

**Different Branches of the Same Tree:  
Ecophobia and the Common Roots of Oppression  
in the Novels of Toni Morrison**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

Throughout Toni Morrison's novels, characters struggle to reclaim their own humanity in the face of domination and trauma. While countless scholars have remarked upon the themes of oppression and language, and several others upon the symbolism of nature in her works, the symbiotic relationship between the three has remained largely unremarked upon. This project explores the similarities between white supremacy, misogyny, and the plundering of the natural world—which I refer to as types of *biosubjugation*—in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*. Utilizing Simon Estok's theory of ecophobia, this project examines how the interactions between characters and the natural world are influenced by linguistic, physical, and ecological trauma. In *The Bluest Eye*, internalized oppression causes female characters to judge and exclude other females for their perceived dirtiness, understood in floral and/or animalistic terms. In *Sula*, female sexuality is conflated with and expressed through natural landscapes. In *Beloved*, trauma is literalized through natural elements, such as the tree on Sethe's back and the shrubs in which Denver hides. An exploration of Morrison's use of language clarifies her invocations of nature, which in turn elucidates her depiction of the alienating nature of oppression. These systems of intersectional oppression cause the characters to react in ecophobic ways in order to assert their own humanity, but these exclusionary tactics amputate the communal connections which are necessary to heal from communal trauma, and thus the cycle continues.

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This thesis is the result of several years of swimming in the question of what the interactions between her characters and the rest of the natural world reveal about Toni Morrison's larger project. It began in a "Novels of Toni Morrison" course taught by Professor Darieck Scott at the University of California, Berkeley. The following semester, Professor Scott kindly supervised an independent study, which gave me the space and support to flesh out the ideas that would serve as the cornerstone of this thesis. I am deeply grateful for his time, insight, and mentorship.

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*clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over...only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were a part of the rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. (Tar Baby 7)*

Nature pervades the very bedrock of Toni Morrison's prose like roots twisting their way through soil. And, just as roots displace soft dirt and crack obstinate concrete, the natural world in Morrison's novels refuses to be hidden or impeded, as she illustrates a level of natural agency which is often overlooked in art. Nature is not simply a backdrop or a place of refuge; it is a living, thinking, and powerful force which shapes the events of her novels as much as—and sometimes more than—any of the characters do. These works often begin with natural imagery that mirrors the sociological struggles that will unfold over the following pages, such as the marigolds that refuse to bloom in *The Bluest Eye*, which highlight the limited agency of the black female children, or the clearing of blackberry bushes in order to make room for cultivated landscaping in *Sula*, an act which reflects the systematic violence perpetrated by white culture upon black culture.

But what counts as nature in Morrison's literary worlds—or in our own? While few would argue that trees and oceans and dirt are nature, what about weather? Or the elements? Or animals? What about humans? Traditional thinking positions humans and all other non-human, living facets of the world in a binary relationship. However, this paradigm is decidedly outdated in light of scientific breakthroughs proving the genetic similarities between humans and other species. Moreover, climate change and the ensuing uptick in number and severity of natural disasters serve as a grim reminder, both of human dependence and influence upon the natural world, and of the sheer power of

forces of nature. Such interconnections between humans and the natural world are inescapable.

I have experienced the power of those connections firsthand. It was nearly midnight on October 8, 2017 and I was reading *Tar Baby* for a “Novels of Toni Morrison” class when I first noticed the wind pounding leaves against my window like gannets diving into the sea. I walked outside and encountered shockingly warm and smoke-scented air. I thought that my neighbors must be smoking cigarettes on their porch again and went to bed, only to awake three hours later to a phone call warning us that a fire was pushing against the northeast borders of my town. Again I walked outside, and this time found a sky as orange as the poppies that grow on the side of the road. An hour later, I had evacuated my family and stood in front of my parent’s house, unable to take my eyes off the shocking orange glow while listening to exploding propane tanks and the rapid-fire of ammunition detonating as the gun shop burned. Chunks of ash the size of book pages fell in front of me and in my hair and I thought, *this must be what the apocalypse feels like*.

Coincidentally, that’s how some inhabitants of the natural world feel in the pages I was reading that night (partially quoted in the epigraph above). Responding to the arrival of Haitian slaves—described as “the end of the world” (9)—the land and its inhabitants are full of agency, emotion, and awareness. Not only are trees and rivers sentient, but they can influence one another in a way that humans cannot. The trees ignore the effects of the human interlopers and carry on with their eco-harmony until the river convinces them that there is trouble. Even then, the humans are not able to destroy the agency of nature, only to “alter it.” In our own world, although it may feel like

humans are destroying the planet, it will go on long after we have rendered it uninhabitable to ourselves and to countless other living entities. Clearly it is time to rethink the human/non-human binary, a misguided schema which not only endangers life on the planet, but also leads to ecophobia.

Simon Estok defines ecophobia as “an irrational (often hysterical) and groundless hatred of the natural world, or aspects of it,” and adds that “such fear of the agency of Nature plays out in many spheres” (112). It is that fear of the agency of nature which causes humans to build shelters to protect themselves from weather, other animals, and, often, one another. Furthermore, manipulating nature through landscaping—both in planting plants where they would not otherwise have grown and in amputating natural growth—is ecophobic. It assumes a power hierarchy in which humans have dominion over nature and is akin to the thinking behind white supremacy and misogyny. Estok continues:

Control of the natural environment, understood as a god-given right in Western culture, seems to imply ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism. Similarly, misogyny is to rape as ecophobia is to environmental looting and plundering. Like racism and misogyny, with which it is often allied, ecophobia is about power. (113)

Thus, ecophobia exists within a complicated matrix of domination, wherein environmental conquest springs from the same source as the oppression of women by men (expressed through rape and other byproducts of patriarchal society) and white supremacy (expressed through slavery, hate crimes, and other byproducts of racist systems). Societal attempts to prune female sexuality are akin to colonizers trying to enlighten *savages* and humans pulling *weeds* to make room for *plants* (as if there were an inherent difference between the two).

Similarly, in “Is All Writing Environmental Writing?” Camille T. Dungy discusses how this sort of thinking plays out in the way that some types of writing are considered *environmental* while others are not. She refers to this as “compartmentalization” and indicates that it comes from the human compulsion to distinguish between *nature* and *civilization*. She argues that what we choose to omit as writers says as much about our intentions as what we choose to include, as does how we orient ourselves within the physical world:

Even while moving through vast cities like LA or Chicago, by being attuned to a world that is more than simply human I can’t help but think of what might have been there before we privileged our own interests: commerce and industry, asphalt and glass...In such urban environments, it might be difficult to remember that you are, in fact, *in* an ‘environment,’ given that we’ve come to think of the terms *environment* and *nature* as referring to someplace wild and nonhuman...But that line of reasoning slides us toward the compartmentalization I resist. Our environments are always both human and other than human. (676)

In using the term “compartmentalization” here, she gets to the heart of the ecophobia that Estok discusses. Likewise, she acknowledges the complicity of capitalism—at once the parent and child of these systems—within this matrix. After all, it is the capitalist notions of progress captured in “commerce and industry, asphalt and glass” which displace naturally-occurring elements, and provide an artificial distinction between the “human and other than human” worlds. It is all about separateness: humans extracted from their own physical reality through a threadbare notion of superiority.

This fallacious line of thinking is required for all oppressive ideologies. It is much easier to rationalize racial/gender/environmental-based violence when we create an artificial distance between ourselves and our victim(s). Therefore, we cannot begin to disentangle ourselves from white supremacist and patriarchal systems of violence without first acknowledging our complicity in human-centric ideology and ecophobic aggression.

When it comes to Morrison's works, I am particularly interested in the space where ecophobia, white supremacy, and misogyny intersect. Unable to find a term that appropriately conveys this space, I developed my own: biosubjugation, the common space between the hegemonies of different biological iterations. That is the water that we swim in, so to speak. Every day, we walk through traumatized ecosystems and likely pay little attention to the life that has been or is being displaced. Likewise, Morrison's characters exist within an invisible web of trauma, alienated community, and oppressive language, unable or unwilling to connect their own brokenness to that of the world around them—both human and greater-than-human.

In *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the trauma is so pervasive that the characters often internalize and reproduce it. The women in each community express their own internalized sexism by using ecophobic language to dismiss other women who fail to adhere to patriarchal notions of feminine purity, thus creating chasms between the individual members of the community. Furthermore, the interactions and juxtapositions of mother/daughter pairs reveal the intergenerational nature of that trauma. For example, Pauline Breedlove's sense of isolation and inferiority are passed on to Pecola, who is neglected by her mother even though they both share a debilitating fixation on their own perceived unlovability and ugliness (in terms of white supremacist, patriarchal notions of beauty). While Pauline alienates herself from her family and her community, Pecola's ultimate alienation comes as she unravels under the weight of her own trauma.

Likewise in *Sula*, two mother/daughter pairs are positioned in a binary relationship with one another, as Helene and Nel strive toward patriarchal notions of purity and propriety while Hannah and Sula eschew those notions in favor of following

their own impulses and desires. Although Nel and Sula do enjoy one beautiful moment of female/anthro-eco-unity, it is quickly interrupted by the male gaze and their friendship cannot recover. In the end, both Helene and Nel emotionally distance themselves from their mothers while Hannah and Sula are ostracized from their community. These binaries also play out in the landscapes of the novel, particularly in the comparison between the wild brambles of The Bottom, which are replaced by the manicured grounds of the Medallion City Golf Course, and the members of the black community, who are displaced in favor of white-male recreation.

In *Beloved*, trauma slithers through every corner of every landscape, and is even literalized as and on biological bodies. There is the obvious example of Beloved, perhaps the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter, but more likely the embodied form of Sethe's grief. Then there is Sethe's chokecherry tree, which not only alters her body but also her ability to interact with the world as the dead tissue keeps her from feeling human touch. Her daughter, Denver, on the other hand, suffers under the weight of other people's trauma, retreating to a room made of boxwood shrubs in order to hide from pain that she feels does not belong to her. Therefore, while Sethe understands her trauma as a tree, Denver hides in shrubs from her own, highlighting both their connectedness and their separateness. *Beloved* is, perhaps, the most striking examination of broken community in all of Morrison's novels, dripping with ecophobic language and action. Sethe is repeatedly conflated with an animal, Denver attempts to hide in nature, and it is the intersection of internalized and externalized white supremacy, misogyny, and ecophobia which precipitates the trauma in the first place.

Much of that trauma stems from biosubjugative language and action.

Accordingly, in each of these novels it is language which most effectively separates members of the community, because it relies upon the conventions of the oppressors. Not only is the language of the oppressors spoken through the characters, but also internalized in a way which causes them to lash out at themselves and others. After all, internalized oppression is essentially when the language of your oppressor becomes the language in your own head. Therefore, these forms of oppression would be much less damaging without the component of language. With Audre Lorde's discussion of "the master's tools," Arthur L. Smith's depiction of an African concept of rhetoric, and Morrison's own writings about the power and danger of language as my guide, I will examine instances of white supremacist/misogynist/ecophobic language and action. Again, my focus will be the biosubjugative interstitial space, a sort of prism through which the full spectrum of biologically-based oppression flashes. Like ecotones, these sites are simultaneously both/neither/all, and they color each of the interactions between characters and other forms of organic matter.

Morrison's characters' reliance upon ecophobic language and action further alienates them from one another, when in fact community is what's needed for them to heal from their trauma. Without that support, they are left alone to marinate in their own oppression. However, when instances of communal healing do occur—such as the community exorcism at the end of *Beloved*—characters are able to process and move forward, together. In short, an exploration of Morrison's use of language clarifies her invocations of nature, which in turn elucidate her depiction of the alienating nature of oppression. Unable to accurately assess their own lives, the characters continue to

oppress each other and the natural world, so that they are unable to heal from their communal trauma, and thus the cycle continues.

## **Chapter II. Oppressive Language and Ruptured Community: “Definitions Belong to the Definers, Not the Defined”**

From the imploding primer at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* to her invented words and concepts such as “rememory,” Morrison wields language that sometimes frustrates and confuses, but always prods her reader to dig below the surface. In fact, she often uses language to expose the trauma which it is capable of creating. For example, in her Nobel Lecture, she appropriates the stock character of a wise but blind old woman in order to explore her own relationship to language. The woman—who young visitors try to trick by asking whether a bird in their hands is dead or alive—understands language “partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—an act with consequences” (13). Here Morrison utilizes the comforting lull of a fable as a vehicle to critique language. For the old woman understands that language is a dangerous thing which destroys as easily as it creates.

Morrison describes the necrotic nature of oppressive language as “unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance” (13-14). This concept not only applies to the language of white supremacy and misogyny, but also to the language of ecophobia. After all, when the women of Lorrain refer to Peggy from Elyria as a “heifer” for the sin of being desired by a married

man in *The Bluest Eye*, they are not only reinforcing misogynistic tropes which blame women for the sexual actions of men, but also subscribing to a hierarchized notion of the world in which humans are superior to animals and it is therefore an insult to be likened to one.

These insults are more than just words, for the child of language is action. In the aforementioned example, the action which follows the misogynistic and ecophobic language is the ostracization of Peggy by the other women, who are equally subjugated and therefore should sympathize with rather than shun her. As Morrison cautions in her Nobel Lecture, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge...it must be rejected, altered and exposed” (16). Thus, Morrison illuminates the link between destructive language and destructive action, and by doing so, urges her readers to carefully attend to her conspicuous acts of language breaking and rebuilding. Surely, Morrison is doing more than spotlighting and recycling hegemonic discourse. Rather, she is taking the tools she has to break down structures that we take for granted and, likely, hinting at a blueprint for how we can build something better.

In her famous speech, commonly referred to as “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde underscores the need for a paradigm shift which acknowledges the role of difference in discourse:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women ...know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (27)

In other words, the oppressed cannot language their way out of oppressive language, at least not by using the same language—“the master’s tools”—which has oppressed them in the first place. Lorde not only advocates for a new house (a reimagining of support not based upon the will of the oppressor) but also new tools (new discourses/language) with which to build it. Similarly, Morrison further remarks in her Nobel Lecture that “sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery” (16). In this light, Morrison’s language breaking and rebuilding can be understood as a radical act of challenging dominant discourses and, to borrow her phrasing, “reject[ing], alter[ing] and expos[ing]” oppressive and violent language.

But language itself is only part of the problem. It is when language is followed with action that the real trouble ensues, whether that trouble be violence, systematic oppression, or the fracturing of community bonds. There is a concept in African philosophy called *ubuntu*, which asserts that “a person is a person through other persons” (Ahiauzu 1101). According to this framework, one’s full humanity is only realized through their interrelations with others. Therefore, the ramifications of “languages of mastery” are two-fold: they depreciate the individual first through language, then again through the amputation of the communal connections necessary for the realization of full personhood. Moreover, when this concept extends to the natural world and our human responsibility within it, our humanity is blocked through our inability to acknowledge the value of animals, plants, and other elements of the natural world.

In Morrison’s works, acts of oppressive language—whether that be the language of white supremacy, misogyny, ecophobia, or other—not only sever interpersonal relationships; they also create and perpetuate trauma. Furthermore, by denying *ubuntu*-

based individual and communal actualization, oppressive language hinders any opportunities to heal from that trauma. In other words, these subordinating acts of language isolate individuals and rupture community. The resulting trauma then causes Morrison's characters to act in ways that further damages themselves and others. Therefore, language is not only a vehicle for describing trauma, but also often a source of trauma itself, as Morrison repeatedly illustrates the ways in which characters cause and process trauma through language, and the ways in which that linguistic trauma emotionally isolates them from others, and themselves.

### *Linguistic Violence in Morrison's Works*

Although there is plenty of violence in Morrison's novels, some of the greatest harms come from language. This reflects the insidious power of verbal violence. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's grief and madness is literalized as an internal dialogue in which she tries to make sense of her father's sexual attack and her mother's denial of it. However, that voice—no more than language in her head—lulls her into a false sense of companionship before boomeranging and attacking her. In *Sula*, when Hannah proclaims, "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (57), Morrison explicitly states that it is the "pronouncement" of "Hannah's *words*" that sends Sula "flying up the stairs...in bewilderment" with "a sting in her eyes" (ibid., emphasis added). In other words, although the content of her words may hurt, it is their speaking which cognitively and physically wounds Sula. Likewise, in *Beloved*, the language in schoolteacher's notebook seems to have as profound an effect on Sethe as the abuse she suffers at the hands of his nephews.<sup>1</sup> As Denver understands it, Sethe's ultimate

justification for her decision to kill her children rather than return them to her enslaver is that they would not be reduced to animalistic language in schoolteacher's notebook: "no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no...Sethe had refused—and refused still" (296). These moments and descriptions of violent language not only harm the characters themselves, but also sever vital familial and communal relationships and, sometimes, cause more violence.

Take Pecola's pathological prattling. It reflects the failures of her parents in their duty to protect her and is seen by her only allies, Claudia and Frieda, as a "madness" which eventually separates ("protects") her from them because it "bore[s them] in the end" (206). In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Morrison writes that "the trauma of racism is...the severe fragmentation of the self and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis" (141). This statement accounts for the multivalent source of Pecola's trauma. First, Pauline struggles to love or even pay attention to her daughter because she has been trained to hate her daughter's blackness by movies that reflect white notions of beauty, as well as her experience working in the homes of white families. From the moment Pecola is born, Pauline reflects, "Lord she was ugly" (126), and invests progressively less and less emotional energy into her daughter from that point on.

Second, when Cholly rapes Pecola, one of his preceding thoughts is "What could he do for her—ever?" (161). These internalized words are an expression of his own "guilt and impotence" and almost turn into vomit (*ibid.*). Although he understands his sudden lust for his daughter in the context of the first time that he met his wife, his response actually harkens back to the hunters whose words—backed by guns and the long history

of white supremacist violence—force him to rape Darlene: “Come on, coon... You ain’t doing nothing for her” (148). Like the vomit he almost experiences as he assaults his daughter, his shame and anger in this moment manifests in his body as “rotten fetid bile” (148). The regurgitation of bodily fluids mirrors the regurgitation of the hunters’ words into Cholly’s own psyche, and emphasizes the perilous power of language to repeatedly inflict violence and trauma.

Third, the dialogue in Pecola’s mind mostly discusses her delusion that her eyes have in fact turned blue, and is therefore a profound example of internalized racism, a response to the linguistic violence she has suffered regarding her dark complexion and eyes. Describing the Breedloves, Morrison explains that it is not their features, but rather the way they look at themselves which causes their unique ugliness. She writes that it is as if some “mysterious master” had told them “You are ugly people” and they had believed it (39). That “master” is white supremacy, and it is reinforced by lighter-skinned characters who view darker skin as ugly. For example, Maureen refers to Pecola (and Claudia and Frieda) as “Black and ugly black e mos” (73) when she wants to hurt their feelings. Even when she is trying to be nice to Pecola, she compares her to a character in a movie who “hates her mother cause she is black and ugly” (67). In each of these statements, blackness is verbally equated with ugliness, which further injures Pecola’s already fragile sense of self. Therefore, it is no wonder that that self eventually splits in two and reduces Pecola to two competing systems of language.

In *Sula*, Hannah’s words not only emotionally injure her daughter, but also set off a chain of events in which Sula kills Chicken Little. Amanda Putnam notes that “the pain Sula feels upon discovering her mother’s opinion of her damages the young girl’s self-

concept...[her] first realization of her mother's apathy to her segues into a scene of accidental violence toward another child and later into a coldness toward death in general" (33). That coldness is clearly linked to this moment, as Morrison describes Sula's thoughts as "dark" and contrasts them with the "bright, hot daylight" that only Nel's words—her "call" that "float[s] up and into the window"—can pull her back into (57). Having been so wounded and isolated by her mother's words, Nel's companionship comes as a much-needed salve and enables the intimacy that they are about to share as they play in the natural world, an intimacy so deep that its interruption ends in violence.

However, it is difficult to know just how "accidental" that violence is. Sula retreats with Nel from her mother's words, uttered inside the human-made structure of their house, into a "wildness" (57) full of possibilities where they engage in synchronized play. Morrison is careful to point out that "Neither one had spoken a word" (59) during this time, giving this sentence its own paragraph. After the pain of Hannah's words, Sula needs this quiet time to heal with her friend and experience the female comradery which has just been taken away from her. However, their play is suddenly interrupted by the male presence of Chicken Little, who steals Nel's attention away as she speaks for the first time to tease him about picking his nose. He responds with a command to "Shut up" (*ibid.*), and the girls are left with two less-than-ideal choices: to continue in their unified muteness, knowing that their silence has been commanded by a male outsider, or break their wordless and female togetherness and engage with Chicken Little's male presence.

Perhaps the loss of Nel's full attention triggers in Sula the abandonment she feels as her mother so freely gives her own attention away to men, because she takes over and demands Chicken Little's full attention as she prods him up a tree and swings his body

around. He flies out of her arms, just as she had flown up the stairs in response to her mother's words, and Sula does not speak until she and Nel are walking home. Even then, she simply repeats Shadrack's "Always. Always" (63). Undoubtedly shocked by the magnitude of this moment, the only language that she can find is the recycled language of a man who is always watching and therefore the literalization of the male gaze; in other words, the language of the patriarchy.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's refusal to let her daughter be reduced to ecophobic words in a notebook precipitates one of the most shocking instances of violence in the history of American literature. While sharing a similarly beautiful moment of female unity with her baby girl, enjoying both "something sweet what lies in the air that time of year" (227) and the unmediated presence of her daughter, she overhears schoolteacher instructing his students: "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (228). The hearing of these words unearths something within Sethe, and that night is the first time that she and Halle begin to talk about escape from Sweet Home.

Furthermore, when Sethe overhears schoolteacher's words, it is the first time that her scalp feels "prickly" as if "somebody was sticking fine needles" in it (228). This feeling is not only reminiscent of the "sting" in Sula's eyes which follows her mother's words, but also foreshadows the figurative hummingbird beaks that will prick her scalp when she sees schoolteacher arrive at 124, and again when she later confuses the arrival of Mr. Bodwin with the same threat. Therefore, it is this act of ecophobic language which leads Sethe to run, the running which causes schoolteacher to chase her, and the chasing which necessitates the violence in Sethe's mind. That violence, in turn, separates Sethe

from her daughter (through death), from her sons (through trauma), and from the rest of her community (through intentional shunning on their parts). What starts as an interrupted moment of connection ends up costing Sethe almost all of the valued connections in her life.

Let me be clear, here. I am not arguing that schoolteacher's ecophobic comparison of Sethe to an animal becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in her violence toward her children. Rather, within these systems of biosubjugative domination, subjects who are treated as objects have very few options available to them in which to enact their determination to be humanized. To paraphrase Frederick Douglass, these systems are detrimental to both the oppressed and the oppressor. Perhaps that is why Morrison refuses to capitalize "schoolteacher." In denying his status as a proper noun, he becomes more of a concept than a person with his own agency, a cog in the white misogynist ecophobic machine mindlessly enacting its agenda. When even those in power seem to lack their own agency, what hope do the oppressed have?

Here, I am reminded of the ending of *The Bluest Eye*, in which Claudia rationalizes her failed marigolds: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late." (206). Within these systems of oppression, the soil is bad for everyone. Those that bloom are tainted, and those that do not are blamed as if it is their own failure. Sethe chooses something different for herself and for her children. While we, as readers, may disagree with her methods, we have no right to judge her

motives. In other words, these actions are a sort of understandable ecophobia, a visceral reaction to social environs which elicit ecophobia.

*Ubuntu Undone: Community Ruptured by Language*

Therefore, at the heart of each of these acts of physical and emotional violence lies a severed interpersonal connection brought about by linguistic violence. Sometimes the price is a familial relationship (like in *Sula*), other times it is a friendship (like in *The Bluest Eye*), still others it is an entire community (like in *Beloved*). It will be useful here to pause and differentiate between community and society. Saidiya V. Hartman contrasts the two: “the language of community has been shaped by an organic vision of social relations, as contrasted with the instrumentalist, utilitarian, violent, and distanced relations of society and social order. Thus, as it is traditionally invoked, community offers us a romance in place of complex and contentious social relations” (60). This paradigm, Hartman argues, positions community as a site of nurturance in the face of outside indifference, yet overlooks the fact that communities exist *within* societies.

Taking communal relationships within the context of slavery as her example, Hartman continues to caution against the “reification of] the social relations of enslavement via the romance of community” as it “fail[s] to recognize both the difficulty and the accomplishment of collectivity in the context of domination and terror” (ibid.). To romance something is to reduce its dimensions, and romancing community not only ignores its tendency to reproduce societal hegemony; it also overlooks the unlikely wonder of “networks of support and care” that arise despite societal “domination, surveillance, terror, self-interest, distrust, conflict, lack of autonomy, tenuous and

transient connections, and fear” (ibid.). Like the dandelions Pecola finds sprouting through concrete, making human connections within a calcified system of denied humanity thwarts the supremacy of the societal machine.

However, from the vantage point of the oppressors, both dandelions and oppressed people are viewed as an inconvenience or aberration. White supremacy depends upon the dehumanization of non-white bodies, and therefore networks of human connection between those bodies is a threat, just as ecophobic thought deems the growth of certain fauna invasive and views their free-ranging growth as an infestation. It is no wonder, then, that a society locked in the manacles of slavery’s legacy would continue to attempt to sever black community through various means, both legislative (through the criminalization of blackness) and linguistically (through discourses of inferiority). Both of these methods, it should be pointed out, are acts of language. After all, a law is written language backed (arbitrarily and unequally) by force, and discourse is spoken language even more insidiously powerful than law. Each separates people: from their humanity and from their community, both physically and otherwise. How could that not be the case in a nation where corporations have more rights than the natural world?

Conversely, in many traditional African religions, the purpose of law is to *restore* communal unity. In “The Spiritual and Philosophical Foundation for African Languages,” Adisa A. Alkebulan explains that “For the African, life is predicated on the belief of the attainment of spiritual harmony. In fact, one’s humanity hinges on one’s pursuit and fulfillment of harmony” (51). This harmony is realized through *ubuntu* and through the ancient Kemetic principle of Maat. Alkebulan continues: “Justice, truth, and righteousness were used to symbolize Maat. One could not simply be righteous; it was a

continuous process that human beings underwent to obtain the harmony we find in nature...Key to our understanding of Maat is the relationship between humanity and the universe” (ibid.). Although Alkebulan’s description noticeably posits humanity and the universe as separate—two distinct entities in “relationship” rather than one being a part of the other—this conceptualization of the universe is much less ecophobic than the human-centric Western worldview, and also places value on natural harmony.

Likewise, in “Markings of an African Concept of Rhetoric,” Arthur L. Smith explains that “in customary African law, establishment of guilt is not the primary consideration, but rather the smooth and peaceful running of the community” (15). Therefore, this approach to justice utilizes the power of language as a unifying force, as opposed to the Western dividing sense of legal language and discourses on justice. Smith continues: “African rhetoric is not only distinguished in its concern for coherence and participation, but also in its relationship to the stability of the traditional society...In instances of conflict or disagreement among members of the society, public discourse must function to restore the stability that conflict creates” (16). Here, unity is paramount, and rather than a focus on guilt and punishment, Maat ensures the harmony of the society as a whole. In holistic paradigms such as these, the individual matters because he is a part of the community, and the community strives to meet the needs of all individuals, just as an ecosystem relies on forms of life within it for its own survival.

Beyond its simple legal ramifications, Smith describes the creative power of “the *word*” in traditional African cultures:

The *word* is productive and imperative, calling forth and commanding. Its power derives from the traditional emphasis on the spoken word in African society...Thus, because the word is imperative, it is the fundament as well as the fashioning instrument of traditional African society. All religion, music, medicine

and dance is produced by vocal expression, inasmuch as creativity is called into existence by man speaking” (16)

Whereas Western thought tends to rely upon the supremacy of the written word, these cultures “maintained an expressive sense that manifested itself as life force in dance, music, and speech. Expression, therefore, is not a function of the written word alone; it is revealed in life” (13). Just as African concepts of justice involve all parties being restored to unity, so do African art and rhetoric involve all parties participating in the creation of the thing itself, whether that thing be language, art, or performance.

This belief in the power of the spoken word to create reality is referred to as *Nommo*. Alkebulan explains that the Dogon concept of *Nommo* “carries an energy that produces all life and influences everything from destiny to the naming of children...It is like magic in one way, but that is not strange to the Dogon because, in the thinking of the Dogon, all magic is ultimately Word magic” (“Nommo” 454). This concept translates easily to literature, because what is literature if not “word magic”? So much more than black lines on a white page, literature is language harnessed in the pursuit of world making, bringing life to characters and causing readers to question their own realities. Morrison’s literary worlds, which she has referred to as “animated world[s] in which trees can be outraged and hurt, and in which the presence or absence of birds is meaningful” (Ruas 223) seem to be as good an example of this “word magic” as any other literary world.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a large part of the magic of these “animated world[s]” is the expressed agency of the natural world; when her characters interact with the natural world in non-ecophobic ways, that is when some of the most compelling scenes occur.

Morrison has in fact spoken about the influence of traditional African culture in her works on several occasions. In the above-quoted 1984 interview with Charles Ruas,

she describes the “vestiges” of African religion which remains in African American culture because it “survived...in ways in which [slaves] worked, sang, talked, and carried on” (242). Furthermore, while she notes “a strong influence of Greek tragedy, particularly the chorus, commenting on the action” (225) in her endings, she likewise has stated that “a large part of the satisfaction [she has] always received from reading Greek tragedy...is in its similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 125). Therefore, the influence of African culture seems to encompass not only the linguistic considerations of her work, but also the interpersonal struggles within it. This overlap between language and community—the place where language can create or destroy community—is of great importance within her oeuvre. In other words, the interplay between “word magic” and word violence creates some of the most fruitful sites of examination into the interplay between language, community, and ecophobia.

**Chapter III. Pruning Female Sexuality in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*:  
“Little Plot[s] of Black Dirt”**

*Now, however, she moves down an avenue gently buffeted by the familiar and therefore loved images. The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty...Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon.* (The Bluest Eye 47)

*Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, ‘They are ugly. They are weeds.’ Preoccupied with that revelation, she trips on the sidewalk crack.* (The Bluest Eye 50)

In Morrison's earliest works, as in other works throughout literature, femininity and female sexuality are often understood through comparisons to the natural world. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is referred to as a "little plot of black dirt" (5) in which her father plants his seed when he rapes and impregnates her. Women who are considered clean are compared to flowers, while supposedly dirty women are compared to domesticated animals. Likewise in *Sula*, women who subvert patriarchal notions of purity are referred to as "wild blooded" (17), "nasty" (44), and indirectly compared to the wild, thorny blackberry patches torn out at the beginning of the novel. And, insidiously, many of these judgements are internalized and reproduced by the women themselves.

Consider the above passages from *The Bluest Eye*, in which Pecola struggles to understand her own place within the hierarchized world of living things. Initially, she admires the dandelions for their tenacity and prettiness, even "love[s]" them, unable to understand the ecophobic assertion that they are "weeds." However, after a painful interaction in which a store clerk finds her so repellent that he cannot even look at her, she again encounters the dandelions. This time, she is keenly aware that the dandelions do not return her "affection," and she decides to hate them. In order to make herself feel better, she harnesses the destructive power of ecophobia in calling them weeds to distance herself from them. But her folly is soon punished by obtrusive concrete as she trips on a sidewalk crack. Morrison's choice of tripping hazard here is perfect, because it not only reflects ecophobic notions of *progress* that justify pouring concrete over natural ground, but also brings to mind the image of plants sprouting through cracks in concrete, revealing the persistence of a natural world which really could care less about our ideas of progress.

In both novels, this internalized oppression not only plays out through the judgements of the women in the community, but also through the generations as mothers and daughters experience similar traumas. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline's own sense of ugliness and inferiority is transmitted to Pecola. In *Sula*, the contrast between Helene/Nel and Hannah/Sula reveals that in a binary-based system in which women are supposed to be either pure or dirty, no one is really happy. Helene distances herself from her promiscuous mother, but Nel chafes at her mother's uptightness and idealizes Hannah. The Peace women, on the other hand, are much more similar in their approach to femininity and sexuality, but are still separated (through divorce, death, and distance) from one another. In fact, there is one beautiful moment of unity between young Nel and Sula in which they experience each other and the natural world in harmony, but it is quickly interrupted by the male gaze. These stark binaries, through which women are sorted in the sexual or the civilized, prevent women from sharing sincere connections with one another. This not only alienates them from their families and communities, but also from themselves.

*Flowers and Femininity: Internalized Sexism and Ecophobia*

In *The Bluest Eye*, women are often compared to flowers. The first instance comes in the opening sentence of the book as Claudia explains that "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (5). Claudia draws a clear connection between those flowers and Pecola's trauma when she equates the failure of the marigolds to bloom with the miscarriage of Pecola's baby: "For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that

the earth itself might be unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt" (5-6). If we read the marigolds as grief, then Cholly plants grief in his daughter by raping her, just as the girls plant the seeds in the dirt as an expression of their own grief. However, neither comes to fruition. Pecola does not process her grief, but instead crumbles psychologically. Claudia and Freida likewise do not process their grief, as they end up turning away from Pecola when her psychosis "bore[s them] in the end" (206). With that betrayal, Pecola loses the only community she has ever experienced.

Furthermore, the references to the marigolds reveal both internalized sexism and ecophobic discourses because their failure to bloom is blamed only on females and female characteristics. Claudia and Freida think that the inability of the seeds to grow is Claudia's fault for placing the seeds too far in the ground. They believe that their ineffective actions not only doom the flowers, but also Pecola's baby. In her own summation, Claudia admits that the girls never consider the role of nature's own agency, "that the earth itself might be unyielding." Likewise, the passivity of the language implies that Pecola is to blame for her pregnancy, as it is she who "was having her father's baby" (5). A more apt summation of events would be that Cholly raped and impregnated his daughter, but the word rape is not used. This is the first information offered about the horrific event, and it is dripping with the linguistic victim-blaming which reinforces rape culture (and thus, misogyny). This irrational blame is consistent with discourses which situate fertility and earthiness with females. Pecola is not referred to as a child, a female, or even a person, but rather as an earthy possession: Cholly's "plot of black dirt." This metaphor outlines the hegemonic thinking required of ecophobia,

wherein males reign over both females and earth. Because this unnatural hierarchy is imposed upon the natural processes of fertility and grief, each is unable to develop as they should. The baby dies and grief splits Pecola's psyche in two.

But perhaps such a split is inevitable for someone like Pecola, whose very identity is a sort of trauma. W.E.B. Du Bois refers to the inherent split in the black psyche as a sort of "double-consciousness, [a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (para. 3). Pecola's world is certainly full of contempt and pity—from the shopkeeper who finds her repellent, to the father who violently resents her love, to the MacTeer girls who grow bored with her after their silly attempt to save her baby fails. Du Bois continues: "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (ibid.). Notably, Du Bois' comments assume a black male body, which is perhaps what affords him the "dogged strength...[to keep] it from being torn asunder." But Pecola, a black female child, stands no chance against such a chasm. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison notes that "children are in real danger. Nobody likes them, all children, but particularly black children" (Ruas 227). Couple that with her already-subjugated gender and lack of familial community, and Pecola is doomed from the beginning.

Just as the sexually-stained Pecola is compared to dirt, other floral references in the novel illustrate the distinction between "clean" (read: civilized and prudish) and "dirty" (read: uncivilized and sexual) women. These notions, too, are inherently ecophobic. In this discourse, women who are "clean" and "civilized" are better because

they are further away from nature. That is, they do not give in to natural sexual impulses, consistently wash the natural elements of dirt and sweat off their bodies and cover their natural scents with artificial ones. This split from their natures enforces the imaginary human/non-human binary by valorizing a split from the natural world. As stated above, such splits in consciousness can only have damaging consequences, especially for women, whose oppression creates a thorny multiplied consciousness.

One example is when the women gossip about Della Jones' husband leaving her for another woman. He is said to leave Della, a "nice good church woman" because "he couldn't take no more of that violet water [she] used...said Della was just too clean for him" (13). Here her worth as a "good" woman is equated with her cleanliness, which is enhanced by her application of water scented with the delicate violet flowers. Therefore, her dousing in violet water not only expresses her "church woman" moral superiority through cleanliness, but also equates that cleanliness with a self-baptism in sweet gentleness. Such docility is required of women in paternalistic cultures and religions, which demand obedience from women toward male figures.

The association of women with flowers serves the goals of the patriarchy nicely because flowers (like "good" women) are pretty, quiet, and incredibly easy to control. Therefore, women who do not fit into this unnatural mold are often disparaged through comparisons to domesticated animals. One might refer to an opinionated woman as a *bitch*, or a woman who doesn't conform to societal notions of beauty as a *pig*. Not surprisingly, Peggy, the woman for whom Della's husband leaves her, is referred to as a "heifer" (13). Female cows are used for their milk and maternity, so the connection between Peggy and a heifer reduces her to her basic female value in a patriarchal society

while still locking her in a sexist/ecophobic paradigm, hence the nod to a domesticated animal used for its (unwilling) labor in a system which is both capitalistic and ecophobic (much like slavery).<sup>3</sup>

One woman who seems to be able to adapt to the prototype of the clean, civilized, and chaste woman to her own advantage is Geraldine. Women like her are said to “have looked long at the hollyhocks” (81) in their backyards until they begin to embody hollyhockian qualities: “like hollyhocks, they are narrow, tall, and still. Their roots are deep, their stalks are firm, and only the top blossom nods in the wind” (82). Fittingly, these ambitious women capitalize on cultural expectations of women in order to better their own lives by operating within the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy through learning “how to do the white man’s work with refinement” and systematically denying “the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (83). Unlike natural-smelling Peggy, Geraldine’s self-cultivation ensures that she “[does] not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs... [and smells] of wood and vanilla” (86). Each of these seemingly admirable qualities reflects ecophobic ideals: it is simply unnatural for a human not to sweat, and wood (cut from trees) and vanilla (extracted from floral beans) are cultivated and commoditized natural objects.

Furthermore, she embodies the amputation of natural growth through her ecophobic manipulation of vibrant and wild flowers, such as sunflowers, bleeding heart, and ivy in the constraints of her garden pots (82). In other words, the only way for a woman to grow within this culture is to submit to the manipulation of the patriarchy by adopting capitalistic and ecophobic notions of progress and denying her *natural* self, as

well as the nature of all that surrounds her. This theme continues in *Sula*, where female sexual agency is forcefully pruned as easily as landscaping.

### *Human Landscapes*

Much of the conflict in *Sula* revolves arounds issues of female sexuality in a male-dominated society. Similar to *The Bluest Eye*, discourses of nastiness/dirtiness devalue any woman whose sexuality differs from male-decided norms. Inherent in any form of oppression is the necessity of devaluing the “other”: misogyny devalues women, white supremacy devalues anyone whose identity falls outside the ideological scope of whiteness, and ecophobia devalues the natural world. Therefore, in this model, women are often associated with “nature,” while men are associated with paternalistic ideals of “progress.” This is the same level of thinking which justifies forcefully taking land from those who “are not using it correctly,” enslaving a group of people who “are too wild to care for themselves and present a danger to society,” or dominating an entire gender who “is too naïve and too reliant upon their baser instincts to function properly in civilization.” In this schema, women and the natural world are both unpredictable, baser forces which must be controlled.

This contrast between “good” and “nasty” women is blatant when comparing Helene and Hannah, whose identities are positioned against each other by several factors, such as the similarities in their names, their origins in matriarchal families, and the fact that they are the mothers of the novel’s protagonists, Nel and Sula. However, Hannah is much more in-tune with her physical womanhood, expressed through her easy sexuality and deep connection to her female lineage. As a result, she “exasperate[s] the women in

the town—the ‘good’ women, who [say], ‘One thing I can’t stand is a nasty woman’” (44). Hannah embodies the social positioning of the three whores in *The Bluest Eye*, who have the audacity to enjoy their own sexuality, and are much happier for it. Helene, on the other hand, disavows both her sexuality and her female lineage. She leaves behind the grandmother who raised her and shows obvious contempt for her own “wild blood[ed]” mother (17). Together, the two women represent the dichotomy of the natural/nasty woman vs. the civilized/good woman.

Young Nel is discovering this difference and finds herself naturally drawn to Hannah. She “regard[s] the oppressive neatness of her home with dread...[and] prefer[s] Sula’s wooly house...where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions” (29). Not only does she prefer Hannah to her own mother, but is also taken with her prostitute-grandmother for whom her own mother shows such contempt. When they meet, Nel:

trot[s] along behind, enchanted with the smell, the candles and the strangeness...it [is her grandmother] who carrie[s] the gardenia smell. The tiny woman with the softness and glare of a canary. In that somber house...where death sigh[s] in every corner and candles spurt, the gardenia smell and canary-yellow dress emphasiz[e] the funeral atmosphere surrounding them. (25)

Nel is captivated by the smell and presence of her grandmother. Just as *The Bluest Eye*’s Peggy is compared to a heifer, Nel’s uncultivated movements are expressed in animal-like terms as she “trots” along. In contrast to Della’s mild violet water, Nel’s grandmother smells like the sturdy, evergreen, and highly-fragrant gardenia.

Furthermore, her grandmother is twice compared to a canary, an animal associated with its exploitative use in the coal mining industry, which rips into landscapes to plunder them. Her female sexuality is held against an example of environmental plunder and ecophobic exploitation. The comparison is apt for a woman who has made her living

through prostitution, and like the canary, is relegated to live or die by the chance of exploitation.

It is that very history of commodification and exploitation, according to Saidiya V. Hartman, that makes the black body a site of subjection and projection. She writes that “the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (21). In other words, the black body, denied agency and personhood for so long, essentially becomes a metaphor through which a white enslaver/oppressor can temporarily assume black identity (as in the donning of blackface) in order to play with different possibilities within the confines of whiteness. As commodities, black bodies became as manipulatable as the land in which they often toiled—just like the “little plot[s] of black dirt” in *The Bluest Eye*. Therefore, the tendency to metaphorize them mirrors the tendency in literature to utilize landscapes as sites of human transcendence and understanding. Accordingly, Tiffany Lethabo King extends this fungibility to what she calls “black landscapes” to map the ways in which

black bodies, nonhuman plant life, and other natural matter function as symbols of transition and flux. The natural sciences that emerged during the European Enlightenment ordered people’s perceptions—their ideas of what it was possible to see and think. Cartesianism distinguishes between human (culture) and nonhuman biomatter (nature). Further, human and nonhuman organisms are imagined as inert objects rather than interrelated, dynamic, ever-changing systems. (67)

In other words, it is the fungibility of black bodies which allows their exploitation to look so similar to the exploitation of the land. Within the system of white supremacy, in which black bodies are reduced to commodities, the black bodies are considered a part of the non-human, natural world. In other words, the oppression of black bodies and the

oppression of land is interchangeable. When that black body is female, the conflation of body and landscape is even more automatic.

Therefore, it is the liveliness of Nel's grandmother, a body which has been *plundered* through prostitution yet is still full of life, makes Nel more aware of the "death" she associates with more *civilized* women: her mother and great-grandmother. It is no wonder, then, that she prefers the uncultured chaos of the Peace home,<sup>4</sup> or at least Sula's presence in her own home to make it more bearable. It is important here that it is only after she meets her grandmother that Nel has "the strength to cultivate" (29) a friendship with Sula and disentangle her identity from her mother's expectations. The term "cultivate" implies that Nel is claiming ownership of her own landscape as she proclaims, "I'm me. I'm not their daughter" (28). It would seem that she is beginning a new path, free of the constraints of her mother's internalized misogyny. However, the term is likewise dripping with ecophobia, and even in forsaking the stifled sexuality of her mother in favor of the "nasty" women, she is still operating within the limited epistemological architecture of domination.

That architecture of domination is especially apparent when it comes to the female residents of The Bottom. In their all-black community, not only are the women divided by their sexual expression (or lack thereof), but are also subjected by the double oppression of misogyny (from the men of The Bottom) and white supremacy (from the residents of all-white Medallion). In fact, the very creation of The Bottom is shrouded in and thrives upon ecophobic ideas of nature that reinforce both patriarchal and white supremacist notions. The first description (and the first sentence of the novel) is that it had once existed "where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots

to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course” (3). Here natural growth is violently torn out to make room for human-made landscaping. The image of black berries torn “from their roots” to make room for a site of white recreation brings to mind the millions of black lives torn from their roots in Africa to be exploited for the benefit of white capitalist “progress.” Therefore, the legacy of the physical space in which the novel is situated is one of plunder, the same kind which reinforces misogyny and white supremacy.

Furthermore, *The Bottom* is born out of an act of a white man exploiting both nature (through agricultural cultivation) and his black slave (by warping an offer of land in order to extract hard labor out of him). The town’s beginning sprouts from perceived racial difference. This origin story is referred to as “Just a nigger joke.”<sup>5</sup> The kind white folks tell when the mill closes down and they’re looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn’t come, or comes for weeks, and they’re looking for a little comfort somehow” (4-5). Here, the “white folks” filter their understanding of the world through production (the mill closing down), but the “colored folks” filter their perceptions through dependence upon nature. Similar to the male/female power dynamic, in the white/black power dynamic, the oppressed is associated with nature, at the bottom of the hierarchy.

If *The Bottom* represents the bottom of the power hierarchy, its women occupy an even lower rung than do its men. Sula and Nel’s friendship thrives when they both embrace this fact: “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be...they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they

were looking for” (52). In the foreword, Morrison notes that the novel is an imagining of what it might look like for women to exist outside of this smothering male-dominated system: “In much literature a woman’s escape from male rule led to regret, misery, if not complete disaster. In *Sula* I wanted to explore the consequences of what that escape might be, not only on conventional black society, but on female friendship” (xvi-ii). Through their common intimacy, Nel and Sula *are* able to escape together, but only briefly. They create a moment of uninhibited unity when they embrace their own naturalness and connect with the physical world (and each other) outside of the weight of the male gaze.

#### *A Brief Communion*

This singular moment of unity with each other and with nature only occurs as the girls up-end the patriarchy by equating boys with commodities. It happens during “a summer limp with the weight of blossomed things...And the boys. The beautiful, beautiful boys who [dot] the landscape like jewels” (56). There are several aspects of this passage which undermine male power. First of all, Morrison describes the summer in a term that alludes to male impotence: “limp.” Furthermore, the boys are compared to jewels, a simile usually reserved for females. But in this case, it is the boys who are the object of the *female* gaze. Like jewels, they are coveted for their attractiveness, and furthermore likened to objects which are cultivated through devastating environmental plunder and human rights abuses. They “[dot] the landscape,” which implies that they are not an organic part of it. Rather, they are representations of the spoils of nature. The

moment is framed through natural terms that situate the girls physically and emotionally within nature.

Also, it is not just the trees who are heavy with blossoms, but the girls as well with their blooming sexuality: “They [run] in the sunlight, creating their own breeze” (57), stopping only to “taste their lip sweat and contemplate the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly” (57-8). Like the trees loaded with flowers, Morrison’s use of the term “wildness” is loaded with implication. Helene looks down on her mother for her “wild blood,” which of course refers to her unbridled sexuality (a trait which young Nel, at least unconsciously, finds rather endearing). Here is it not immediately apparent to which wildness Morrison refers: the wildness of the wilderness, the wildness of the girls’ sexual attraction, or some other wildness growing within them? As with many Morrisonian conundrums, the answer is likely *all of them*. It is clear that the girls are reveling in this wildness, where they are free to enjoy the taste of their sweat, their own bodies, and become one with nature (even participating in its processes as they “creat[e] their own breeze.” They are being “nasty” and powerful, and existing totally outside the patriarchal-white-supremacist notions of what they should be.

The scene is ripe with sexuality; not only in their lust for the jewel-like boys, but in the intimacy which they share with each other and with nature. As they lie next to one another on the grass, their “flesh tighten[s]” underneath their dresses and they notice their own “small breasts [which are] just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort” (58). They then join each other in “grass play,” wherein they “stroke the blades up and down, up and down” before Nel peels the bark off of a twig “until it [is] stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence” (ibid.). With the “strok[ing]” and “stripp[ing],” the girls are

sharing in a highly eroticized game, and doing so outside of the male gaze. What makes the connection between them so successful is that the play depends completely on natural elements: breeze, grass, twigs.

The game comes to a climax as the girls poke their twigs “rhythmically and intensely into the earth” (ibid.). This sexualized performance not only allows the girls to have agency over their own sexuality, but also eliminates the need for male participants. In this moment, outside of the male gaze, the girls work in tandem with nature and with one another. They end by filling the holes they have dug with bottlecaps, “paper, bits of glass, [and] butts of cigarettes” (59). Aside from the bottlecaps, the other objects are notably made by distorting natural materials: paper from destroying trees, glass from manipulating sand, and cigarettes from tobacco (of course the connection to slavery should not be overlooked here). They bury these “defiling things” (ibid.), as a final act of power. They take items which have exploited the earth and bury them within it. They have owned their sexuality through their connection with nature and have found a way to exist outside of the male-white-supremacist gaze.

This interlude comes to an abrupt end when their natural feminine play is interrupted by a male intruder (the young boy called Chicken Little) and Sula turns her attention to him, thus breaking her connection with Nel. As she helps him climb a tree, the paradigm once again switches to hierarchy as she is the powerful one helping the less powerful one act. When she later throws him in the pond (allowing nature to swallow him up), it seems to be an unconscious repudiation of something; but, just like the murky water, her motives are unclear. Perhaps she is refusing to reintegrate into a hierarchical mode. Perhaps she realizes that she cannot escape hegemonic systems simply by opting

out. After all, even their play and objectification of the boys is little more than a reversal of well-established traditions. One thing is clear, however. Once the girls realize the severity of Chicken Little's failure to reemerge, the first words spoken are "Somebody saw" (61). Somebody did see; a man named Shadrack. It seems there is no possibility of escaping the male gaze, after all.

**Chapter IV. The Nature of Communal Trauma in *Beloved*:  
"In That Bower, Closed off From the Hurt of the Hurt World"**

*Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning—that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin...to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. (295)*

In *Beloved*, 124 pulses like a heart wrapped in the scarred tissue of trauma, pumping pain and loneliness through each of its inhabitants as they struggle to live with the ghosts of their own suffering. Sethe is haunted, quite literally, by her own act of infanticide and the horrific events at Sweet Home which bring her to a place where such a gruesome act seems to be her only option. Baby Suggs, who has already lost all eight of her children and endured a lifetime of wretched abuse, finally "dismiss[es] her great heart" (104) after the murder of her granddaughter and loss of both her grandsons. Paul D spends his time running from the memories of his Sweet Home brothers hanging from trees and the repeated sexual assaults inflicted by chain gang guards in Georgia. Even Stamp Paid and Ella have their own tragedies. For Stamp it is the memory of being forced to surrender his wife to be systematically raped by their enslaver's son, an event

which so shapes him that it becomes his name, and for Ella it is the unimaginably gruesome and repeated sexual assaulted perpetrated by a sadistic father and son duo that leave her pregnant with a baby she cannot even bear to look at.

Denver, on the other hand, is not allowed to participate in this communal trauma, although she clearly has plenty of her own. She was not at Sweet Home, has never been assaulted, has never lost a child or been subject to perverse sexual violence. Because Sethe herself is so traumatized, she seems unable to see and appreciate her daughter's trauma, and the rest of the community is so content in sucking their collective teeth at Sethe's actions that they pay little attention to Denver and her struggles. After all, her own mother has tried to kill her, her father has always been absent, her grandmother slowly disappears while her brothers disappear quickly, and her childhood attempt to integrate into the community traumatizes her so badly that it "block[s] up her ears" (297) and she stops hearing for a time. Therefore, whereas Sethe cannot escape her trauma or the tree on her back, Denver tries to utilize the natural world as an escape from the trauma-dripping walls of her own home.

However, just as humans cannot separate from nature, they also cannot not effectively separate from one another, as they are all a part of the same (emotional, spiritual, and physical) ecosystem. Denver's ecophobic assumption that nature is a place of escape help fuel her attempts to escape from her community and their/her trauma. Conversely, ecophobic language about Sethe traps her in her trauma and away from her community. This dichotomy is literalized through the comparison between Sethe's tree: a "chokecherry" scar on her back, and Denver's shrubs: the "emerald bower" in which she hides. But Denver does eventually reach beyond her isolation and ask her community for

help when her mother and Beloved are so locked into reliving their trauma that the three of them face starvation. This act serves as a catalyst in which both Sethe and Denver, as well as other members of the community, can begin to heal from their communal trauma by finally coming together as a community. In other words, it is only once Denver learns to understand her own place within the ecosystem of her community that any real healing can begin—for mother, daughter, and everyone else who helps to exorcize the ghost of their trauma in the yard outside of 124.

### *Sethe and Her Tree*

While Denver tries to escape into the natural world in order to hide from the trauma of other humans, Sethe's trauma traps her away from her community. Although she refers to it as "rememory" (43), the unpredictable and often all-encompassing nature of these memories reflects severe trauma, the kind that sticks to her like scum on teeth. Sethe's trauma becomes, quite literally, her house (a haunted 124) and her body (a chokecherry tree on her back). Therefore, Sethe can no more escape *into* nature than she can *from* it, because the violent haunting of her house serves as a constant reminder of the daughter she murdered, just as the chokecherry tree on her back serves as a reminder of her life as a slave. So when Paul D (a living reminder of the trauma of Sweet Home) appears and asks her why she doesn't leave 124, she responds, "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing" (18). In this description, Sethe seems to order her entire world in three pieces: the tree and the ghost are her trauma, which surround her on both sides, and Denver is the only thing that punctuates these two overwhelming forces.

Perhaps as much as *Beloved* herself, Sethe's tree has engendered much fruitful discussion. Several scholars have offered up their interpretations of what the tree might symbolize. Glenda B. Weathers takes a Biblical approach when she argues that the Sethe's chokecherry, like other trees in the novel, taps into a longstanding tradition in black vernacular culture in which trees "posit knowledge of both good and evil" (Weathers 201). She further explains that the tree and the ink which Sethe makes for schoolteacher—quite notably derived from cherry gum and oak bark—serve as two of her primary sources of knowledge: "With the Sethe-produced, tree-bark ink, schoolteacher, the one who 'knows' about good and evil, studies behavior, charts body measurements, numbers teeth, 'proving' with pseudo-science that the slaves are less than human" (207). It's not clear who is gaining "knowledge" in Weathers' estimation. Obviously, schoolteacher believes that his biosubjugative classifications impart certain knowledge, but Weathers' use of the word "proving" in quotes and her description of his process as "pseudo-science" reflect the fact that he is not actually *learning* anything. Rather, his inquiries create a false body of knowledge based on prejudice and confirmation bias, because all of his assumptions are rooted in a false, human/whitemale-centered epistemology. In other words, his attempts to hierarchize not only reflect white supremacy and misogyny, but also ecophobia.

Furthermore, while the events from which Sethe's tree takes root certainly show her the depravity possible in violent systems of oppression, it is unclear just how much "knowledge" Sethe gains from schoolteacher. After all, the violent whipping "open[ed] up [her] back, and when it closed it made a tree" (20). Nowhere does it say that it opened her mind. How could it? If Sethe were to *learn* from schoolteacher, Morrison would be

reinforcing white supremacy (placing knowledge in the hands of a white human at the expense of a black human), misogyny (privileging the knowledge of a man over a woman) and ecophobia (instilling a human-centric order on the natural world). Instead of “knowledge of good and evil,” what schoolteacher gives her along with her chokecherry tree is trauma; while “knowledge” is intellectual, trauma resides in the entire body. It is not just her sense of self or of the world around her that is warped. Her physical body is altered as a large swath of flesh becomes hard and loses feeling. Likewise, her orientation within the world changes as she becomes incredibly reactive to perceived threats, such as her split-second decision to murder her children and her attempted attack of Mr. Bodwin. But, as is often the case with such trauma, Sethe endures moments of utter powerlessness as the pain that lurks inside her body pounces in the form of debilitating flashbacks.

In a novel which foregrounds Sethe’s agency so prominently, these moments of forced reliving reveal the unpredictable and powerful nature of trauma. The first of such moments comes just before Paul D arrives as Sethe is transported back to the horrors of Sweet Home:

her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing...Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty...Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonder soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6-7)

This passage reflects the “devious” and inescapable nature of trauma, in that it often strikes without warning or provocation, while simultaneously causing “shame” because it is really her own brain that is doing the attacking. Furthermore, it highlights the relationship between ecophobia and trauma, as Sethe cuts across a chamomile field but cannot stand the residue of the plants which inhabit it, so she runs to a human-made pump—which yanks the water from the ground—in order to wash it off. Here Boy, on the other hand, uses the water as sustenance, and is more than happy to collect it as it lay.

Likewise, Sethe’s mind processes the trauma of seeing lynched bodies hanging from trees by setting up a false binary between those bodies and the trees. White supremacy justifies lynchings by essentializing race, while ecophobia’s essentializing of human/non-human tells Sethe that she is wrong to remember the trees because they matter less than the humans hanging from them. Thus, she “[can]not forgive her memory” for choosing to remember the “wonder” of the trees more than the horror of murdered bodies. The fact that she cannot accept remembering beautiful trees simply as beautiful trees implies that, at least on some subconscious level, she wants to blame the trees for the violence. In fact, the cherry gum from the ink used to document her abuse foreshadows the chokecherry tree on her back that serves as an ever-present reminder of that violence. Furthermore, she recalls that “there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream,” when it is really the horrendous actions of the humans that have traumatized her.

Much of the trauma she has experienced springs from ecophobic language and action that plague her throughout the novel and repeatedly distance her from others, and this passage harkens back to two of the most formative: her mammary rape and

schoolteacher's objectifying notebook. In each of these memories, she is equated with an animal. The forced nursing equates her to a cow being milked, an association first underscored by the fact that the Sweet Home men believe that their only sexual options are either a willing Sethe or unwilling calves (13), then by the fact that her punishment for telling on schoolteacher's nephews is to be whipped with cowhide, her own hide permanently split by that of a cow. But the notion that cows exist to be milked, or raped, or used for their hides is inherently ecophobic, just as the enslavement and abuse of Sethe reflects white supremacy. Unsurprisingly, schoolteacher justifies that violence by distinguishing her "human characteristics" from her "animal ones" (228), circling back toward the realm of ecophobia as he operates from the assumption that humans are distinct from animals, and therefore within their rights to treat them however they see fit.

This orientation is not surprising of an enslaver, because it is this level of dehumanization which both justified and sustained slavery in the first place. The systematic violence and horror required to enslave, beat, rape, and mutilate other humans relies upon white supremacy maintaining that other races are closer to animals than humans, and ecophobia maintaining that animals matter less than humans. But schoolteacher is not the only one to refer to Sethe as an animal. Even those who share in her oppression chastise her in animalistic terms. Amy, who is also oppressed by misogyny, reprimands an injured, laboring, and immobile Sethe by saying, "What you gonna do, jus lay there and foal?" (41), conflating Sethe with a horse, an animal notably used for serving humans. Even Paul D, who has shared in much of Sethe's Sweet Home trauma, censures her violent actions in a similar way by saying, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (194). In this moment, he is not a fellow-slave who can empathize, but a man

judging a woman for a choice he can never understand. Immediately, “a forest [springs] up between them, trackless and quiet” (ibid.). In other words, there is a sudden divide, seemingly impassable, and that divide is a fundamental misunderstanding of nature—the way he understands nature as a separating thing and the way in which those assumptions separate her from him (and others).

That fundamental misunderstanding of nature and insulting of the natural world is exactly what isolates Sethe from others. It’s no coincidence that the thing which springs up between them is a forest, an amalgamation of trees. It is as if Paul D could handle Sethe’s one tree—after all, he gets to be squarely in patriarchal control in that moment where he kisses her scars and tells her what it looks like (since she’s never seen it). But he cannot abide by this thing over which he has no control. She has a past without him, and there is no salve he can produce to remedy a dead baby, so he retreats to the comfort of misogyny and ecophobia to soothe his own discomfort. Of all the people in Sethe’s life, Paul D knows what she’s been through more than anyone, so this betrayal is a particularly painful reminder of the alienation inherent in these biosubjugative epistemologies, and are perhaps the most painful parts of the novel. Dungy explains that “the black body has... frequently been rendered ‘animalistic’ and ‘wild’ in the most dangerously degrading and limiting senses of those terms,” and that “to separate the importance of human interactions with the non-human world from the importance of cultural and political considerations would be to limit the scope” of any given work (678). Therefore, any examination of Sethe which omits her forced alienation through ecophobic comparisons is woefully incomplete.

Not only do these comparisons legally and physically limit Sethe, but they existentially burden her as well as she walks through the world carrying the weight of her trauma. It is difficult to tell how much is a trauma-induced survivor's guilt and how much is internalized biosubjugation. Regardless, each time she reflects upon schoolteacher and his humiliating project, the memory seems to bleed with the ink that she made as she increasingly blames herself for her part in what happened to her. For example, when she remembers her mammary rape, schoolteacher is there "writing in ink she herself had made" (116). Likewise, she recalls that although the recipe came from Mrs. Garner, schoolteacher "preferred how [Sethe] mixed it and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book" (44). The implication here is that his nightly notetaking could not have occurred without her involvement. In fact, she tells Paul D as much when she says, "I made the ink...he couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (320). Just as she blames her own mind for taking her back to her Sweet Home trauma more than she seems to blame those who perpetuated that trauma, she feels that she has allowed for her own abuse by creating the ink that she had no choice but to make.

Ultimately, Sethe is pushing against these sorts of hierarchies when she decides to kill her children rather than subject them to the white supremacist, patriarchal canker of slavery. She refuses to participate in schoolteacher's dichotomous listings when she determines that "no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no...Sethe had refused—and refused still" (296). She refuses hierarchies when Paul D suggests that death might be worse than slavery and she proclaims, "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (194). Obviously, she cannot opt

out of such systems that are woven into the very fibers of our society, and she does admit that the price she paid for running from slavery (and misogyny and ecophobia) “cost too much” (18). Indeed, these choices cost Sethe just about everything she has. Perhaps that is why Denver chooses to hide instead.

### *Denver and Her Shrubs*

Denver has a deep connection with nature, but her trouble lies in viewing it as a separate place in which she can isolate. Before Beloved corporealizes, Denver often seeks solitude in her boxwood bushes:

Back beyond 124 was a narrow field that stopped itself at a wood. On the yonder side of these woods, a stream. In these woods, between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves...In that bower, closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out.* (34-5)

Everything about this description suggests isolation and separateness. First of all, each of the parts described seems very separate from one another, strictly divided by borders. It is not “in the wilderness behind the house,” but rather a “narrow field that stop[s] itself at a wood.” The wood and the field are therefore separate, which seems, from the description, to be a deliberate choice on the part of the field, as it “stops itself.” Beyond the wood (not at the further part of it) lies a stream. The description then reminds the reader once again that the woods are “between the field and stream,” not a part of them. Also, the boxwood bushes are “hidden” by other trees, effectively making them separate from the other parts of the woods since their existence is obscured. Dungy points out that ecologists refer to areas such as these as “ecotones, areas at the margins between one zone and

another...[spaces that are] overlaps rich with possibility and also, often, danger” (676). These bushes have been “planted,” which is to say that they have been manipulated by human agency, and come together to make an “empty room” which mimics the loneliness which wears on Denver. This liminal space is her only escape from the one world that she is trapped in. After all, the entire purpose of a room is to protect one from outside elements. In other words, the expressed purpose of a room is to separate from nature.

But the idea that humans can separate from nature is decidedly ecophobic. Humans are natural beings, and therefore always a part of nature. Stephen Nathan Haymes explains that according to the African term *ubuntu*, “full moral personhood is ethically attainable only in and through communal relationship with other beings” (36), including the natural world. Therefore, Denver’s tendency to retreat to nature is much more ecophobic than it may at first appear to be. Her aim is not to unite with nature, but to separate from the human world, which presupposes that humans and nature are inherently separate. However, because she feels so excluded from the communal trauma in which she is forced to swim every day, she feels that her own trauma doesn’t even belong to her. Her sister’s murder belongs to her mother, the outrage belongs to the community because they remember it, and even her own father’s absence seems to belong to everyone but her.

For example, when Paul D first appears at 124, Denver quickly realizes that she is not invited into the moment he shares with her mother:

They were a twosome, saying “Your daddy” and “Sweet Home” in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father’s absence was not hers. Once the absence had belonged to Grandma Baby—a son, deeply mourned because he was the one who had brought her out of there. Then it was her mother’s absent husband. Now it was this hazelnut strangers’ absent friend.

Only those who knew him (“knew him well”) could claim his absence for themselves. (15)

Although Denver and Sethe are the actual twosome, effectively exiled to their own home and mourning the losses of the same people, Denver feels that Paul D’s shared experience with her mother renders Sethe his. Not only does he take her mother, but the memory of her father as well. At the heart of this erroneous assumption lies capitalist ideas of ownership, underscored by the words “belonged,” “claim,” and “not hers.” Just as ecophobic capitalism asserts that land can be owned and white supremacy asserts that people can be owned, Denver believes that heartache and experience can be owned, and therefore denied. Although the trauma that pulses throughout the novel is hers as much as anyone’s, her own internalized ecophobia renders her separate; so separate, in fact, that she makes Paul D a tree, just like her mother. She refers to him as a “hazelnut stranger,” which nicely complements her mother’s chokecherry tree. In this moment, Denver is a mere boxwood shrub wilting in the shadow of these two trees.

It is fitting that Denver would be a shrub among trees because her separateness, highlighted by frequent trips to the boxwoods, keeps her from maturing. In other words, her seclusion keeps her from growing or moving forward in her life. Morrison notes that Denver’s trips to the boxwoods begin “as a little girl’s houseplay, but as her desires [change] so [does] the play...First a playroom...then a refuge” (34). Even in her late teens, Denver passes her time in “play.” Her immaturity is highlighted by the tantrum she throws when Paul D arrives, where her tears soak “her far too womanly breasts” (17), underscoring the disconnect between her young mind and already-developed body. This false separation of mind and body mirrors the false separation between humans and nature. However, without physical access to peers, or even unencumbered emotional

access to her mother, Denver lacks the social connections necessary to mature; just as a plant needs sunlight, soil, and water to grow, Denver cannot grow on her own. She laments, “Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either” (ibid.). But that has not always been the case, and as Denver isolates to separate herself from “the hurt of the hurt world,” she only increases the “loneliness [that wears] her out” (35). She is most alive, productive, and happy when she seeks connection with her community. It is only when Denver stops trying to hide in the natural world that she is able to thrive.

The first instance of her attempting to venture into her community and outside of her own isolation is when she seeks connection by “walk[ing] off looking for the house that other children visited but not her” (120). She finds the home where Lady Jones educates the local children, but immediately has difficulty establishing the connection and can only peer through the window. Her reticence is understandable, as she is so used to a house providing a physical barrier between her and others. The walls of 124 have kept others away from her for as long as she can remember. Here, what literally separates her from the other children is glass, a perfect example of human manipulation of a natural material (sand) in order to create a barrier. It is only after watching from the outside on four occasions that she finally enters and enjoys “almost a whole year in the company of her peers” (120). The words used to describe that time are “precious” and “happy” (ibid.), two adjectives not elsewhere associated with Denver, and rarely associated with anyone else.

However, when another child asks about her mother’s violent past, Denver separates again. First, the comments make her feel different, even though there is “no

meanness in his face or in his voice. Just curiosity” (121). He is not bullying her or trying to make her feel excluded; in fact, his question is an attempt to understand her better and is thus an attempt at connection. It is Denver who chooses never to go back. Furthermore, when she finally asks her mother and grandmother about it, instead of listening to the answer, she spends two years “walk[ing] in a silence too solid for penetration...hear[ing] nothing at all” (ibid.). In this case, physical separation from her community is not enough. Instead, she shuts down one of her natural senses completely in order to avoid interaction with her family. In other words, she uses (or rather, refuses to use) one of her natural abilities to isolate, to escape from the trauma she is too afraid to explore; she evades a connection with her family when she does not connect to their trauma.

Later, Denver tries again to establish a connection with Beloved, but it fails for two reasons. First, Beloved is not a natural being. What she is, exactly, can be debated elsewhere, but she seems to be an accumulation of regret, loss, dehumanization, and trauma. In other words, she is the physical embodiment of some of the worst byproducts of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy which birthed the slave trade and continues to thrive today. Second, Denver’s connection with Beloved comes only at the expense of connections with others. It is inherently exclusionary, and therefore simply another form of isolation. She wants Beloved all to herself, delighting in and craving her presence, and as she uses her as a vessel through which to escape her family’s shared trauma, Beloved becomes her new emerald bower.

Tenuous at best, Denver’s connection with Beloved is fraught with insecurity as she desperately tries to keep her for herself. She begs Beloved to not reveal her identity to Sethe, thus attempting to block any chance of the two having a real connection. When

this makes Beloved angry, she desperately backtracks. Terrified that she will leave her, she reminds Beloved, “I didn’t do anything to you. I never hurt you” (89). Lurking in that proclamation is the reminder that Sethe has, in fact, hurt her. But Denver does not dare spell it out, lest it push Beloved further away. Therefore, they pretend to ignore their shared trauma; after all, their mother did intend to kill them both. Their connection is based on Denver’s childish and one-sided devotion to Beloved and is furthermore wholly dependent upon the exclusion of Sethe, so it is therefore not a real connection at all. This false connection not only reproduces Denver’s previous state of isolation, but intensifies it, as Sethe and Beloved become locked in a parasitic dynamic which threatens the lives of all three of them. It is not until Denver ventures out into the community again and finally forms extra-familial connections, while simultaneously facing her familial trauma, that she is able to begin to move forward.

#### *The Community Unites in the Out of Doors*

Denver finally forms that connection when she ventures out from her home in search of work. What she finds is the community and acceptance she has been lacking all those years, as they provide for her and her family in a way that her mother no longer can. In other words, she finds a symbiotic ecosystem of which she can be a part. Furthermore, individual members of the community are able to face their own trauma through helping Denver exorcise Beloved. It is notable here that the food which she receives and they give is exchanged outdoors, in the open, uninhibited by human-made barriers. It is as if Denver is tapping into her natural instinct to forage. This move marks the beginning of her maturity, and thus her healing as she is no longer trapped in her

childlike and isolated state. Faced with starvation and living with a mother and sister that are more concerned with their own unnatural enmeshment than seeing to their natural needs, Denver acts like the parent and reaches out for help: “Neither Sethe nor Beloved knew or cared about it one way or another...So it was [Denver] who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would” (281). For Denver, “step[ping] off the edge of the world” means breaking down the barriers that separate her from her community, realized in her refusal to isolate and forsaking her overdependence upon Beloved. Although she considers this action a death, it is really more of a rebirth—a changing in the seasons of her life—wherein she is able to actualize through the rallying of the other women in her community.

Morrison foreshadows this rebirth and unity between human community and the natural world with her descriptions of Denver’s surroundings as she enters the town for the first time in years. The houses sit “close together in a line like wrens” (287) and human-made objects sit broken next to an obviously unmanicured “clump of forsythia” (ibid). Another house is green with wild growth from the discarded buds of a sycamore. Men *and* women greet her. Everywhere she looks, humans and plants seem to be living in harmony. This reunification of the human and natural worlds is vital for a young woman who has spent most of her life viewing the natural world as a place to hide from other humans. When Lady Jones answers her knock on the door, she looks at Denver and realizes that “everybody’s child was in that face” (290), that, despite the years of physical estrangement, Denver is one of her own. Denver’s act of reaching out to her community, coupled with their responses, “inaugurate[s] her life in the world as a woman” (292). Morrison refers to this symbiotic relationship as a “sweet thorny place” (ibid.), evoking

an image of uncultivated blackberry brambles yielding tasty berries. They do not give her money, but nourishment, thus forsaking the hegemonic notion of charity in favor of womanist ethics of care.

Furthermore, these womanist acts not only save Denver (from both starvation and her own isolation), but also help the other women in the community become more whole. Depositing food on a tree stump outside 124 allows for a fourfold regeneration. First, it revitalizes the dead tree by using it as a vessel of life-sustaining food. Second, it allows the women to begin to atone for their ostracization of Denver's family as they grapple with the guilt of "the years of their own disdain" (293)—although many of them still cling to righteous indignation over Sethe's perceived pride. Third, it provokes conversations in which Denver hears from all those who "knew her grandmother" (293). Here, Denver gets to share in the memories of her grandmother, a stark contrast from the days in which her own father's absence belonged only to others. Finally, in these conversations the women are able to reflect upon their own relationships with 124: "others remembered when it was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt" (ibid.). Therefore, 124 comes back to life in their memories in vivid, sensual detail as a place where they heard, tasted, trusted, and created.

It is this spirit of remembering which ultimately causes the women to come together to exorcise Beloved's parasitic presence. Such an exorcism, powered by communal unity, could only take place out of doors, free of the tools and structures of ecophobic *progress* and patriarchal influence. No buildings, no tools, no men, no words; just thirty harmonized female voices that have come to protect their own. Although the

women do begin in prayer, imploring their “Maker” to help (304), they quickly realize that they must “step back to the beginning” where there were “no words...[only] the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (305). That sound finally draws Sethe out of the house where she must face her actions as she relives the day when she killed Beloved, right down to the “hummingbirds stick[ing] needle beaks right through her headcloth” (308). It is only by going back and facing their trauma that they are able to move forward together.

Although they face that trauma together, they also must face their own individual horrors. Denver begins to face her past by reaching out to Lady Jones, and faces it head-on when she encounters Nelson Jones—the one who’s words had “blocked up her ears” (297) as a child—and decides to start taking care of herself. Ella faces Beloved as a reckoning with the baby she let die and refused to love. In that moment, even Mr. Bodwin, only stopping by to pick up Denver for work, is returning to the house he was born in which his mother died before he was three (305). Likewise, while the approach of the women draws Sethe outside, the appearance of Mr. Bodwin transports her back to the fateful day, where she gets to try a different option and attack the approaching white man instead of harming her own children. In facing their trauma, each woman gets to assert her own agency and try something new, while still operating within the safety of sisterhood.

However, before the exorcism is over, Morrison cuts to a new chapter with Paul D and Stamp’s perspective recounting the events, slicing through another beautiful moment of female and ecological unity with the male gaze, just like Chicken Little’s interloping and Shadrack’s voyeurism on Sula and Nel’s stick-and-grass play. Furthermore, when

Paul D finally returns to Sethe, he placates her grief at the loss of Beloved by assuring her “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (322). But this individualistic stance flies in the face of the communal spirit which has saved her from Beloved in the first place.

Furthermore, classifying something as a “best thing” superimposes the sort of artificial hierarchy which sustains all forms of biosubjugation. Sethe and Denver have spent plenty of time being singled out and isolated in their trauma. After all, Paul D reinforces linguistic ecophobia when he “count[s] Sethe’s feet” (321), as she points out.

Unfortunately, the return of Paul D and his linguistic hierarchization amputates the growing communal spirit engendered by the women’s healing exorcism.

#### **Chapter V. Conclusion: “Down Here in Paradise”**

In Morrison’s works, as well as in life, moments of unbridled unity—connections which are based on exclusion or otherness—are always temporary. Pecola’s companionship with Claudia and Freida cannot survive her “madness” after her father inserts his own trauma within her, both literally and figuratively. Nel and Sula’s friendship is forever altered after Chicken Little interrupts their grass play. Likewise, Paul D returns and dismisses Sethe’s grief at the loss of Beloved and denies her need for community as he assures her that she was her own “best thing” (322) all along. In each instance, patriarchal discourses encroach upon female unity as the male gaze upends these moments of connection. But perhaps Morrison is also demonstrating the short half-life of these types of connections.

After all, one can only hide from the white-supremacist, misogynist, ecophobic world for so long. Each time one of these connections occurs, the characters are asserting their own subjectivity in a world which insists upon their objectification. But, as the previous examples demonstrate, that world wins out in the end. Trusted companions eventually bow to popular opinion, unwanted lookers-on interlope upon intimate moments, and well-intentioned men superimpose their own meaning onto life-altering events. Thus, because it is the return of exclusionary forces which curtail these connections, the losses are often understood in ecophobic terms which blame the natural world for the handiwork of systems of biosubjugation.

For example, Pecola's union with Claudia and Freida is based on their common otherness. Eventually, when Pecola becomes the subject of "gossip and the slow wagging of heads" in their community, the girls can no longer stand to look at her (204). Then, they unite with their community in a common disgust: "All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (205). In other words, they forsake their now-depressing connection with Pecola in favor of an artificial "*wholeness*" which depends upon her otherness. Furthermore, even as an adult Claudia realizes this sort of communal soul-murder, she blames it on the community and, by metaphorical extension, the land. Referring back to the unblooming marigolds she had planted to save Pecola's baby, she proclaims that "it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town... This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture" (206). Therefore, she is able to absolve herself for her ineffective planting and blame the soil, just as she blames her community for her own decision to turn on Pecola.

Similarly, both Nel and the community of The Bottom vilify Sula in order to cleanse themselves. Nel takes comfort in the fact that it was Sula who threw Chicken Little in the river, even though she watched (as Eva points out) and admits to herself that “it felt so good to see him fall” (170). Likewise, the community spirit engendered in The Bottom by their common distaste for Sula’s ways fades after her death, causing “steeping resentment[s],” “uncoddled” husbands, and “claims of superiority” amongst Northern-born blacks (154). In other words, both Nel and (most of) the rest of The Bottom need Sula in order to establish their own superiority and to feel a part of something bigger than themselves. It is not until the end that Nel realizes how much she has missed Sula, the only person with whom she has ever shared an authentic connection. In this moment, “leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of over-ripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze” (174). She seems to be transported back to their grass play, with the leaves, mud, and breeze, where they connected with each other—despite “the fact that they were neither white nor male” (52)—and the natural world—despite the fact that it is neither white, nor male, nor human. Just as Claudia understands her abandonment of Pecola through a natural metaphor, Nel first encounters her grief by paying attention to the natural world around her.

In *Beloved*, however, this paradigm shifts. Whereas *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* end with an individual realizing that they were wrong to sever a vital connection with someone who is now beyond their reach, *Beloved* ends with a community forgetting that they were ever connected to that someone in the first place. After the women come together to banish their common enemy—their own terrifying pasts—and after Paul D

hawks his rugged individualism to Sethe, they systematically forget Beloved. She becomes nothing more than forgotten “footprints by the water” and “wind in the eaves, or spring thawing too quickly. Just weather” (324) through which the community can cleanse itself. Unlike the previous examples of loss understood through nature, this loss seems to *become* nature. Furthermore, instead of an individual remembering, it is a collective forgetting. Because Beloved had been the enemy, they banish all parts of her, including the memory of her, to the realm of the natural world as if it were a separate place. But without facing the trauma which Beloved represents to them, they are unable to move forward, and instead fall back into the retrogressive groove of comfortable forgetting.

This thought takes me back to that night in October when a bellicose fire swept into my town and swallowed 5,643 human-made structures, claiming 22 human lives in the process. It burned houses built in known fire zones as well as those built well outside the imagined reach of wildfires. The streets of my youth were reduced to rubble and twisted metal like a warzone. Likewise, countless animals were displaced as their habitats were decimated. Foxes roamed through subdivisions and rats died in gutters for months afterwards. In one night, my sense of safety and place were disrupted as I was reminded that there really is no such thing as a city limit.

However, during that time that was so traumatic that a cigarette or barbeque can still elicit a mild panic response today, there was an expression to which my community clung: *The love in the air is thicker than the smoke*. Some opened their homes to complete strangers. Restaurateurs who had lost their own homes opened their doors to feed people for free. There were so many donations and volunteers at the several

evacuation centers that they were forced to turn people away. It seemed that every overpass and intersection was strewn with signs expressing gratitude to the first responders who came from all over the western United States to aid our own overwhelmed firefighters, paramedics, police officers, power linemen, and more. Even as the fire closed in on us, my community opened its collective heart in a way that I can only struggle to put into words as we united against a common threat.

Yet, just as the Morrison's moments of unity are interrupted and altered, so too was our communal unity abbreviated by the return of capitalist and ecophobic discourses. Life went on and old patterns reemerged. The disparity in insurance coverage allowed some to recoup financial losses and others to lose everything. Renters and undocumented immigrants lacked access to the same resources as homeowners and citizens. Wealth inequality increased, forcing people to leave the county in droves, unable to afford the soaring cost of living. People lamented the loss of community spirit, but little was done to get it back. Landlords began to raise rents because the market allowed it, citizens began to complain about the increasing homeless population encroaching on their lives, and the yellowing signs were torn down from the overpasses. Again, perhaps such a deep communal connection was unsustainable. Or perhaps our problem was that our unity came only because our trauma differentiated us from other people in other towns who had not experienced our brand of communal trauma.

I am reminded again of *Tar Baby*, which ends with the protagonist, Son, reuniting with nature by joining the wild horsemen of the island, who roam “all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow” (306). Presented with the choice between returning to Jadine—a woman who has forgotten her race, forgotten

her place in nature, and “forgotten her ancient properties” (305)—or remaining on the island with the timeless men and the ancient, sentient trees that are “still there” despite it all (306), Son chooses the latter, which is a reclamation of his race, his place in nature, and his “ancient properties.” He “stumbles” on pebbles and roots at first (306), demonstrating a lack of harmony between himself and nature. However, as he finds his footing, he becomes steadier, and “the mist lift[s] and the trees [step] back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man” (ibid.). By persevering past his stumbling and steadying himself, he proves his worthiness and the natural elements of the island recognize him as “a certain kind of man” who can live in harmony with them.

Although the ending of *Tar Baby* is situated on the more hopeful end of the spectrum of Morrisonian endings, it still leaves a number of loose ends. First of all, Son is a man, so he already profits from systems which privilege men over women. Also, his reunification with nature is marked by his joining the wild horsemen and forsaking his other human connections. This is similar to the instance of Nel and Sula uniting with nature in *Sula*, but only by flipping well-established hierarchical systems upside-down. In other words, each of these seeming solutions simply reorder the components of an oppressive machine. Conversely, *The Bluest Eye* ends with condemnation of love, that it is “never any better than the lover” (205), and *Beloved* ends with forgetting both the past and the natural elements that serve as a reminder (324). None of these novels feature an alternative which is anything more than a retooling. What can be gleaned, then, from Morrison’s critiques of systems which are at once so hidden and so omnipresent that there seems to be little hope of ever fully understanding (let alone escaping) them?

Perhaps this question is better addressed by considering the ending of another Morrison novel, *Paradise*. She writes:

In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl—fuse in the younger woman's face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf.

There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun.

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise. (318)

This passage recalls several moments of promised peace that have failed to come to fruition in the previous novels. Pecola's ruinous desire to meld her dark black skin with blue eyes is finally realized in the "[adored] black face framed in cerulean blue." Sula and Nel's attempt to bury "defiling things" proves fruitless in this mystical place where "sea trash," such as "discarded bottle caps" and "a small dead radio" not only "gleams" and "sparkles," but seems to exist in harmony with nature as it "plays the quiet surf." Denver's binary assumption that contentment is to be found either through female familial connection or by hiding in nature from the traumas of the world is proven false as these women find "solace" in each other and in this natural setting, without ignoring the ship full of "disconsolate" people. Even Son's reunification with nature, which seems to omit both the non-human and non-masculine, is perfected in this place where those who are at peace are joined by ships full of people who are "different...both lost and

saved.” Furthermore, this place of peace and equality is not somewhere else, but “down here.”

Therefore, Morrison’s literary worlds show us that it is imperative that we neither alter nor opt-out of the systems which both oppress and define us. In my own town, we were forced to reckon with the power and agency of nature, as well as our own collective fault in the fire’s devastation and subsequent fallout. It was only then that normal hegemonic lines seemed to disappear. However, once the threat was gone, so to speak, those lines quickly reemerged and life arched back toward *normal*. In other words, for a brief time, we acknowledged our own complicity in systems of environmental violence, which (temporarily) loosened other systems of oppression.

After all, Morrison’s literary worlds demonstrate the intersectional overflow of oppression from one to another. Black men, crushed by the weight of racialized oppression, engage in misogyny and violence towards children. Black women, subdued by internalized racial and gendered oppression, reproduce that oppression against other women. All of them use ecophobic language and action to distance themselves from nature and each other. In this sense, unity seems to come only through othering others or individuating oneself. Perhaps unity is not the goal at all. After all, there seems to be no way of permanently sustaining it within the biosubjugative systems which we cannot escape. Rather, the striving toward unity seems to be the place where genuine connections are made, where the traumatized live in harmony with *all* elements of the natural world, where one who toils can “rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise,” where we can rethink our entire practice of

interacting with the world and look at it anew, with fresh eyes that love the “ruined” and “disconsolate” things.

## Notes

1.) Although the scholarly convention is to capitalize “Schoolteacher,” I have chosen to adopt Morrison’s uncapitalized version in order to stay truer to her text. It is notable, however, that Morrison denies schoolteacher the status of a proper noun.

2.) This is perhaps why her work is so often referred to as magical realism. I do not make that accusation here. To me, Morrison’s worlds play with the limits of language in an oppressive world, and reflect her understanding of the generative power of unexpected language. Furthermore, these accusations seem to belittle her work as mere fantasy, overlooking the stark applicability of her stories to real-world situations. To me, they are akin to patriarchal accusations of female hysteria when a woman feels/expresses an inconvenient thought/emotion. Instead of grapple with Morrison’s challenging language and themes, too many critics are happy to dismiss it as magical realism.

3.) Another Morrisonian character who is repeatedly compared to animals is Sethe (discussed further in Chapter 3). Schoolteacher has his pupils line up her human characteristics against her human ones (228) and even Paul D, who should be on her side given their shared trauma, chastises her by saying “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194).

4.) It is notable that the home that seems to have the most chaos (at least the one with people constantly coming and going, sex in the pantry, and family members repeatedly burning to death) is the Peace home. This is contrasted with Nel’s family name, Wright. This brings to mind the colloquial expression, “Do you want to be happy or do you want to be right? Here, the question could be amended to say, “Do you want to be peaceful, or do you want to be right?”

5.) I thought long and hard about whether or not to include the actual word. In the end, I chose to keep Morrison’s original text and include this acknowledgement of the fact that it is not my word to use.

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