Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of American Culture and Literature

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS: *LOVE*, *A MERCY*, *HOME,* AND *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

Rumeysa BAYRAKTUTAN

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2024

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ABSTRACT

BAYRAKTUTAN, Rumeysa. *Community Building in Toni Morrison's Novels: Love, A Mercy, Home, and God Help the Child*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2024.

This thesis will focus on building and maintaining communities in Toni Morrison's works published after 2000, which are *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), and *God Help the Child* (2015). These novels explore the dynamics of racialized gender relationships in fostering the development of communities. The concept of intersectionality, which examines the interconnectedness of social identities such as sexuality, gender, class, and race, offers a framework for evaluating the difficulties faced by the characters. In the first chapter, how the legacy of slavery and Eurocentric worldview hinder the characters' capacity to establish positive interpersonal connections that contribute to the well-being of the community is explored. The main focus is on the impact of white-dominating standards on African American communities, particularly in regard to their interpersonal connections. In the second chapter, an analysis is conducted on Morrison's changing viewpoint regarding power, gender, and race within present-day African American communities. The author's last two novels prominently focus on community development, solidarity, and the characters' continuous fight for social justice and equality. Morrison's depictions of the African American experience prompt an exploration of the biased and close-minded perspectives that prevail in society, while cultivating a respect for the resilience and support found within African American communities. The experiences of the characters prove that individuals need to possess a heightened sense of cultural consciousness for African American communities to flourish.

Keywords

African American Criticism, Toni Morrison, Gender, Community Building, Interpersonal Relationships

ÖZET

BAYRAKTUTAN, Rumeysa. *Toni Morrison'un Ask, Merhamet, Yuva ve Tanrı Çocuğu Korusun Romanlarında Topluluk Oluşturma*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2024.

Bu tez, 2000 yılından sonra yayımlanan Toni Morrison'ın *Aşk* (2003), *Merhamet* (2008), *Yuva* (2012) ve *Tanrı Çocuğu Korusun* (2015) eserlerinde toplulukların oluşturulması ve sürdürülmesi üzerinde duracaktır. Bu romanlar, toplulukların oluşmasını sağlayan ırk temelli cinsiyet ilişkilerinin dinamikleri üzerine odaklanır. Cinsellik, cinsiyet, sınıf ve ırk gibi sosyal kimliklerin birbirine bağlılığını inceleyen kesişimsellik. kavramı, karakterlerin karşılaştıkları zorlukları değerlendirmeye yarayan bir çerçeve sunar. Bu tezin ilk bölümünde, kölelik mirasının ve Avrupa merkezci dünya görüşünün, kişilerin topluluğun refahına katkı sağlayan olumlu ilişki kurma kurma yeteneğini nasıl engellediği araştırılır. Ana odak, özellikle de kişilerarası ilişkiler açısından, egemen beyazların standartlarının Afrikalı Amerikalı topluluklar üzerindeki etkisidir. İkinci bölümde ise günümüz Afrikalı Amerikalı topluluklarında güç, cinsiyet ve ırk konusunda Morrison'ın değişen bakış açısı incelenmiştir. Yazarın son iki romanı, özelikle topluluk oluşumu, dayanışma ve karakterlerin süregelen sosyal adalet ve eşitlik mücadelesine odaklanmıştır. Morrison Afrikalı Amerikalı deneyimini betimleyerek toplumda yerleşik olan önyargıları ve dar görüşleri açığa çıkarır ve Afrikalı Amerikalı toplulukların doğasında bulunan dayanıklı olma ve birbirini desteklemenin önemini vurgular. Karakterlerin deneyimleri, Afrikalı Amerikalı toplulukların gelişmesi için bireylerin üst düzeyde kültürel bir bilinç duygusuna sahip olmaları gerektiğini gösterir.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Afrikalı Amerikalı Eleştiri, Toni Morrison, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Topluluk Oluşturma, Kişilerarası İlişkiler

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison (1931-2019), the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, has written eleven novels as well as children's books and collections of essays. Among her novels, *Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, and *Beloved*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, Born as Chloe Ardelia Wofford, Morrison was reared in Lorain, Ohio, earned her bachelor's degree in English from Howard University, and received her master's degree in American literature from Cornell University. In the late 1960s, Morrison became the first African American woman editor at Random House in New York City.

Toni Morrison is renowned for her writing style, which is distinguished by evocative imagery, lyrical language, and intricate story frameworks. Ethnicity, identity, memory, and history are explored in her novels. The lyrical nature of Morrison's work is accomplished through the use of figurative language, allusions, and repetitions. She often employs sensory descriptions to create vivid and immersive situations, and her writing is recognized for its attention to detail. Morrison often delves into the passions, anxieties, and innermost thoughts of her characters. She writes about African American life that echoes the rhythms of African folk tales. Morrison's works concentrate on the African American experience in an unfair system; her characters strive to discover who they are and their purpose in life. In her works, domestic space provide a microcosm to explore racialized relationships between the male and female characters and present how the African American communities function through these relationships.

In this thesis, Toni Morrison's four post-2000 novels Love (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015) will be analyzed within the framework of African American criticism and African American gender studies. The characteristics related to patriarchal gender roles inflict the African American men and women's relationships, especially in the domestic sphere. Through this analysis, a deeper understanding of Morrison's evolving perspective on issues of race, gender, and power in contemporary American society, and how her work contributes to ongoing conversations about these critical topics will be explored. Specifically, the role of solidarity and community-building in Morrison's post-2000 novels, and how these

themes speak to the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality in America today are significant. In these later novels, Morrison has made it evident that healthy communities cannot be built and maintained in a white-dominated patriarchal culture unless there is a heightened level of cultural awareness. Morrison's complex and nuanced portrayals of the African American experience sparks a conversation about the kind of writing that challenges dominant narratives and promotes understanding and empathy among diverse communities within the framework of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's intersectionality, Web Du Bois' double consciousness, and bell hooks's notion of healing African American communities.

Authors who have discussed gender roles, racial issues, and the value of community are not limited to Toni Morrison. Like her, African American critic bell hooks, whose works form the basis of this thesis, has written extensively on the importance of community in African American culture. In her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks argues that community is central to the survival and resilience of African Americans in the face of systemic racism and oppression. hooks contends that African American communities have historically been formed out of a shared struggle against oppression and a commitment to mutual support and collective well-being. She explains that "there in that domestic space we learn to serve and honor one another" (449), meaning that building strong communities necessitates strong interpersonal relationships, shared values, and a sense of belonging. hooks emphasizes that the concept of community in African American culture is not monolithic and there are many different ways of understanding and experiencing community; basically, there is a tension between the ideal community as a source of strength and support and the reality of intra-community as a place of conflict and competition. She argues that gender plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of both men and women in African American communities. hooks contends that traditional gender roles and expectations have often created conflicts between African American men and women, leading to rifts and divisions within communities. According to her, these binary gender roles create barriers to communication and understanding between men and women in African American communities and reinforce patriarchal values. Intersectionality and interconnectedness of gender and racialized identities are a "more vital way of framing the discourse in that it serves as a constant reminder that we cannot change one aspect

of the system without changing the whole" (7). hooks emphasizes the importance of recognizing and celebrating the diversity of gender expressions and identities within African American communities while working to create more equitable and just relationships between men and women.

Just like hooks, in his book *Race Matters*, Cornel West argues that African American women have historically been marginalized within the feminist and civil rights movements, and from that marginalization, the tensions between African American men and women have been created, as well as within African American communities. African American women have often been excluded from leadership positions within the civil rights movement. Leadership was predominantly male, which meant that the unique perspectives and needs of women were frequently overlooked or undervalued. Along with this, within the first and second waves of the feminist movement, the primary focus has been on the issues faced by white women. This has led to the marginalization of African American women since their specific struggles related to race and gender were not adequately addressed. Consequently, African American women face intersectional challenges both as African Americans and as women. The lack of this particular intersectional analysis contributed to their peripherical positioning in the civil rights and feminist movements. This type of marginalization was caused by the patriarchal structures and the legacy of slavery. In the face of such adversaries, West emphasizes the importance of solidarity and mutual support between African American men and women. He suggests that building relationships based on shared values and a commitment to justice and equality is essential for creating stronger, more resilient communities. In his book *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, West explores the challenges and opportunities of romantic relationships between African American men and women. These relationships can be powerful sources of mutual support and growth, but they also require a deep commitment to understand and challenge the ways in which systemic oppression and cultural norms have created divisions between genders (West 207).

In his book, West writes about bell hooks and his conversations with her about male and female relationships and how they can form or disintegrate African American communities (87). In these conversations, West and hooks discuss how the field of

African American studies was not originally intended to be exclusively for those of African American descent. The intention was to reinterpret the concepts of humanity, modernity, and American identity, since individuals of African origin in the nation should possess these qualities. In her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks contends that marginalization has led to tensions between African American men and women, as well as within African American communities. She states that;

> [Feminism] is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (137)

In this context, West's and hook's views on relationships between men and women are similar. She suggests that building relationships based on shared values and a commitment to justice and equality is essential for creating communities. In her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, hooks explores the ways in which African American men have been socialized to view masculinity as a performance of toughness, aggression, and sexual conquest. She argues that this narrow view of masculinity has contributed to creating rifts between African American men and women.

Like hooks, Morrison explores the complex relationships formed through the interaction between African American men and women and the challenges they face due to systemic racism and patriarchy. She portrays male characters who are struggling to find their place in a society that has marginalized them, while highlighting the importance of sisterhood and female solidarity. Morrison's works after the new millennium demonstrate a shift in focus, by emphasizing the power of unity and building communities for resolving issues in relationships between genders. By highlighting the significance of cultural consciousness and mutual support, Morrison advocates for a more inclusive and equitable society that celebrates diversity and nurtures healthy relationships between individuals.

Morrison's book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* explores the ways in which Anglo American canonical literature construct an Africanist presence in American history. She uses the term "Africanist" to describe the connotative

African American identity that African people have come to represent and the full spectrum of opinions, presumptions, interpretations, and misapprehensions that go along with studying African Americans from a Eurocentric perspective (6). Her analysis of Africanism in literature raises important questions about the ways in which history is interpreted and the role of racialization in shaping African American cultural identity. By highlighting the inherent biases and assumptions that underlie traditional approaches to literary interpretation, Morrison challenges readers to rethink their understanding of the literary canon and consider the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities. Morrison's analysis of Africanism in literature focuses on how canonized white American literature has constructed a positive "quintessential American identity" (Morrison, *The Source* 164). She draws attention to how African Americans are portrayed as empty, negative, and pessimistic in the white literary tradition, based on the master-slave dialectic.

The persistence of these limited and stereotypical representations in the white literary tradition is not coincidental. Rather, they function as a reification of the dominant racial hierarchies they depict. By employing a critical lens informed by intersectionality, these portrayals can be deconstructed and their role in perpetuating these very structures can be exposed. Kimberlé Crenshaw's article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" provides a valuable framework for such an analysis. She focuses on the intersection of race and gender and how these notions contribute to the accentuation of identity. Crenshaw's argument that societal assumptions based on nonintersectional settings and the impacts of multidimensional subordination of minority women, particularly African American women, shape and restrict the prospects for effective action. Through the perpetration of domestic abuse against women, white culture often creates conditions that hinder African American women from cultivating their voice and asserting their identity. According to Crenshaw, in the United States, hierarchical structures often result in intersectional disempowerment, whereby minority women face greater levels of marginalization compared to men of color or white women (1244). Both Crenshaw and Morrison accentuate the importance of addressing racism and sexism, with a particular emphasis on the need for collaborative resistance to racist behavior.

Morrison explores the interrelational dynamics between African American men and women, focusing on African American femininity and the history of the United States. Furthermore, male perceptions regarding gender roles are more nuanced in her works, with various masculinities defining manhood differently across racial, ethnic, class, sexual, and regional boundaries. Research into African American masculinity, as highlighted by Tangee Denise Thomas, demonstrates that African American men often correlate their sense of masculinity with principles of self-determinism and responsibility. This perspective is integral to understanding their overall mindsets and approaches to life (Thomas 123). In parallel, the literary explorations by Morrison on African American heterosexual relationships delve into the tumultuous dynamics within these connections, uncovering a spectrum of issues including instability, disintegration, and pathological weaknesses. These observations by Morrison not only complement the findings by Thomas but also offer a broader lens through which the complexities of African American masculine identity and its impact on interpersonal relationships can be scrutinized, illustrating a multifaceted picture of struggle and resilience within the community. Yvonne R. Bell's research shows that African American relationships with a stronger Afrocentric cultural base are more secure than those that favor Eurocentric ideals (166). Negative sexist stereotypes, such as the perception of African American women as emasculating and aggressive, can create tension in relationships. The absence of sharing and support in African American heterosexual partnerships can disrupt power-centered relationships and create potentially dysfunctional unions (167).

Other African American women writers focus on the importance of community in their works and on the intersectionality of race and gender as a tool to build communities, which is part of the major argument of this thesis. Alice Walker, a prominent African American writer, often highlights the importance of healthy relationships between men and women within the African American community, particularly in the face of societal oppression. In her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), Walker explores the lives of African American women in the rural South during the early twentieth century. The novel portrays the difficulties and traumas faced by these women, including physical and sexual abuse by men. However, the strength and resilience of the women and their ability to form supportive relationships with one another are also emphasized. Walker's work highlights the need for African American men to challenge and reject patriarchal

systems that perpetuate violence and oppression against women. She also emphasizes the importance of African American women supporting and uplifting one another against adversity. In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), Walker explores the lives of African American women and their struggles to create art and literature while living in a society that marginalizes and oppresses them. She also discusses the importance of female relationships and how they have contributed to the survival and growth of African American communities. In accordance with Walker, in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), Michele Wallace criticizes the sexism and misogyny that existed within the Black Power movement and argues that the movement's focus on male leadership and masculinity undermined the efforts of African American women to achieve equality and empowerment. She also discusses the importance of male-female relationships in building communities. Like Wallace, Gloria Naylor explores the lives of several African American women living in a housing project and the relationships they form with each other and with the men in their lives in her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Naylor examines the complex dynamics of these relationships and shows how they are integral to the survival and well-being of the community as a whole.

Patricia Hill Collins also discusses the role of African American women in community building and the significance of male-female relationships in her book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). In this book, Collins discusses the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the experiences of African American women and the importance of recognizing and addressing these intersecting oppressions:

> Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression. (18)

The African American women's demands center on their experiences and stem from their marginalization within existing social movements. Likewise, Audre Lorde, a poet and civil rights activist, also explores issues of race, gender, and sexuality in her works. Her writing often focuses on the intersections between these different forms of

discrimination, and she emphasizes the importance of building solidarity across different marginalized communities. She focuses on how these aspects of identity are interconnected. Being an African American lesbian woman shapes her experiences in ways that would not be captured by looking at race, gender, or sexuality alone. Lorde also rejects the idea that different forms of oppression can be tackled independently. She argues that racism, sexism, and homophobia work together to create a system of power that disadvantages marginalized groups. In her essay "There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions," Lorde states: "I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression" (9). This essay exemplifies her belief that dismantling systems of oppression requires a united front that recognizes how they intersect.

Last but not least, Angela Davis, a political activist and scholar, has written extensively about issues related to race, gender, and power. Her work emphasizes the importance of building strong, inclusive communities that can work together to challenge dominant narratives and systems of injustice. Davis, like many African American feminists, argues that race, gender, and class are interconnected. One of Davis's key works exploring these themes is "Women, Race & Class." In this book, she analyzes how African American women's experiences are shaped by the intersection of race, gender, and economic marginalization. She argues that true liberation requires dismantling the entire system of power that upholds these inequalities (31).

Just like her contemporaries, Morrison explores the complexities of African American relationships, starting with her earlier works. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she portrays the harsh realities African American women face, forced to rely on one another due to systemic racism. While, *Sula* (1973) explores the destructive potential of jealousy and competition within female friendships, *Song of Solomon* (1977) tackles African American male vulnerability. Here, Morrison portrays men grappling with societal marginalization, often at the expense of the women who love them. This theme continues in *Jazz* (1992), where male characters struggle to find their place in a world that diminishes them. *Beloved* (1987) further emphasizes female solidarity. Morrison

depicts the enduring strength African American women find in their relationships with each other, a necessity in the face of historical oppression.

Morrison's works after 2000 demonstrate a distinct shift in focus, where she delves into the power of solidarity and the formation of communities in resolving issues that arise in male and female relationships. However, in her later novels, Morrison has made it clear that healthy interactions between African American men and women cannot be achieved in a white-dominated patriarchal culture unless there is a heightened level of cultural awareness. Morrison's literary works emphasize the importance of collective efforts and communal bonding in overcoming societal barriers and achieving harmony between genders. By highlighting the significance of cultural consciousness and emphasizing the need for mutual support and cooperation, Morrison advocates for a more inclusive and equitable society that celebrates diversity and nurtures healthy relationships between individuals.

Morrison proposes a strategy for interpreting popular literature from an African American viewpoint in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. This approach uncovers the ways that white writings build, for their own ends, an Africanist presence in American history. She uses the term "Africanist" to describe the connotative African American identity that African people have come to represent, and also the full spectrum of opinions, presumptions, interpretations, and misapprehensions that go along with studying African Americans from a Eurocentric perspective (11). In Morrison's understanding, canonical writers of the American literature reflect their own anxieties, needs, aspirations, and conflicts onto Africans and African Americans, which is referred to as Africanism:

> As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. (12)

Morrison's analysis of Africanism in literature raises important questions about the ways in which history is interpreted, as well as the role of race in shaping our cultural identity. By highlighting the inherent biases and assumptions that underlie traditional approaches to literary interpretation, Morrison challenges readers to rethink their

understanding of the literary canon and to consider the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities. In doing so, she encourages a more nuanced and inclusive approach to literary criticism, one that recognizes the complexities of race and identity and seeks to understand the full range of experiences and perspectives that shape our world.

By contrasting a created Africanist identity with the "raw and savage . . . bound and unfree, rebellious but servicible" Africanist identity, Morrison hopes to investigate the ways that canonized white American literature has constructed a positive "quintessential American identity." Morrison draws attention to how African Americans are portrayed as empty, negative, and pessimistic in the white literary tradition: "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 16). Morrison bases her case on the master-slave dialectic, which holds that the existence of African Americans, more specifically, the slave, for the majority of American cultural tradition, is absolutely necessary for the development of white identity:

> In that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. And what rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and rationalize external exploitation was an Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire—that is uniquely American. (Morrison, *Source of Self Regard* 173).

Building on Morrison's analysis of Africanism in literature, Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about African American women in literature, as well as the intersectionality of race and gender. Despite not being a novel idea, intersectionality was not publicly acknowledged until Crenshaw's thesis. Crenshaw's work has been instrumental in shedding light on the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly African American women, and highlighting the ways in which race, gender, and other factors intersect to create complex and multifaceted forms of oppression. Her contributions to the field of critical race theory have been recognized with numerous awards and honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship in 2020. Crenshaw's work continues to inspire and inform

scholars, activists, and policymakers around the world, as they seek to build a more just and equitable society.

In her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Crenshaw focuses on how race and gender intersect and how these concepts serve to emphasize identity as well as analyzing the social environment. Therefore, intersectionality proves to be an analytical tool in analyzing a body of work that includes African American women. Separation of identity markers covers the real issues, as she states, "The intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244). According to Crenshaw's argument, societal assumptions based on isolated settings, and the impacts of multidimensional subordination of minority women, more specifically African American women, shape and restrict the prospects for effective action. Unquestionably, women are often exposed to subordination and abuse in their own homes. Minority women are disproportionately afflicted by domestic violence, which eventually results in other situations that undermine the voices of those women. Along with the double threat they face in a white-dominant society, African American women are also subjected to domestic violence. According to Crenshaw, "patterns of subordination intersect in women's experience of domestic violence. Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (1249). By subjecting women to domestic violence, whether in the form of physical or mental abuse, white society often creates an environment where African American women cannot foster their voice and identity.

The hierarchical relationships in the United States cause the intersectional disempowerment. According to Crenshaw, by being subjected to racism and sexism, minority women experience disempowerment more than men of color or white women. These disempowerments undermine women of color by ignoring the "added" matter of race or patriarchy, and often fail to adequately articulate the complexity of racism and sexism. To solve this problem, Crenshaw says, "Black women will have to make it clear that patriarchy is a critical issue that negatively affects the lives not only of Black

women, but of Black men as well. Doing so would help reshape traditional practices so that evidence of racism would not constitute sufficient justification for uncritical rallying around misogynistic politics and patriarchal values" (1295). Collaborative resistance to racist behavior is necessary for preserving African American culture and interests.

Similar to Crenshaw, Morrison often examines the interrelational dynamics between African American men and women as well as the link between race and gender in her novels and critical essays. She often explores the notions of African American femininity and what it means to be an African American woman in a white-dominated society. Oftentimes, she correlates what sets African American women apart from class and gender differences, as well as speaking of race and the history of the United States. However, Morrison is also interested in male privilege within the African American community and she explores the causes of sexism by concentrating on African American men. In her article "Women, Race, and Memory" Morrison states:

> The truth is that males are not a superior gender; nor are females a superior gender. Masculinity, however, as a concept, is envied by both sexes. The problem, therefore, is this: the tacit agreement that masculinity is preferable is also a tacit acceptance of male supremacy, whether the "males" are men, male-minded women, or male-dominated women, and male supremacy cannot exist without its genitalia. (163)

Many facets of African Americans' domestic attitudes regarding marriage and family relations are significantly influenced by established ideas regarding masculinity and femininity. According to Kathleen M. Blee and Ann R. Tickamyer's research, male perceptions regarding gender roles are more nuanced than previously believed; "Rather than a single standard of masculinity to which all men and boys are taught to aspire, studies have documented a variety of masculinities that define manhood differently across racial, ethnic, class, sexual, and regional boundaries" (Blee and Tickamyer 21). This argument further proves the need for intersectional analysis of the relationships between African American men and women.

The study done by Andrea G. Hunter and James Earl Davis concludes that instead of prosperity, fortune, greed, and status, African American men associate masculinity with self-determinism and responsibility (Hunter and Davis 464). Hunter and Davis argue

that African American manhood is constructed from the tension between "family role expectations grounded in patriarchy and the comparatively egalitarian work and family roles in Afro-American families" (472). White men and African American men differ from each other, as Africanist worldviews often celebrate communalism and a broader definition of masculinity that can include nurturing qualities, while Eurocentric views traditionally emphasize individualism and a narrower definition focused on dominance and control, and their attitudes toward women reflect their mindsets. Their study proves that "attitudes of both African American and White men toward women's gender roles becomes more liberal over time" (Blee 24).

In Morrison's works published after 2000, "Black heterosexual relationships are characterized by a plethora of conflicts and problems, such as instability, disintegration, and pathological weaknesses" (Bell 162). In these novels, interactions between sexes exhibit varied degrees of Euro-American cultural ideals. Studies show that this is is apparent in the cultural atmosphere of the United States: "Having existed in a Eurocentric social reality over several centuries, evidence suggests that African-Americans have become psychologically dependent [...] many African American males and females have internalized Eurocentric definitions/values and practice them in their relationships" (Bell 165-166). According to Bell, a African American man raised on Eurocentric ideals might prioritize stoicism and emotional distance in relationships, suppressing his nurturing side which might be more aligned with an Africanist view of masculinity.

The purpose of this study is not to argue that African American male and female relationships are toxic, but rather to present that the dominant cultural influence has negative effects on African American male and female relationships. Numerous African American relationships are impacted by attitudes and ideas consistent with the Euro-American worldview, according to studies on African American heterosexual partnerships (Bell 166). African American relationships with a stronger Afrocentric cultural base seems to be more secure than African American couples that favor Eurocentric ideals. Because of imposed white standards upon African Americans, African American men and women have been influenced by negative heterosexual stereotypes, which is one of the reasons for tension in their relationships. According to

sociological studies, “some Black males tend to perceive Black women as emasculating and aggressive” while they “tend to believe that Black females are the antithesis of beauty, femininity, and womanhood” (Bell 167). Therefore, the absence of sharing and support, which characterize partnerships in African American society, disrupts power-centered African American heterosexual partnerships and creates potentially dysfunctional unions.

In light of the discussions above, the first chapter of this thesis will focus on Morrison’s *Love* (2003), and *A Mercy* (2008). *Love* involves a number of women infatuated with Bill Cosey and displays several facets and interpretations of the events. The narrator, L, is an elderly woman, who had previously worked as a cook at Bill Cosey’s hotel. She stands out from the other women because she monitors Cosey’s life while discreetly watching over everyone else and bearing witness to events. Heed and Cosey’s daughter-in-law May are in charge of business decisions. When Cosey’s daughter-in-law May learns about her daughter Christine and Heed’s close relationship, she starts to perceive her own child as a danger since she can inherit the hotel. May views Heed as inferior because of her lower social status. Heed and Christine’s friendship is not affected by class, race, and other societal divisions. Their friendship started when they were young and their connection was broken when Cosey decided to marry the eleven-year-old Heed. She was literally sold to the old man by her uncaring parents and learned to behave like a lady and compete with Christine for dominance in the Cosey household. Their initial positions change as adults when Heed becomes the heiress and Christine becomes the servant. All women like to imagine themselves as Bill Cosey’s favorite while viewing others as rivals. The relationships between the characters are strained due to the lack of a sense of community.

Morrison’s female characters display the construction of the African American identity. African American women’s position has been culturally and historically defined but Morrison moves beyond these set definitions. She tries to make her female characters stand out by showing them as people who come from oppressive situations and are trying to stay alive. *Love* portrays African American women who are confined by the dominant white patriarchal systems that enforce racial and gender norms; limiting their access to employment and school and hindering their individual growth. These women

search for comfort through sisterly connections with one another after being left behind or mistreated by both African American and white males, as well as being neglected or disregarded by their own communities and families. Heed and Christine yearn for the feeling of belonging to a community since they are unable to form one in the dysfunctional family atmosphere. All women wish for the solidarity of female companionship. The relationships between the male and female characters are beyond repair since the characters are not aware of their communal bonds.

A Mercy (2008), which is the story of an English farmer, Jacob, his wife, Rebekka, whom he paid to marry, and their increasing family of indentured and enslaved whites, Native American, and African characters in the late seventeenth century. Morrison illustrates the early stages of racism in America, and what it was like to be a woman in that particular period. In the last chapter of the book, the narrator Florens states "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (155). Before Jacob died, the slaves were cared for rather decently. Some, particularly Florens' mother, has the exact opposite experience, since she was gang-raped. Later on, she realizes that her master is also ogling her daughter as she approaches adolescence. Florens' mother is aware of the possibilities and she tries to protect her daughter from the cruelty she has experienced. In contrast to *Love*, *A Mercy* presents how female unity may give women greater power. Yet, the prospect of building a better society is still undermined by a lack of social and cultural awareness.

A free African American blacksmith, who is Florens' lover, Malaik's caretaker, and Jacob's contractor, is the key figure in the novel. Florens and the blacksmith have a love affair, but he departs suddenly without bidding farewell. When she realizes that he is taking care of Malaik, she injures the youngster out of her jealousy. The blacksmith interferes, but she strikes him with his tongs and injures his face. Due to her envy, Florens and the blacksmith are unable to develop a trusting relationship. As previously stated, the sense of community is undermined through the Eurocentric worldview that favors individualism and causes resent among couples. Florens and the blacksmith's relationship ends due to a lack of communal feeling.

The second chapter examines *Home* (2012), and *God Help the Child* (2015) with the perspective of bell hooks, Morrison's own essays, and articles, as well as the framework

of intersectionality and double consciousness. Morrison chronicles a twentyfour-year-old African-American Korean War veteran, Frank Money's trip back home after being discharged from a unified army in *Home*. Although a year has passed, he has not returned home to Georgia since he still felt disturbed and displaced. Morrison interweaves Frank's narrative with that of his sister, Ycidra, also known as Cee, who ran away from home at the age of fourteen with "a rat" named Prince. Cee works as a medical assistant for a white doctor, Beauregard Scott. Cee reveres and idolizes the physician, but since she is not trained in the medical profession, she fails to notice the warning signals of his malpractice. Dr. Beauregard is actually a eugenicist who sterilizes local women and uses Cee as his test subject. Frank rescues her and brings her to the local women of their hometown who "handled sickness as if it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping" (121). At the end of the novel, the brother and the sister unite to find some solace in each other's company. Morrison's work sheds light on the idea that men and women can create a stronger relationship when they come together to form a community; communal rituals brings them closer and allows them to view each other in a different light. The novel includes the shared experience of storytelling, a transmission of knowledge in communal relationships. Toni Morrison utilizes a storytelling center on community building where shared rituals and narratives strengthen bonds and foster new perspectives between men and women.

Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), takes place in the 2010s and concentrates on the horrors of child abuse. Almost every character in the novel is either a witness or a victim of molestation, sexual assault, mental or psychological abuse, neglect, or other forms of abuse (Lopez Ramírez, *Childhood Cuts Festered* 149). Morrison underlines how dysfunctional families have significant impacts on children's identity and ties with the community. Lula Ann Bridewell's (aka Bride) mother, Sweetness, mistreats her as a young girl. Sweetness is light-skinned, "with good hair, what we call high yellow" (3). The heritage of slavery and its consequences continues to resonate in multifaceted manners as viewed in Sweetness' embarrassment and feelings of dread toward her child's "midnight black, Sudanese black" skin (3). She does not offer an acceptable and nurturing atmosphere for her daughter because she transmits her self-loathing to her child. As Sam Sacks observes, "parents unwittingly pass hatred to

their children, thereby reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over" (Sacks).

The racially biased culture has significant influences on Sweetness' lifestyle and motherhood. Her "fear of producing a dark black baby, muses on the twenty percent of white people who have 'Negro' blood running in their veins, the legacy of slavery—in this, the 150th anniversary of its abolition in the US. The fault lines of contemporary racism are ever-present, but the complexity of racism internalized by African Americans is also there" (Iqbal). Due to race politics in society, Bride experiences a traumatic childhood and suffers from its consequences in her adult life. As a mistreated girl, Bride's reality is shaped by racism and its manifestations. Colorism, according to Lillie Fears, is a pattern of interaction amongst African Americans in which lighter-skinned African Americans reject darker-skinned African Americans (34). White Americans have created such a society where members of a community turn against each other due to internalized racism. This further proves that racial identity does not matter as long as one can pass as white. Sweetness' internalized racism is caused by her ability of passing as white. Nanna Jensen states in her thesis;

> The mechanics behind lighter skin are obvious—plantation owners raped or seduced slave girls who subsequently had light-skinned babies. These unions rarely became a normal part of the master family due to racism and the laws on miscegenation, but the bloodline followed light-skinned people like Soaphead and Sweetness for generations. Passing African-Americans were sometimes known to cut all ties to their black families to assimilate completely to white American life, and some would take on the role of the tragic mulatto, never fitting in to either community. (49)

Sweetness adheres to white patriarchal values, which prevents her from bonding with her daughter. Morrison shows how the dominant culture impacts relationships between people of color and prevents them from building communities. However, Morrison also demonstrates that bonding and healing scars of a broken relationship are possible when there is a communal bond. Bride's boyfriend Booker and she reconcile as a result of a healing ritual in the community. Their love becomes stronger and more potent than ever as they care for a woman named Queen. Just as she did in *Home*, Morrison shows how community building can improve male and female relationships in *God Help the Child*.

Morrison's later novels, *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015) present Morrison's approach to the changing and transforming racialized gender relations and their contribution to building communities. This thesis will be make use of intersectionality, which refers to the interconnectedness of politics of identity such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, and how these identities intersect to shape experiences of oppression and privilege. In the context of African American male and female relationships, the intersectional approach will be beneficial in examining how gender and race play a role in shaping the experiences and challenges faced by African American men and women in Morrison's latest novels. African American men and women face different forms of oppression and discrimination based on their gender, which can impact their relationships with each other and their ability to work together in community building.

CHAPTER 1

INABILITY TO BUILD A COMMUNITY: *LOVE* (2003) AND *A MERCY* (2008)

Love delves into the varied experiences of love, loss, and the consequences of one's actions. Set in the twentieth century, the story primarily revolves around the lives of two women as their paths intertwine and their shared history unfolds. The narrative begins with the introduction of two contrasting characters: Bill Cosey, a wealthy and respected African American hotel owner, and his granddaughter, Christine. Bill Cosey's luxurious seaside resort, known as the Cosey Hotel and Resort, becomes the backdrop for the events. After Bill Cosey's death, the novel focuses more on the women of the house. He leaves behind his second wife, Heed, who is haunted by the specter of her husband's previous lover and her own insecurities. Alongside Heed is Christine, whose mother worked as a cook at the Cosey Hotel and Resort. Bill Cosey's attitude towards Christine and her memories from the childhood she spent in the hotel create the way she perceives love and relationships. As the narrative progresses, the complex web of relationships becomes evident. L, a mysterious and enigmatic woman, arrives at the resort, captivating everyone with her beauty and aloofness. She becomes a muse for the women, particularly Heed and Christine, as they grapple with their desires, secrets, and regrets. Their lives intertwine in unexpected ways, leading to profound moments of introspection and revelation. Through vivid storytelling and a nonlinear narrative, Morrison explores themes of race, gender, power dynamics, and the lasting impact of personal choices. Love, in its various forms, serves as a driving force and a source of both joy and suffering for the characters. The novel explores human relationships, shedding light on the vulnerabilities and flaws that define experiences of love.

Claudia Lawrence-Webb offers three theoretical perspectives to enrich the discussion on African American intergender relationships: patriarchy, role, and love (624). According to her research, current discussions about African American intergender relationships often miss the complexity of the issue when the conceptual perspectives and the experiences of African Americans are omitted. Since 2000, when it comes to economic differences and affection showing in intergender relationships, society's standards of

men and women have changed enormously. As couples try to figure out how to adapt their relationships in a rapidly changing society, the number of self-help books about communicating with different genders and maintaining relationships has grown. Even though African American intergender relationships have not been spared by these changes, they are shaped by factors that are especially important to the community (Lawrence-Webb 624).

The African American traditional the gender roles, which are stereotypically defined as provider and provided, challenge the structure of male and female relationships (Lawrence-Webb 624). If responsibility arising from such assigned roles becomes too demanding, it leads to a "role overload." In heterosexual African American relationships, this "role overload" can be caused when the role expectations are unclear. The application of a Eurocentric analytical framework to the examination of African Americans notions unavoidably results in a misconception of the dynamics of relationships. The examination of intergender interactions among African Americans is inherently flawed due to the imposition of patriarchal structures. For example, assuming the position of "head of the house" fails to include the more egalitarian dynamics seen in African American family structures (Lawrence-Webb, 625). The notion of assuming the role of "being the man of the house" or "commander of the ship" seems to be undermined at times, even before it is established. Similarly, the portrayal of African American women is likewise subject to distortion. A prevalent perception exists whereby African American women are often characterized as excessively dominant, domineering, and lacking in traditional femininity within the context of their interpersonal interactions (Bell, Bouie, and Baldwin 162). The active involvement of African American women in providing economic support for their families is sometimes seen as detrimental to their relationships with African American men, since it challenges traditional gender roles and may be perceived as emasculating. Hence, the contrasting perspective embraced by African Americans about the cultural norms pertaining to gender roles and the practical manifestations of these roles inside couples serves as a manifestation of role ambiguity. This often results in a situation of confusion over the appropriate responsibilities that must be performed. The examination of Eurocentric notions of masculinity and femininity, which are rigidly constructed, is

crucial when discussing intergender interactions within the African American community (Bell, Bouie, and Baldwin 162).

African American men and women's roles, as defined by Lennell R. Dade and Lloyd R. Sloan, are androgynous rather than accentuating masculinity or femininity (676). If this is the case, the emphasis on role differentiation must be reevaluated in light of its usefulness and Eurocentric perspective. African American couples are influenced by the philosophical dimensions of patriarchy due to their socialization and the well-defined societal expectations regarding gender roles, which can result in adopting elements of the dominant culture due to environmental influences (Lawrence-Webb 626). Nevertheless, despite the seemingly diminished prominence of distinct gender roles, patriarchy continues to have its impact on African American couples as a result of deeply established cultural norms and expectations that are reinforced via the process of socialization. This suggests that the philosophical dimensions of patriarchy, which are firmly ingrained in the societal structure, have an influence on these couples. As a result, they must navigate an environment characterized by tension and oppressive circumstances.

The primary argument to be presented in this context is that the ramifications of patriarchy for African Americans are situated within the aforementioned frameworks that have particular significance for their sustenance. According to Lawrence-Webb, these circumstances give rise to an atmosphere characterized by repressive and tense conditions, which couples must navigate as they attempt to initiate or sustain a relationship (627). Consequently, such problems provide obstacles to the formation of a cohesive community. The economic well-being of African American individuals is contingent upon their access to resources, which is subject to the discretion of the dominant group under the institutionalized patriarchal structures. This leads to a scenario in which the acquisition of resources essential for optimal well-being becomes a consequential process, requiring couples to make trade-offs between various parts of their relationships in exchange for pecuniary or emotional benefits. The historical experiences of African Americans within American culture, in which they are considered a minority, serve to exemplify the aforementioned viewpoint. It is essential to acknowledge that the coexistence of egalitarian relationships within a patriarchal

culture is a noteworthy observation, and it should be emphasized that the eradication of patriarchy does not automatically ensure the establishment of egalitarianism (Lawrence-Webb 627).

The enduring racial prejudice experienced by African Americans throughout history had an impact on gender norms and the dynamics between genders. The gender role expectations of African American women, such as their pursuit of economic and emotional autonomy and independence from males, can be traced back to their African heritage (Steady 1985). The preservation and increased importance of these principles may be credited to the persistent difficulties encountered by African American women over centuries of subjugation. Contrarily, African American men have historically had challenges in meeting the typical gender expectations of being the primary provider and protector, which are prominent in both traditional African and traditional white American social standards in the United States (Lawrence-Webb 628). They often exacerbate intergender tension since the concept of total male authority necessitates men's control over the provider role, which proves unattainable for many African American males within this societal context. The maintenance of a certain level of authority that hinders male supremacy is contingent upon African American women fulfilling the role of provider. The job of the provider has significant value and serves as a means of respect and self-determination for several African American women, who demonstrate a reluctance to surrender this role. In succinct terms, it can be seen that African Americans use a Eurocentric framework, leading to a contradictory outcome. According to Lawrence-Webb (631), there is a correlation between the level of success achieved in this model and the emergence of negative dynamics within relationships.

In exploring the dynamics of African American communities, bell hooks delves into the profound impact of social structures on collective survival. In her analysis, hooks contends that the strength and vitality of communities play a pivotal role in sustaining human life worldwide (*All About Love* 53). Contrary to popular notions in the United States that center around nuclear families or the isolated individual, hooks argues that genuine resilience arises from the cohesion of communities. This viewpoint establishes the foundation for her examination of the deleterious effects of capitalism and patriarchy, which, as formidable systems of dominance, have actively eroded the

essential fabric of extended kinship. In this context, hooks illuminates how the shift towards privatized, small autocratic units has fostered alienation, intensified power imbalances, and laid the groundwork for pervasive abuses. By dismantling the broader community structure and promoting the segregation of nuclear families, these systems have engendered dependency, particularly among women and children, creating fertile ground for the exploitation of power dynamics (*All About Love* 53).

In her analysis of Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel *Summer Will Show*, Terry Castle contends that a distinct narrative emerges in the twentieth century that challenges and deconstructs the traditional male-female-male triangulations commonly associated with male homosocial desire. Castle argues that this counterplot not only dismantles the perceived permanence of patriarchal structures but also highlights the displacement and eventual dominance of female homosocial desire within a male-female-male triangle (Castle 72). The relationships among women are portrayed as being in opposition to and challenging a sexual economy that subjugates women, as it appears in Morrison's works, more specifically in *Love*. The phenomenon of women exchanging men among themselves pertains to the subversion of male homosocial desire. According to Castle, the act of female bonding has the potential to disrupt the traditional triangle structure of male desire, challenging and eventually replacing it, particularly in the extreme case of lesbian bonding (72). Terry Castle and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argue that female homosocial bonding, regardless of its sexual nature or the perceived connection between sexuality and social dynamics, challenges the flow of desire within a patriarchal system.

This challenge is likely more pronounced because such interactions occur less frequently with white males, who traditionally hold more power within the patriarchal system. Based on research conducted by David A. Thomas in 1989 on cross-racial mentorship and sponsorship patterns, African American women exhibited a greater frequency of developmental partnerships compared to the average among other genders and ethnicities (45). This phenomenon partially elucidates the hindrance to receiving assistance from white males as well as the inclination towards receiving help from women of various ethnic backgrounds, particularly African American women (Denton 449). The outcome is an obligatory distribution of resources and provisions among

individuals who are part of the association. In this context, it becomes evident that the conventional concept of the family, consisting of a husband, wife, and children, fails to adequately include the intricate support networks prevalent throughout African American communities. In her publication titled "All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community," Carol B. Stack found it necessary to redefine the concept of family as "the most compact, structured, and enduring network of both blood relatives and non-relatives who engage in regular interactions, fulfilling the domestic requirements of children and ensuring their continued existence" (31). However, when examining the concept of "personal kindreds" which refers to an expanded familial network consisting of both relatives and non-relatives, Stack demonstrates that young African American males often evade the conventional obligations linked to familial duties.

Morrison's novel *Love* intricately weaves through the tapestry of communal bonds and familial structures, echoing the sentiments expressed by bell hooks and the challenges faced by African American communities. The novel, set against the backdrop of post-World War II America, delves into the lives of its characters, grappling with the complexities of love, race, and the impact of historical legacies. Morrison's exploration of relationships, both familial and communal, resonates with the idea that traditional family structures fail to encapsulate the robust support networks prevalent in such communities. As the characters navigate the intricacies of their personal connections, Morrison's narrative provides a commentary on the redefinition of family and kinship. The novel invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of societal structures and how they shape the experiences of individuals within the intricate web of relationships, offering a lens through which to further examine the themes of dependency, power dynamics, and survival within the context of hooks' and Stack's analyses.

While the female homosocial bonding depicted in the novel plays a pivotal role in community building, Morrison also highlights the stark reality that these bonds, though powerful, are not in themselves sufficient for the complete healing and survival of African American communities. The toxic relationships within heteronormative families emerge as an obstacle to communal well-being, which is often built and kept alive by women's solidarity. The novel reveals how patriarchy and toxic masculinity, performed

by Mr. Cosey, break up the community's peaceful livelihood. In heterosexual relationships that are under the Eurocentric influence, the presence of betrayal weakens the safe space created by female homosocial bonds. A power struggle among women erupts over the estate's inheritance. Heed devises a scheme to fabricate a new will to solidify her claim on the hotel, and oust Christine, while Christine seeks legal counsel to do the same. The once strong bonds of friendship and cooperation are replaced by suspicion and competition, a testament to the destructive power of Mr. Cosey's actions. The effects of these unhealthy relationships last for generations, creating generational traumas. The novel *Love* shows how hard it is for communities to find a balance between the healing power of female homosocial relationships and the deep wounds caused by toxic relationships, which further proves the difficulty of a community's wellbeing and survival.

The characters are haunted by the love for a deceased man, but the profound female relationships gives substance to the plot. Thus, the ending of the story resonates with Toni Morrison's *Sula*, her most extensive examination of the depth of female camaraderie. The familiarity between Heed and Christine reflects the same level of closeness as Nel and Sula. Sula's contrasting complexion serves as a reminder of the girls' different skin tones. Heterosexual relationships undermine the bonds of friendship in both cases: Sula's involvement with Jude, and Heed's marriage to Bill Cosey, Christine's grandfather become obstacles for building a healthy communication. This mirroring of Sula's dynamic with Nel underscores the challenges that can arise within even the strongest female friendships. External forces, societal expectations, and even intraracial colorism, as exemplified by Sula's lighter skin tone compared to Nel's, can disrupt these bonds. Both novels showcase how romantic relationships, like Sula's entanglement with Jude and Heed's marriage to Bill Cosey, can disrupt the powerful connections women forge with each other.

Both Christine and Heed eventually come to the realization, although later in life, that their most intense longing is for each other rather than for the men. The intricacies of human relationships are presented in *Love* in a number of ways, such as economic disparities, social classes, or a lack of emotional bonding. As a result of power differences, the characters, like Heed and Christine, act in ways that are hurtful to each

other and create toxic relationships. In addition, most of Morrison's characters have the trouble of being manipulated emotionally and they abuse their power in partnerships. These actions could take the form of gaslighting, guilt-tripping, or other controlling methods that hurt one partner's freedom and well-being and make the relationship unnurturing. For example, In *Beloved*, Sethe's emotional trauma manifests in self-isolation and a detachment from her daughter. Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* portrays the destructive power of manipulation within a mother-daughter relationship. Pecola Breedlove constantly faces criticism and negativity from her own mother, Pauline. Pauline reinforces Eurocentric beauty standards and relentlessly criticizes Pecola's appearance. Likewise, in *Love*, all the characters follow rigid gender roles defined by the society, which cause individuals to hold back their hopes, dreams, and sense of who they are, creating an unhealthy environment that hinders them from developing and finding happiness.

Constructing the African American and female self involves traversing a path that intersects with a male. Due to the presence of such a detrimental attitude, connections deteriorate, and it is impossible to develop a thriving community. *Love* depicts the deterioration and loss of friendship between Heed and Christine. Morrison demonstrates how women fail in life and grow weaker when they do not trust each other. The quest for individualism causes African American individuals to disavow their racial identity, ultimately resulting in the erosion of the cultural heritage as a whole. A community's survival is contingent upon the presence of a robust connection between its members, including both homosocial and heterosocial relationships. The male protagonist in the novel exhibits such a high degree of toxicity that it becomes imperative to eliminate him in order to foster a wholesome and harmonious connection, community, or sisterhood. To give an example from Cosey's toxic masculinity, Morrison gives a flashback to Christine's birthday party, where things get out of hand when Heed feels humiliated by what May and Christine do. The tension escalates further when Cosey spanks Heed in front of people for throwing a glass. This harsh treatment prompts L to issue an ultimatum, threatening to leave the hotel if Cosey repeats his actions towards Heed. Morrison skillfully constructs the narrative perspective of L, the female character who seems to have deep affection for all the individuals in *Love*.

L carefully watches and diligently works, first as the chef for Bill Cosey's successful resort and then in a different café. Eventually, L murders Cosey to transfer his estate to the younger second wife, whose life he had changed by marrying her as a child (Wagner-Martin 136). Morrison persistently challenges established norms, for example in L's last speech, she admits to poisoning Cosey with her own recipe of a mixture in the kitchen: "Foxglove can be quick, if you know what you're doing, and doesn't hurt all that long. He wasn't fit to think, and at eighty-one he wasn't going to get better. It took nerve, and long before the undertaker knocked on the door, I tore that malicious thing up. My menu worked just fine" (101). The location and method L chooses for the murder hold have symbolic meanings. It is not just about the act itself, but how it dismantles traditional notions of femininity and power. Unlike a violent confrontation, poisoning implies a calculated plan, a quiet assertion of control. L subverts the stereotype of women as being meek and passive. Her expertise, often relegated to the realm of folklore or superstition, becomes a tool for a powerful and deliberate act. The act of poisoning in itself challenges expectations. Kitchens, traditionally seen as safe, domestic havens, are transformed into a site for a calculated and deadly act. Her skills and knowledge, traditionally used for nurturing and sustenance, become tools for a very different purpose. This act can be seen as a symbolic reclamation of power. The kitchen, a place where women have historically been confined, becomes the site where L asserts her agency and challenges Cosey's control over not only her but also the other women in the hotel.

The act of betraying trust in the role of a "father"—a role that Cosey assumed towards those around him—is a deeply sorrowful state, particularly when it is perpetrated by someone who is considered a trusted person. Excluded from the expected role of being nurtured by their parents, these inexperienced and innocent women are subjected to severe mistreatment. The primary storyline of the work revolves around the consequences of Cosey's decision to marry Heed when she is only eleven years old. This choice devastates the close friendship between Heed and Christine, Cosey's granddaughter, and greatly impacts the emotional well-being of both young girls. Their enduring animosity as a consequence of Cosey's decision squanders both their lives and contributes nothing positive to either the family or African American society. The aim of *Love*, therefore, is to foster the formation of a meaningful and definitive bond

between the two young women. Morrison interposes a remark on the fluctuation of the novel's title, which persisted until the last stages of her creative process. Morrison meticulously reviewed the text and eliminated every use of the word "love" in order to preserve its rawness, ensuring that the women in the story could only utter it for the first time. The title of novel holds significant meaning that extends beyond a simple descriptor as the characters grapple with various forms of relationships, some marked by manipulation and power struggles, which can easily be mistaken for love. Morrison challenges these conventional notions and suggests that genuine, unconditional love might not always conform to societal expectations. The primary objective of *Love* is to elucidate the essence of love; however, it diverges from conventional expectations since it manifests as a sentiment that may first be mistaken for hatred. It is too far from society's conceptualization and idealization of an idol. The genuine kind of love that exists is homosocial, whereas other forms are only expressions of power dynamics.

"Love, I really do" (194) says Heed to Christine; the novel starts by presenting Heed and Christine as two relentless adversaries, culminating in a portrayal of their indomitable love for one another. This juxtaposition highlights the final calamity of the novel—the annihilation of the affectionate bond between Heed and Christine—instigated by their own families, which conventionally serve as havens of solace and defense against racial discrimination for African American women. Heed and Christine are compelled to transition into adulthood early, leading to their permanent inability to completely overcome their childhood traumas and develop their identities. Ultimately, their inability to be truthful with one another, which arises from their sense of guilt and acknowledgment of their own responsibility in sexualizing their bodies, hinders them from rebuilding their connection. Once again, the concept of sisterhood and its destruction by men means that to perpetuate the oppression of women, it is imperative to eradicate women's bonding since it does not contribute to patriarchy. Morrison's writings often feature African American women who are imprisoned by white patriarchal power systems that impose on them numerous stereotypes related to race and gender and deny them access to employment and educational possibilities that may foster their personal growth. It can be argued that, due to the marginalization Heed and Christine face, their ability to bond and create a healthy environment in which their friendships can flourish and be beneficial to each other is stripped away from them.

Thus, the responsibility for the toxic spaces lies not with them, but with the white patriarchal society.

Morrison's exploration of historical contexts in other works reveals the pervasive influence of such structures across generations. In *A Mercy*, Jacob Vaark, a New England farmer and merchant, travels to Maryland to settle a debt with D'Ortega, a plantation owner who buys and sells enslaved individuals. Vaark is given the option to choose any slave he wants as compensation for his debt and he chooses Florens' mother. Since Florens' mother pleads with Jacob to take responsibility for her daughter Florens is sent to New England. Jacob returns to Maryland and invests in the sugar cane sector to build a residence like D'Ortega's where he meets Rebekka, his wife, and their attendants, Lina, and Sorrow. Jacob builds a similar house with workers from various locations and the help of the blacksmith, who is unnamed and referred to as such. Florens develops romantic feelings for the blacksmith, who helps her during her illness. Eventually, the blacksmith leaves the Vaark family without bidding farewell to Florens, which upsets Florens, since she wants to be close to him. Jacob's house is nearing completion when he becomes infected with smallpox and ultimately dies. During his burial, Rebekka becomes aware that she too has pockmarks. The next day, she becomes confined to her bed due to the sickness. Recalling the blacksmith's healing Sorrow during her illness, Rebekka instructs Florens to find him and escort him back. Following a journey by wagon and a harrowing night in the forest, Florens arrives at a settlement and requests refuge from a lady called Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane. While Florens is there, the villagers visit the home to investigate her. During their time there, they observe Florens and unjustly label her as a demon due to her dark complexion. Florens escapes with Jane's assistance before her persecution.

Finally, Florens reaches the residence of the blacksmith. She informs him about Rebekka, prompting the Blacksmith to take the journey immediately. He informs Florens that she is required to remain at his cabin in order to care for a little child named Malaik, whom he is legally responsible. Florens, desiring the Blacksmith's undivided attention and affection, harbors feelings of jealousy and insecurity towards the youngster. The blacksmith departs to provide medical treatment to Rebekka. Meanwhile, Rebekka experiences a profound religious transformation, and becomes

hostile, exhibiting cruelty towards Lina and Sorrow, and plans to sell Florens. On the other hand, Florens contemplates about the possibility that her mother deserted her.

The novel "is set in the 1690s, in the slave era, at a time when it was perilous to be without the 'protection' of a man, independent women were still suspected of being witches and paternalistic relations between men and women were still the norm" (Downie 56). Florens harbors deep-seated abandonment issues and consequently, she seeks validation from the blacksmith. She becomes entangled and engages in events fueled by her envy. The communities that are present in the novel are unable to undergo healing due to the presence of toxic relationships, which are a result of the detrimental impact of white society on individuals' well-being. Florens' sale, undertaken to avert a wretched existence ultimately leads to her downfall. Similar to her earlier novel *Beloved*, Morrison explores the complexities of slavery and its impact on African Americans in *A Mercy*. The novel serves as a historical document, reflecting both the author's contemporary views and the conflicting voices surrounding the period of slavery (Kuzmanović 64). Morrison vividly portrays the dehumanizing effects of slavery and how it robs its victims of their sense of self and agency. The novel also delves into the consequences of slavery-inflicted traumas on the survivors' bodies and souls, highlighting the inextricable link between physical and psychological elements (Panteleimon 48). This results in Florens' dependency, attention seeking personality, and possibly mental instability. The healing process is impeded by the presence of mental issues, and the process of healing in the community is compromised.

African Americans history is marked by a legacy of slavery, segregation, systemic racism, and ongoing struggles for civil rights and equality. Understanding the historical context in which individuals and communities have navigated challenges allows for a more informed and empowered approach in addressing present-day issues. It offers a perspective on the progress that has been made as well as the work that still needs to be done. Gaining agency in the face of historical and contemporary challenges means recognizing and valuing one's own narrative as well as contributing to the broader narrative of African American achievement and resilience. It involves drawing strength from the struggles and triumphs of those who came before and using that knowledge to inform decisions, actions, and advocacy for positive change. Morrison's notion includes

her own endeavor to explore her genealogical and cultural heritage, using the recollections of others to get an understanding, “entrance into [her] own interior life” (Morrison, “The Site of Memory” 115).

A Mercy portrays a diverse cast of characters who are bound together by circumstance rather than choice. These characters come from different backgrounds, each carrying their own scars from a society marked by exploitation and violence. However, despite their shared experiences, the novel suggests that true communal healing remains elusive. The characters are unable to fully overcome the traumas of their pasts, and their attempts at forming a cohesive community ultimately falter. Within this community, individuals like Florens grapple with the weight of their personal traumas. Florens’ jealousy towards Malaik, the little boy in the guardianship of the blacksmith, can be viewed through the lens of white supremacy and patriarchy, which shape power dynamics within the community. Florens, as a marginalized individual, is affected by feelings of jealousy and resentment towards Malaik. In the colonial era, white supremacy and patriarchy determined structures of got recognition and approval. The already disempowered Florens’ mental state is influenced by these preconceptions. This turmoil further shows how complicated the connections are between white oppression, and sexism, and how they affect the dynamics within the communities. The system that favors white ideologies divides people and makes it hard for them to share power, which in turn hurts the radicalized communities.

The novel invites readers to contemplate the profound impact of systemic oppression on personal connections, highlighting the importance of recognizing and dismantling these structures to foster genuine, equitable bonds within the community. As an enslaved young woman, Florens experiences deep emotional distress due to the separation from her mother, a traumatic memory. The impending pregnancy of Sorrow causes her to feel anxious, as it serves as a painful reminder of her mother handing her over to Jacob Vaark. Observing “mothers nursing greedy infants” triggers memories of her own mother nursing her younger brother, and the thought of “how their eyes go when they choose” (8) resurrects the memory of her mother choosing to keep her little brother instead of her.

Florens feels a deep anguish caused by her mother's decision to send her away while keeping her brother. The lack of connection with her mother, the absence of her love and guidance, and the impossibility of ever seeking an explanation affect her and lead her to a frantic quest to find love and acceptance. Florens in the Vaark home expresses profound gratitude for any display of love, whether it is a gentle touch or a kind word (61). As Florens enters adolescence, she is deeply attracted to a free man of color who is the skilled blacksmith working for Vaarks from time to time. This attraction ignites a powerful and all-consuming desire within her. She envisions the blacksmith as the embodiment of her hopes for a meaningful connection, freedom from enslavement, and safeguarding against future abandonment (157). Florens experiences the same rejection she faced before, when the blacksmith discards her to protect Malaik who has lost his father or guardian, in her desperation, Florens offers herself to the blacksmith, saying; "You alone own me" (141). In reaction, the blacksmith, feeling disgusted by her self-objectification, banishes Florens from his presence: "Own yourself, Woman, and leave us be . . . You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (141). Subsequently, Florens initiates an assault on Malaik, the little boy, and the blacksmith, realizing that the true source of enslavement is inside an individual: "it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild" (160). The blacksmith's subsequent rejection compounds the damage, creating a narrative thread of abandonment and isolation that weaves through Florens' life. The novel navigates the brutalizing effects of racist discourse, further exacerbating the corrosion of her self-esteem. Morrison meticulously portrays how societal prejudices and discriminatory ideologies take hold of Florens, leaving her grappling with a distorted self-perception: "This withering, the destruction of Florens' sense of her own humanity and worth, has its roots in her mother's rejection, is reinforced by the blacksmith's similar rejection, is fed by the brutalizing effects of racist discourse, and finally manifests itself in the wilderness of violence and self-hatred" (Bellamy 22). This process manifests itself through cruelty and self-loathing, and presents the effects of systemic injustice and the dehumanizing effects of prejudice.

As mentioned previously, *A Mercy* can be considered a prequel to Morrison's earlier novel *Beloved* (Bellamy 14). In *A Mercy*, Morrison explores slavery, the genesis and formation of her literary places, focusing on the ideas of joining, transformation, and

articulation (Sundman 2). By setting the novel during the era of slavery, the seventeenth century, and focusing on enslaved people like Florens, Morrison directly depicts the brutalities of the system and its degrading effects. The idea of joining refers to the forced connection between enslaved people and their masters, or the attempts by enslaved people to build communities and connections with each other in resistance. Morrison shows how slavery transforms not only the physical lives of the enslaved people but also their sense of self, culture, and identity. Enslaved people find their voice and express their experiences through limited means like spirituals, folktales, or even acts of resistance. For instance, towards the end of the novel, Florens secretly enters the house of Vaark's at night and etches sentences into the wooden surface of the rooms, recounting her narrative with the aspiration that the blacksmith would eventually read it. By incorporating these elements, Morrison creates a literary place that sheds light on a critical period in American history and the ongoing struggle for freedom and identity.

The novel explores the psychic damage inflicted by slavery and the failed messages between a slave mother and her daughter. The epilogue of *A Mercy* sheds light on the genesis of the novel and the act of selling Florens into slavery, challenging the reader's interpretation of the traumatic scene. While Florens interprets her mother's sacrifice as an act of betrayal, a closer look reveals the complexities of the situation. Florens, a young girl, lacks a full understanding of the horrors of slavery. She does not grasp the brutal treatment her mother would have faced if she had remained with D'Ortega. Her interpretation of her mother's actions is based on innocence and a child's desire for a mother's love. The novel portrays slavery as a system that destroys families and strips individuals of their agency. Florens' mother, facing a difficult situation, chooses to send her daughter away not just to protect her but also to offer her a chance at a slightly better life, even if it means separation. The act of sending Florens away can be seen as an act of self-preservation for the mother as well. Remaining with D'Ortega likely meant continued torture and abuse. By ensuring Florens' survival, the mother most likely was ensuring her daughter's life. Within the system of slavery, the mother had very few choices. She could not fight back openly, escape, or protect her daughter; sending her away was the only option to change her fate and exercise a meager form of control.

The novel also addresses the dialectic of love, loss, and alienation, with Florens' voice offering some resistance and empowerment. Additionally, *A Mercy* represents both the historical and contemporary African American author, with the protagonist's act of carving words into walls, which serves as an act of resistance against the historical silencing of the black voice:

> In many respects, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) can be considered a prequel to her masterpiece, *Beloved* (1987). The action of *Beloved* occurs in the years just before and after the end of slavery, while *A Mercy* takes place during the era when slavery becomes entrenched and racialized in the colonies that will become the United States. In *Beloved*, an enslaved mother makes the unimaginable decision to kill her daughter rather than allow her to be raised in slavery, as the traumatic memories of the mother's enslavement and the presence of her dead daughter's ghost continue to haunt the elder woman. *A Mercy* portrays the aftermath of another enslaved mother's decision to offer her daughter in payment for her master's debt, hoping that a different master will give her daughter the chance of a better future. (Bellamy 14)

Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy* share striking thematic and narrative parallels while demonstrating continuity in Morrison's exploration of the enduring legacy of slavery and its profound impact on individuals and communities. Both narratives delve into the trauma experienced by characters who have endured slavery, showcasing the profound emotional scars that linger long after physical liberation. Themes of healing, coping, and the struggle for self-identity are central to both novels. Identity, particularly racial and gender identity, is a prominent theme in both novels. Characters grapple with their sense of self in a society marked by prejudice and dehumanization. While the novels feature different casts of characters, there are subtle connections that can be drawn between them. For example, *A Mercy* features characters like Lina and Florens, who are mentioned or alluded to in *Beloved*. In *A Mercy,* Lina is a Native American woman who serves as a vital figure in the Vaark household. She is depicted as a caretaker, healer, and an important emotional anchor for the characters. Her interactions with the Vaark family, particularly with Florens, reveal her compassionate nature and her ability to bridge cultural divides: "They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god…Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were

insatiable" (54). Lina's character embodies themes of intercultural relationships and the bonds formed between individuals of different backgrounds in a society marked by exploitation: "Florens' humiliation" in the village inspires "her physical defense against the blacksmith's harsh words" just as the schoolteacher's study of Sethe's human and animal parts inspires her fight for freedom" (Bellamy 23).

In *Beloved*, Lina is not explicitly present as a character, but her presence is subtly alluded to in the form of Sethe's memories and recollections. Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, has a complex history with slavery, and her memories of individuals like Lina serve as poignant reminders of the relationships forged during that turbulent period. These references to Lina add depth to Sethe's character, highlighting her connections to other figures who play crucial roles in her life. Florens, the central character in *A Mercy*, is a young, enslaved girl whose perspective provides a unique lens through which to explore the complexities of identity, love, and survival. Her narrative is characterized by its poetic and introspective qualities, allowing readers to intimately engage with her experiences. While Florens herself does not make a direct appearance in *Beloved*, her presence can be indirectly felt through the thematic echoes that resonate across both novels. The themes of love, loss, trauma, and the search for identity that define Florens' journey reminds the themes in *Beloved*:

> The haunting presences in *A Mercy* link this text to a growing body of literature on contemporary forms of haunting, particularly in Ethnic American literature. Haunting serves primarily as a means of accessing lost or repressed knowledge, especially among subjugated peoples, whose history and culture is undervalued and under-recorded in mainstream American society. (Bellamy 15)

These haunting presences in the novel summons the untold and erased histories African Americans. The absence of Florens' mother symbolizes the collective trauma, caused by violence, oppression and loss experienced by the generations of African Americans. The lack of maternal love and the common ground of the shared trauma act as a tool to create a community, which eventually becomes unsuccessful. Lina firmly believes that Jacob Vaark, who will escape from "his grave to visit his beautiful house" (143), will eternally haunt its rooms. The eerie atmosphere and the presence of a contagious sickness make people fearful and highlight the association between the haunted home and slavery. Willard and Scully can see a recurring phenomenon where they witnessed a

spectral light that "began near midnight, floated for a while on the second story, disappeared, then moved ever so slowly from window to window" (144). They feel that Jacob is satisfied with wandering about his house, which is where he properly belongs. However, it seems that this belief is really a reflection of Florens' candlelight as she writes her own story on the wooden floor and walls.

Florens, having experienced profound loss and abandonment, yearns for a sense of belonging and love. Her journey serves as a microcosm of the broader individual struggles depicted in the novel. Despite her longing for healing and connection, Florens finds it difficult to transcend the deep-seated wounds inflicted by slavery. The women in *Love* also go through a similar experience. As stated, *Love* depicts the deteriorated and isolated relationship between Heed and Christine, highlighting their lost friendship. In these novels, Morrison demonstrates that the absence of unity among women results in their diminished strength and failure in several aspects of life.

In *A Mercy*, the relationship between Florens and the blacksmith is a poignant illustration of the challenges faced by individuals in their quest for healing. Both characters carry their own burdens of past trauma, and their attempts to find solace in each other are fraught with complexities: "They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess" (156). Although a true connection exists between them, the emotional injuries from their pasts are too profound to completely overcome. Their individual traumas ultimately hinder the potential for a successful, mutually healing relationship:

> As much as we would like the novel to organize and resolve Florens' and her mother's traumatic histories, these characters are left unsettled, with no true hope of creating better futures for themselves… At the end of *A Mercy*, the reader recognizes that Florens' trials have not ended, that she and her descendants will live in bondage for generations without the hope of release. (Bellamy 17)

Morrison explores several key themes with this ending. First, the novel emphasizes the effects of trauma. Traumatic experiences, like the forced separation of Florens and her mother, leave lasting scars that can impact individuals and families for generations.

Second, *A Mercy* offers a brutal yet unflinching portrayal of slavery. The novel depicts the dehumanizing nature of the system, its destruction of families, and its relentless crushing of hope for a better future. Third, the novel highlights the powerlessness of the enslaved as both Florens and her mother have limited agency within the system. Their choices are severely restricted, leading to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

Furthermore, the novels deal with the complexities of survival and observation as fundamental aspects of the human condition in a manner that corresponds with W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of double consciousness. Du Bois' framework sheds light on the intricate dynamics between external perceptions and internal identity formation, a phenomenon acutely felt by African Americans within the context of a racially stratified society:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. ("Strivings of the Negro People" 4)

Both Morrison and Du Bois' concepts underscore the nuanced journey of individuals navigating hardships and prejudice, emphasizing the significance of endurance and self-awareness in the face of adversity. To overcome this internal conflict, Du Bois urges individuals to assert their own identities, claim ownership of their narratives, and connect with their cultural heritage. This concept remains a significant framework for understanding the experiences of African Americans in the United States. In *A Mercy*, this phenomenon is evident in several aspects of the work.

Meanwhile, *Love* portrays powerful female homosocial bonds crucial for community building, Morrison highlights the harsh reality that these bonds alone may not ensure complete healing and survival for African American communities. Toxic relationships within heterosexual realms, particularly familial structures, emerge as significant impediments to the communal well-being established through female solidarity. The

legacy of patriarchal power dynamics and toxic masculinity disrupts the harmonious fabric woven by women in the community, fostering cycles of trauma and dysfunction. As a father, the novel explores how Bill Cosey betrays his children, and what happens later shows how Cosey's choices had an effect on Christine's mental health. Christine explicitly says that both women essentially compromised their integrity and independence by seeking to satisfy Cosey, who may have represented an ideal or a source of power: "Well, it's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder" (91).

In both *Love* and *A Mercy*, there is a stress on jealousy among women caused by a man's affection and sharing him. The women in *Love* are pitted against each other by an old man's desire; Cosey's choice to wed Heed at the tender age of eleven. This decision profoundly shatters the intimate bond between Heed and Christine, significantly affects the emotional welfare of both young girls. Their persistent hostility resulting from Cosey's choice wastes their lives. In the absence of a unified support system, power dynamics are left unchecked, allowing for the exploitation and mistreatment of the most marginalized members of society. Similarly, the relationship between Florens and her brother, for whom she harbors feelings of jealousy due to her mother's preferential treatment, as well as with Malaik, who shares a close bond with the blacksmith, a figure Florens seeks affection and validation from, are conspicuously intertwined. This interplay ultimately culminates in a loss of personal agency, self-loathing, and the internalization of prejudicial attitudes. The prevailing white societal structures forcibly separate Florens from her mother, thereby attempting to avert her from the grim prospect of enslavement, exploitation, and abuse. The ensuing traumatic experiences, such as separation and trauma caused by slavery engender a fixation on the blacksmith, consequently inciting feelings of envy towards the young Malaik, leading Florens to hit him out of jealousy. While the blacksmith holds Florens culpable for these events, it is imperative to recognize that the root issue emanates from the pervasive influence of the prevailing white societal norms. Owing to the traumatic abandonment she has endured, Florens finds herself incapable of achieving a state of emotional well-being, rendering her unable to cultivate a mutually nurturing and healing relationship and precluding the establishment of a cohesive community. This deficiency in communal cohesion is particularly detrimental to the enslaved populace, as exemplified by Rebekka's abusive

behavior towards them and her contemplation of Florens' potential sale. The incapacity to forge a sense of community precipitates the individual's decline and ultimate disintegration. In the context of both novels, the absence of communal cohesion and mutual support exacerbates the challenges faced by the enslaved individuals. Without a collective framework to lean on, the enslaved people are left isolated and vulnerable, exposed to the harsh realities of their circumstances.

Communities falling apart make individuals isolated, build distrust, and, in the long run, render people to egocentrism. The fact that Christine and Heed are not being honest with each other makes it harder for them to create the same bond they shared as young women. Similarly, in *A Mercy*, Florens accepts racist ideas and wonders if she is the one to blame for what led her mother to leave her: "Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we don't" (115). Without the shared bonds of mutual understanding, empathy, and collective identity, individuals like Christine, Heed, and Florens are left to grapple with their traumas in isolation, compounding their struggles and impeding their capacity to heal and thrive. In this context, the absence of community is not only a source of personal suffering, but also a structural flaw that undermines the potential for collective empowerment and societal resilience. The unraveling of social bonds and mutual support systems ultimately contributes to the broader societal decline. It serves as a stark reminder of the crucial role that community plays in fostering individual well-being and safeguarding the dignity and agency of all its members.

The African, and Native American female characters in *Love* and *A Mercy* are the primary aspects that align the novel with the standard paradigm of the (neo) slave narrative: "Although an image of the individual whose narrative this was, a title-page assertion of authorship, supporting testimonials by whites, a verse serving as an epigraph and (variously) material appended after the narrative to document further the narrator-author's enslavement" (Olney 152–153). *A Mercy* also explores the male perspective in a world where slavery is an accepted reality. This exploration adds complexity to the understanding of both the oppressors and the oppressed within this system:

> And in the case of the blacksmith, Morrison presents a powerful, self-actualized figure of a black man in colonial America who is not a slave and, because of the late seventeenth-century timeframe of the novel and the still relatively nascent instantiation of the slave culture in the colonies, has never been a slave. (Melton 36)

These Morrison novels exhibit a notable shift towards a more individual-focused narrative approach. This evolution in her storytelling style allows Morrison to offer readers a more intimate and in-depth exploration of the personal struggles, triumphs, and complexities of her characters. It represents a natural progression in her literary career, showcasing her versatility as a writer and her ability to adapt her narrative techniques to explore new thematic terrains. "My project, is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 90). Morrison's change in attention to the individual allows her to explore the realities of the character in these novels, revealing the profound psychological and emotional effects of race, gender, and societal pressures.

In *Love*, Mr. Cosey's plan to marry Heed, a young girl, with the intention of having children, is seen by L to be both morally wrong and repugnant. L notes that their time alone starts promptly upon their parting. Similarly, Christine experiences animosity stemming from her submissive status within the family due to her connection with Cosey. Each woman perceives herself as the one Bill Cosey desires and regards others as rivals, as they seek his full attention. This competition and jealousy among women create a tense and complex dynamic within the story. Morrison skillfully explores the ways in which societal expectations and patriarchal power structures can pit women against each other, ultimately preventing them from forming supportive and nurturing relationships. For the same reason, in *A Mercy*, the blacksmith is a pivotal figure. He is a skilled blacksmith and plays a crucial role in the lives of the various characters in the novel. His interactions with Florens and other characters contribute to the intricate web of relationships and dynamics explored in the novel. Specifically, he is tasked with creating the iron gate that serves as a barrier to prevent unauthorized entry or exit from the Vaark property, similar to the gates depicted in seventeenth-century representations of the Christian creation myths, symbolizing the entrance of Heaven and Hell. Aligned with the Edenic imagery, the barrier created by the blacksmith is aesthetically pleasing,

but it also represents a foreboding entrance that signifies possible hazards and alluring enticements reminiscent of the Biblical archetypes. This is shown by the presence of the "glittering cobras" (*A Mercy* 36) that intertwine at its top: "Like the gate, and very much like Cholly Breedlove from *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel, the blacksmith is a figure alternately divine and demonic. He is a healer, 'a savior', but his methods are extravagant and frightening, aligning him as much with magic as with miracles" (Melton 37-38).

The character of the blacksmith emerges as a figure characterized by strength, independence, and resilience. Like Bill Cosey, the blacksmith navigates a world marked by racial inequality and economic hardship with a quiet but palpable fortitude. Morrison illustrates Cosey as a stereotypical strong man, similar to her other male characters in previous novels. The blacksmith has a strong sense of self and purpose as a previous slave who gained his own freedom. What he and Bill Cosey have in common is that they both have an effect on the women characters in the story. The blacksmith gives the women around him a sense of security and support. He is more than just a provider; he is a mentor. This dynamic echoes the nuanced relationships between male and female characters that Morrison often portrays, where the male figures offer a source of strength and stability within the complex social and historical contexts of their lives. Therefore, Morrison argues for the displacement of the masculine role in women's lives, advocating for the strengthening of female agency, as she has elaborated:

> Patriarchy is assumed, but women have to agree to the role. It's not that [Cosey] gobbles them up, but they allow themselves to be eaten. When you're able to stop blaming other people-your father, your grandfather, your husband-for your shortcomings or confusion or failure, then language is possible, and so is love. (O'Connor)

Furthermore, the blacksmith exhibits distinct characteristics that set him apart from his literary predecessors. His independence and self-sufficiency are particularly pronounced, as he is skilled in his craft and enjoys a level of economic autonomy. The sense of independence makes him unique and, unlike any other male character in Morrison's earlier works who have dealt with economic problems. He is also more than just a blacksmith; he becomes a teacher to Florens. Moreover, his relationship with Florens shows how care, mentoring, and emotional depth do not have to follow standard

gender roles or power relations. Instead, the blacksmith values mutual respect and he wants Florens to grow. This is different from some of Morrison's earlier portrayals of male-female relationships; it shows a more complex and equal relationship that reflects how the themes and characters change in her later works, as the blacksmith's "work, however, requires him to labor in fire, and that associates him with Hell and the alchemy of potentially forbidden admixtures. The blacksmith's physical being likewise evokes this archetypal tension between fire and freedom, power and production" (Melton 38). He provides Florens with a safe space to express herself and offers solace in moments of distress. However, despite the blacksmith's healing presence, Florens struggles to fully embrace the healing offered to her. This reluctance is rooted in her internalized adherence to Eurocentric standards, which have influenced her perception of self-worth and agency.

Florens lives in a society based on Eurocentric standards of order, control, and outward reinforcement. She feels that she is not good enough or worthy due to the degrading effects of slavery and systemic injustice. Even the blacksmith's affection seems too much for her because she doubts that she deserves them. Florens has trouble with her self-worth and sense of autonomy since she is ripped away from her Africanist values. She finds it hard to accept the idea that she should seek approval from within rather than from outside sources. Her struggle is a reflection of her inability to assert her identity. The contrast between the blacksmith's role as a healer and Florens's reluctance to accept healing shows how people keep struggling after being hurt or oppressed. It underscores the profound impact of societal norms and standards on one's sense of self and capacity for self-care. The narrative begins with Florens' mistaken understanding of the betrayal and concludes with her mother's clarification of the event. Being rejected inflicts a psychological injury that hinders Florens' development, causing her to surrender her autonomy to someone else, which her mother later condemns as morally wrong.

In Morrison's novels *Love* and *A Mercy*, the narratives depict interconnected lives marked by the enduring legacy of slavery and the profound impact of systemic oppression. The novels prove that racist prejudice hurts people and show how social stereotypes change Christine, Heed, and Florens' minds and their self-perception. The

stories go into detail about how complicated relationships within a community can be, showing the difficulty of bonding when there is systematic injustice. The narratives also reflect W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness," where the individuals have more than one social identity, which makes it difficult for them to develop a sense of self. Personality development and social standards are complicated, especially in a racially divided society. The characters' inner struggles, their difficult past, the traumas they encounter, and how others judge them reflect this double consciousness. *Love* and *A Mercy* are about surviving, observing, and the complicated ways that people connect with each other in the face of past and present problems. By exploring the lasting effects of slavery through these works, both during slavery and after emancipation, Morrison paints a picture of the difficulties of identity, resilience, and the need for healing in a society marked by systematic unfairness.

As the characters try to create bonds with each other and get over their past, the novels explore the necessity of community healing. Relationships, power, and the search for identity are complicated and may stand in the way of building healthy communities. The stories of the female characters in particular show how structural oppression can hurt interpersonal relationships. The characters from the above-mentioned novels are unable to build communities, due to the lingering affects of their traumas. The following chapter will explore Morrison's last two novels—*Home* and *God Help the Child*—and how the characters are able to achieve a community fostered by resilience and connection through sharing their experiences and working on their individual traumas.

CHAPTER 2

BUILDING A COMMUNITY: *HOME* (2012) AND *GOD HELP THE CHILD* (2015)

Toni Morrison's *Home* and *God Help the Child*, which are the subjects of this chapter, both fall under the umbrella of trauma narratives. Trauma narrative refers to the process of reconstructing and retelling personal stories after experiencing trauma. It involves making sense of traumatic events, rebuilding agency, and empowering trauma survivors. Narrative therapy is a collaborative and interactional approach that helps trauma survivors to process their experiences and to incorporate them into their lives (Bayes 62). African American trauma narratives have been the focus of several studies. These narratives aim to disrupt dominant perspectives and create a space for empathy and solidarity within the community (Pourgharib 58). Research has explored the lived experiences of African American families exposed to physical assault, emotional abuse, murder, and racial profiling by law enforcement, highlighting themes such as racial profiling and fear for African American individuals (Lipscomb 7). Female narrators in various literary works have also been shown to suffer traumas caused by their male counterparts, with writing serving as a healing process and a means of self-acceptance and agency (Ngom 14). Additionally, African American youth and African refugee youth encounter systemic racism in different ways, with refugee youth also facing inherent traumatic experiences (Acquaye 187). African American women in particular experience trauma related to the loss of subjectivity, sexual discrimination, and generational trauma (Liang 53), as depicted in Morrison's last two novels *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015).

The healing process described in these novels is very similar to what hooks shows in her book *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery,* in which she talks about the community African American women built for healing: "Our collective hope for the group was that it would be a space where African American women name their pain and find ways of healing" (6). The name "Sisters of the Yam" comes from Toni Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*:

> We found that one important source of healing emerged when we got in touch with all the factors in our lives that were causing particular pain. For all black females, and males too, that means learning about the myriad ways racism, sexism, class exploitation, and various other structures of domination operate in our daily lives to undermine our capacity to be self-determining. (hooks 6-7)

She argues that African American female self recovery, like all African American self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice: "living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity (knowledge of who we are and where we have come from), choosing wellness is an act of political resistance" (hooks, *Sisters of the Yam* 7).

Morrison's portrayal of eugenics goes beyond simply depicting its brutality. It also functions as a metaphor for the systemic control exerted over African American lives. By manipulating reproduction, the eugenicist doctor attempts to dictate the very future of the African American community. This act of control becomes deeply intertwined with the themes of displacement and dispossession that permeate the novel. The characters' struggle to find a sense of belonging and establish a secure "home" is further complicated by the knowledge that their ability to create families and future generations is under threat (Parrinder 127). However, *Home* does not solely dwell on the darkness of eugenics. Despite the trauma Cee endures, the novel also emphasizes resilience. Her story becomes part of a larger narrative of African American women's strength and the importance of community in the face of adversity. Through acts of love and support, the characters find ways to heal and rebuild their lives (Fitzgerald 144).

According to Irene Visser, in *Home*, Morrison uses the narrative of "Hansel and Gretel," as a framework to explore the fundamental issue of trauma, depicting it as a difficult journey of reconciling with previous wounds. Frank and Cee are represented siblings who depend on their deep affection and assistance for one another to face and ultimately assimilate profoundly distressing encounters (Visser 149). In an interview, Morrison says:

> A reason for *Home* is that I got very interested in the idea of when a man's relationship with a woman is pure—unsullied, not fraught . . . It could be masculine and protective without the baggage of sexuality. So the sort of Hansel and Gretel aspect really fascinated me. ("Toni")

Morrison's portrayal of classic literature serves to highlight the complexities of human connection and the potential for deep emotional intimacy outside the realm of romantic or sexual attraction. The brother-sister bond between Frank and Cee offers a unique sanctuary. Frank can be fiercely protective of Cee, driven by a sense of responsibility for her safety and well-being, without the entanglement of desire. This allows him to express a different kind of masculinity, one that is nurturing, caring, and selfless. It transcends the societal expectations that often define masculinity through aggression and dominance, highlighting the possibility for emotional depth in male-female relationships that are not rooted in sexuality. The novel primarily focuses on the familial relationship, leaving unexplored the complexities of adult romantic love. Additionally, Cee's trauma at the hands of the doctor remains largely unaddressed within their dynamic, raising questions about the emotional impact on their relationship. It highlights the human desire for safe spaces within male-female relationships where vulnerability and emotional connection can exist freely, independent of romantic or sexual attraction:

> Regarded in the wider context of Morrison's project of depicting the history of exclusion of African Americans from their democratic rights as US citizens, the Money siblings' desire for personal belonging and security must be understood against the novel's background of the 1950s, a time of growing awareness of the need for racial equality, preceding the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. (Visser 150)

The novel raises important questions such as what the process of recovering from trauma is and how characters who have experienced trauma can regain a sense of identity, inner calm, and a revitalized passion for life.

While hooks focuses on the individual's healing process in her book, the lessons she shares are applicable to a larger group or community. The lessons arise from the community's firsthand encounters and close connections with African American individuals. hooks contends that "It is important that black people talk to one another, that we talk with friends and allies, for the telling of our stories enables us to name our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing" (8). African Americans, motivated by the need to protect themselves in the face of a mostly white society, resorted to using tactics of deception and concealing the truth in their interactions with African American groups. This was particularly accurate in the context of gender dynamics:

> Again and again, when I talk with black women who are engaged in a recovery and liberation process, whether they are in primary relationships or living single parents or alone, I hear from all of us a concern about building a greater sense of community . . . Now, I am more confident that community is a healing place. As black women come together with one another, with all the other folks in the world who are seeking recovery and liberation, we find the will to be well affirmed, we find ways to get what we need to ease the pain, to make the hurt go away . . . We are all discovering that the experience of community is crucial to wellness. (hooks, *Sisters of Yam* 115)

Further studies on healing communities also "points to the value of actively engaging survivors in constructing a community response to trauma and healing at the local level, and provides a focal point for further examination" (Todahl 630). The emphasis on a fostering community inherently confronts a culture of dominance that prioritizes individual welfare over communal endeavors. The culture of poverty has resulted in the formation of a strong sense of communalism among the economically disadvantaged African American population, which is characterized by a focus on sharing talents and resources. However, according to hooks, "just when black people need to affirm the importance of community, when we need to redevelop an ethos that emphasizes collective well-being, we are witnessing a proliferation of the false assumption that somehow black life can be redeemed if we develop strong black patriarchies" (117-118). Replicating the experiences of white families that adhere to patriarchal norms in the United States would have no impact on addressing the pain and dysfunction present in African American communities and intergender relationships.

Adhering to old patriarchal norms and resisting adaptation to modernity, particularly in African American relationships, may impede societal healing from the traumas created by these same principles. Healing can be derived from novelty:

> Breaking with traditional patriarchal thinking, and the negative masculine identity it promotes, would enable black men to take seriously their mental health and well-being. If black people disinvest from the patriarchal notion that "real" men do not need to address their emotional life and their psychic well-being, we can begin to create strategies for social change that will enhance black male life and as a consequence all our lives. (hooks, *Sisters of the Yam* 118)

Social change and justice could be achieved by forming strong communities, as hooks states: "such communities of resistance can emerge around our struggles for personal

self-recovery as well as our efforts to organize collectively to bring about social change. We grow closer in struggle" (122). hooks also asserts in her work that "As black women collectively act compassionately toward ourselves, we will be able to extend a more loving compassion to black men as well… As black women learn how to ease the distress we feel, our ability to generously give to others (not as self-sacrificing martyrs) will be strengthened" (129).

From an African-centered viewpoint, healing is a communal undertaking that entails preserving a peaceful equilibrium between the spiritual domain and the physical sphere.

> (Re)establishing spiritual harmony with one's ancestors is a healing prerequisite that allows for access to special cures. To meet human needs, the interdependency of a community creates opportunities to achieve what is difficult to achieve alone when the following commitments are upheld: unity, trust, openness, love and caring, uplifting elders who are the collective memory of the community, respect for nature's medicinal wisdom, and honoring the ancestors. Cultural healing practices may include specific rituals, drumming, dancing, singing, and storytelling. While African concepts of wellness generally characterize a person's health status as a communal affair, it also characterizes human knowledge as limited: incapable of explaining all that exists on Earth and beyond (Nkechinyelum 5).

According to Dominick LaCapra, an American historian specializing in the intellectual history of Europe, there are two primary ways in which traumatic experiences are remembered: "acting out and working through" (ix). LaCapra draws upon psychoanalytic notions and attempts to enhance their applicability in the field of historical studies. The research conducted on this subject applies advanced psychoanalytic theories to analyze collective phenomena, providing detailed explanations of historical acts of violence that are both contextually relevant and psychologically insightful: "These accounts are particularly compelling when focused on what I call 'punctual' traumas: historical events of such singularity, magnitude, and horror that they can be read as shocks that disable the psychic system" (Forter 259). In the 1990s, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman significantly transformed the understanding of trauma and its representation in both language and personal encounters. Caruth's book *"Unclaimed Experience": Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) acknowledges Sigmund Freud's thoughts on this subject as she "puts forth the view that the rhetorical potential of recurring figures in texts that capture

splintered referentiality that points to the knowing and not knowing of the traumatic past, which in turn reveals the traumatic nature of history itself" (Mandal 10256). However, in *Home,* Morrison is not interested in depicting characters who are suspended in "the timeless space of trauma but in the resumption of developmental possibility in ways that at first seem trite and simplistically redemptive, but that are also, in the context of Morrison's oeuvre, perverse and bold" (Lopez Ramírez, "Hurt Right Down the Middle" 129). In *Home* and *God Help the Child*, the characters acknowledge the pain resulting from their traumas, and use them as a bonding agent and a step forward to a brighter future.

Home (2012), centers on Frank Money, the main character, who is a Korean War veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder because of the war, and is admitted to a mental health facility because to his "episodes" of lapses. The novel explores him and his sister Ycidra, who's more often called Cee, and their turbulent childhood in a small town in Georgia, characterized by family adversity and psychological mistreatment. The distressing narrative describes Cee's relationship with an uncaring man called Prince and her working conditions, which cause her abuse and eventual agony. Her employer, Dr. Beauregard Scott, sterilizes Cee and other women of color in the area without their consent. Cee's physical and emotional condition deteriorates; she is worn out and bleeds between her legs. Following his escape from a psychiatric facility, Frank sets out on a quest to save his sister. His contemplations on his previous encounters and involvement in the war illuminate his mental suffering and post-traumatic stress disorder, shown through flashbacks. His regrettable actions include raping a child during the Korean War. Upon arriving in Atlanta, Frank becomes aware of Cee's severe condition. With the aid of kind strangers in Lotus, Frank is able to bring Cee back to their town. The determined women in their community attend to Cee's welfare, exposing the repercussions of Dr. Beauregard's unethical medical experiments. This situation causes Frank to confront and seek solace from his distressing previous experiences, which in turn strengthens his connection with Cee. As the siblings strive to heal their relationships through the help of their community, they try to rectify the injustices symbolically through giving a proper burial for an unmarked grave, which serves as a cathartic and transforming act.

The focus on healing and community engagement is a significant departure from traditional portrayals of African American manhood in literature. Frank delves into his history, present, and eventually transforms throughout the narrative. *Home* "associate[s] black men in particular with flight, seemingly indicating that any settled space—and especially domestic space—is dangerous to black masculinity" (Still 39-40). The depictions in the novel both illustrate and challenge wider societal anxieties around the role of the African American male body. The pattern of changing identities is examined in the male character's quest to leave his home and find a new one. The African American man, Frank Money in this case, is consistently marginalized within the white patriarchal realm. However, he experiences a profound shift as he ultimately accepts the ambiguity and uncertainty that arise from this exclusion. In other words, Frank learns to exist in a space that is neither fully belonging nor fully displaced. This space enables him to explore different ways of expressing racialized masculinities.

In an interview, when questioned about the inspiration for *Home*, Morrison describes "home" as a space where individuals "may or may not like you, but they are not going to hurt you" (Morrison, *Home*, 12). Conversely, she asserts that the concept of a home during the 1950s, the era in which the book takes place, was intertwined with a broader communal American notion: "World War II was over. People were buying houses, and everything was nice and comfortable. And I didn't think so" (Boone). Morrison believed that the culture of conformity affected marginalized people the most, and in her work, she examines several manifestations of this conformity:

> Cee and Frank's personal development is influenced both directly and indirectly by the broader cultural silences of the Fifties, including the personal and political fears of many Americans that perhaps the post-war world was less safe and comfortable than portrayed in the media. There was the fear of communism outside US borders in the Korean War, and the anti-communism within US borders. In *Home*, fear of communism is also inseparable from racial fears generated by the legacy of slavery in the South. Hostility toward political and racial 'others' becomes part of a single, interwoven fabric inside various houses in the novel. (Castor 140-141)

Morrison compels readers to confront the characters' traumas head-on and guides them through the process of seeing their own recovery: "Healing for Cee and Frank relates to 'home' as a temporary but safe haven where strength and a sense of agency can become

real, for now and in the future. For Morrison's characters, healing honors rather than seeks to erase scars" (Castor 142). The poem about a tree towards the conclusion of the story symbolizes their traumas, although they are in the path of healing: "I stood there a long while, staring at that tree/ It looked so strong/ So beautiful./ Hurt right down the middle/ But alive and well" (147). The concept of home inherently encompasses the capacity to undergo healing by combining imaginative prowess with tangible, instinctive recollection within a societal context of certain temporal and spatial dimensions.

The intricate narratives of Frank and Cee's journey toward completeness are crucial to Morrison's overarching narrative vision. This is because the narrative exemplifies the concept of "double consciousness" coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, which entails the simultaneous experience of being both American and African American. This duality enables a heightened perception of underlying power dynamics and injustices (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 12). Both Frank and Cee see empowerment as pertaining to "healing as self-healing in a supportive community that brings one closer to home. In contrast, genuine healing does not happen in the houses and institutions of the medical establishment" (Castor 146). Throughout the novel, the characters acquire an understanding of their societal positions in relation to their race and gender. Regarding Cee's circumstances, she acquires the ability to restore her well-being as a female in an environment free from any male, even her brother. Frank "believed his maleness would worsen her condition. She told him the women took turns nursing Cee and each had a different recipe for her cure. What they all agreed upon was his absence from her bedside" (119). However, in the end, both Cee and Frank find healing and Cee's journey requires not just physical but also emotional support, which Frank can offer as a sibling, and also as parental figure to his sister. Traditionally, the nurturing role falls to a mother figure, but here, Frank fills that gap due to their circumstances. This ambiguity emphasizes the importance of human connection and shared vulnerability in the healing process, suggesting that support can come from unexpected individuals and defy rigid gender definitions.

The Money siblings establish both collective and individual homes as a consequence. Cee's convalescence in the presence of women takes her to a state where she can

embrace the solace that Frank provides without relying on him for her ability to navigate through life (Morrison, *Home* 131). In the end of the novel, Cee and Frank unite in a new societal environment that symbolizes their newfound, combined influence, to give a proper burial to a man whose grave was unnamed: "Cee's quilt—which is useful, and also symbolic of the community of women near and far away, past and present—becomes the cover for the man to whom they give an honorable burial" (Castor 148-149). Ultimately, Morrison asserts that, to heal society as a whole, it is imperative to address the underlying tensions between men and women. This may be achieved by harnessing the healing capabilities of communities.

Furthermore, female relationships provide emotional support and nurturing that aid in women's recovery. This enables them to develop new female identities that break free from patriarchal norms through "a rejection of the imposed gendered socially-sanctioned construction of female identity" (Lopez Ramírez, "Hurt Right Down the Middle" 132). Morrison emphasizes the crucial and healing function of sisterhood and female friendship within the African American community by portraying Cee's friends, Thelma and Sarah, in a similar manner as she did with Amy in *Beloved*. Thelma aids Cee in securing a more desirable employment opportunity, while Sarah's assistance and her correspondence with Frank ultimately save her. In her book *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, bell hooks explores the role of the maternal figure, namely the "other mother" like Ethel, in supporting and mentoring adolescent girls. This guidance helps to enhance their self-perception and cultivate a stronger sense of self-value. hooks emphasizes the importance of creating an environment that enables individuals to "[be] in touch with [one's] healing powers, know how to 'draw up the powers from the deep. Within this space, it is possible to identify the sources of pain and begin to heal" (13). In the novel, the healing environment is situated in their hometown Lotus where the group members are inclusive and hospitable to those who seek help. The family and community plays a pivotal role in assisting and healing those affected by traumatic memories. The other African American women and especially Ethel guide Cee on the journey of self-acceptance and self-esteem. These wise matriarchs understand that the young woman's healing requires not only physical, but also mental work. These women provide the care Cee needs and nurture her back to

health. They help in creating self-awareness and empower her to strive for self-identification:

> Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. See your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (126)

Throughout her healing journey, Cee acquires confidence and independence. The protagonist was stigmatized from a young age as "an unlovable, barely tolerated gutter child . . . agreed with the label and believed herself worthless" (Morrison, *Home* 129), however, the spiritual healers in the community support her transformation from victimhood to gaining agency of her life. They provide her with an alternative perspective that empowers her. As a result, Cee is able to make her own decisions, evolving from a powerless and vulnerable child into a mature woman. Ethel and the other women's inherent healing methods, derived from African American cultural traditions, are juxtaposed with Western medical procedures. Western medical system's was unable to cure Frank's post-traumatic stress disorders or Dr. Beau's eugenic experiment brought a myriad of other problems for Cee. Traditionally African Americans have a particular connection with nature and believe in the potent restorative qualities of spaces and herbs in opposition to the Eurocentric patriarchal notion of nature as something to be managed and inherited. Morrison places a strong emphasis on the characters' collective healing process; African Americans in the community have access to the love and human connection they need to recover from their traumas. Ethel and the other black women heal Cee and guide her in accepting herself and her place in the community. They support her in forging her identity and foster the courage she needs.

In *Home*, Morrison asserts the need for African Americans to reestablish a connection with their historical roots in order to facilitate the healing of their individual and collective traumas, as well as to safeguard against the obliteration of their shared identity and historical narrative. Frank and Cee evoke the ancestral memories of African American history, which provides strength and empowerment not only to individuals but also to the whole African American community. The siblings partake in a

ceremonial rite to honor the deceased African American man: "connotation is of restored dignity and regained vitality, signifying a celebration of transformation" (Visser 15). The participation in this African American ritual works on multiple levels: On one hand, it is the revival of ancestral knowledge, which carries the risk of disappearing under the influence of white dominant culture and, on the other hand, it is a healing ceremony to remedy the destructive influences of the society that has caused such pains. *Home* illustrates the inherent connection between the ideals of residence, affection, and environment and the crucial factors for recovery, recuperation, and strength: "Lotus, the women's community, is a beacon of hope that has emerged from a state of inactivity and has undergone a profound process of change and rejuvenation" (Lopez Ramírez, "Hurt Right Down the Middle" 137).

In Morrison's novels published before the year 2000, homes devoid of warmth and affection are juxtaposed with homes that are welcoming and filled with love. These elements, which are also prominently included in *Home*, "include the characters' return to a hometown that was once left and their rebuilding a home there, seeking a place of safety and growth, whilst attempting to live with (literally) or come to terms with the ghosts of the past" (Visser 5). The central juxtaposition in *Home* lies between the frigid and devoid-of-affection household of Frank and Cee's upbringing and the affectionate and inviting residence provided by the women in Lotus; the town they once despised and departed from as soon as they could, but now reluctantly revisit, only to discover that it is the rightful place. While the previous novels lack a definitive feeling of attaining acceptance and belonging, *Home*, on the other hand, depicts the healing power of becoming part of a community. In her last two novels, Morrison seems to arrive at a solution: A supportive community, which is tied to African American traditions, is necessary in healing the traumatic effects of slavery and colonialism.

Lotus plays a crucial role in saving the lives of the main characters. Their uncomplicated Christian beliefs and unwavering moral values, especially regarding women's independence, greatly contribute to healing and recovery. Initially, Frank assumes the position of a passive therapist, but toward the end of the novel, the women create a more powerful therapeutic and social atmosphere. The novel suggests that while trauma might result in social fragmentation, it can also foster a heightened sense

of belonging. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber's research highlights the crucial role of family and community in Morrison's works, aiding victims of trauma in reconciling with their past and "moderate trauma, and, as a result, self-esteem" (Schreiber 9). Morrison strengthens this idea through Frank's transformation. Initially, Frank has a profound and debilitating feeling of disconnection and does not feel included in a community, but in time he reestablishes connections.

In the first chapters of the novel, Cee is happy and delighted at finding employment and a residence, unaware of the fate that awaits her. Dr. Beauregard Scott exploits young, destitute women like Cee for his illicit experiments. The doctor is depicted as a "heavy-weight Confederate" (62) with a substantial library of books on eugenics (65), whose warm welcome towards Cee covers "a sham protection covering a malicious intent, and the doctor parallels the witch, determined to entrap homeless young women in order to cannibalize them" (Vissel 153). This violation of her bodily autonomy becomes a stark symbol of the power imbalance and the racist application of eugenics during this period. African American women, deemed undesirable for reproduction according to this twisted outlook, were targeted for such procedures without their consent. This situation highlights the historical reality of African American women's vulnerability within the white medical system and the broader societal forces that sought to control their reproductive choices (Fitzgerald 142).

Cee's recuperation in Lotus, presents a revolutionary concept of self-affection and self-fulfillment in opposition to the deeply ingrained influences of eugenic degradation: "Read from the perspective of its matrifocal collective, *Home* not only rehearses rhetorically the cruel medical apartheid that constituted postwar eugenics but also envisions intersubjective forms of healing that seek to nurture people rather than control bodies, chipping away in the process at the logics and legacies of reproductive racism" (Gerald 142). Cee's journey challenges societal norms and offers a fresh perspective on self-love and healing by highlighting the harmful effects of eugenic practices. *Home* advocates for a more compassionate and inclusive intergender relationship in order to create healthy societies. By connecting with others who have experienced similar challenges, individuals can find support, understanding, and guidance in their healing journey. Through shared experiences and empathy, the community can play a crucial

role in helping individuals navigate their trauma and move toward recovery. Over the course of her recovery, Cee becomes more confident and independent. She is "Branded early as an unlovable, barely tolerated 'gutter child' . . . agreed with the label and believed herself worthless" (129), however, the community spiritual healers provide her with a counter-narrative of empowerment and help her move beyond victimhood into self-respect and self-determination. By the time the novel ends, the girl has transformed from a helpless and insecure child into a confident young lady.

Home paints a poignant picture of characters grappling with a multitude of traumas, both individual and collective. These experiences leave deep scars, shaping their identities and driving the narrative forward:

> As a veteran of the Korean War, Frank displays many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cee, a victim of illegal medical experimentation, is scarred emotionally and physically for life. Moreover, the siblings are also victims of what is known in trauma theory as the intergenerational transmission of trauma, which here (as in other works by Morrison) is racial persecution. (Visser 151)

Frank Money embodies the devastating effects of war trauma, and his experiences as a soldier in the Korean War manifest in his nightmares, flashbacks, and a profound sense of alienation. He struggles to reintegrate into civilian life, haunted by violence, loss, and the psychological scars etched by war (Parrinder 244). The novel presents the psychological toll of war, offering a glimpse into the invisible wounds soldiers carry, "constituting an entanglement of primal, disturbing, and obsessive memories that feed his fascination with manhood as connected to fighting, violence, and bloodshed but also underlie his self-image as protector of his sister" (Visser 154).

Accompanied by PTSD, racial trauma also holds a strong place in all the African American characters' psyches in the novel. This constant undercurrent of racism creates a sense of insecurity and displacement. Everyday experiences, from microaggressions to outright hostility, reinforce a sense of being unwelcome and being "othered." This racial trauma is a constant pressure cooker, simmering beneath the surface and shaping their perception of the world (Fitzgerald 145). Furthermore, the characters are haunted by experiences of loss and separation. Frank mourns the loss of comrades in war, while Cee yearns for a sense of belonging and connection. The fractured family dynamic

further amplifies this sense of loss. These experiences of loss and separation create a void in their lives, leaving them searching for ways to rebuild and reconnect. Morrison also subtly weaves in hints of Cee's experience with childhood abuse at the hands of her father. Although details are scarce, the implication of this trauma adds another layer to her emotional struggles. This unresolved trauma from a young age can have a profound impact on a person's sense of self-worth and ability to form healthy relationships (Parrinder 130). Both Frank and Cee experience childhood traumas, which leaves them scarred. As a result, Frank subsequently recalls their hometown as "the worst place in the world" (83). Their parents, overwhelmed by their jobs and fatigue, entrust the care of their children to their step-grandmother, Lenore, who deprives them of food and physically abuses them. This story portrays a realistic account of childhood deprivation and abuse, with blatant references to fairy-tale elements (Vissel 152).

In *Home* the experiment conducted on Cee is a remark on health injustices and how such abuses affect the Money family. Actually, this experiment is only the continuation of many other incidents and precarious circumstances surrounding the family members. Separate and unequal maternity services, hazards and illnesses related to jobs, and premature mortality have been part of the African American experience under the Jim Crow laws. Before their settlement in Lotus, Georgia, the Moneys lived in Bandera County, Texas but they had to leave because "hooded men" with guns threatened them: "twenty-four hours, they were told, or else" (10). That same night, four-year-old Frank, his father, and his pregnant mother escaped on foot, seeking shelter at local churches along the way. They traveled for weeks until Frank's mother gave birth in the basement of an old church but waited nine days before naming the newborn baby girl, "lest death notice fresh life and eat it" (40). Whether the mother, Ida Money, had some support from any midwives or other friends during the birth is unknown, but the circumstances surrounding her delivery present the difficulties and prejudices they encounter as second-class citizens. The Money family history demonstrates their victimization under the widespread extralegal violence since "state-sanctioned racial segregation not only divided up social life and services but perpetuated uneven health outcomes for those located on the wrong side of the color line" (Fitzgerald 146).

It is crucial to acknowledge that the characters' traumas are examples of what others also encounter in the community as well as creating a ripple effect for other disturbances. These traumas often interweave and enhance other distresses. Frank's war trauma hinders his capacity to establish a secure domestic environment, intensifying his feeling of being out of place. Furthermore, Cee's encounter with medical trauma intensifies the emotional intricacies of her childhood maltreatment. Morrison's depiction emphasizes the interdependence of trauma, illustrating how several encounters may cumulatively impact an individual's state of being. Her depiction of many types of trauma enables readers to comprehend the enduring effects of these events on both people and societies.

In *Home*, the scene where Frank rescues Cee from Dr. Scott's mansion serves a pivotal role in his character development. This daring act not only solidifies his image as Cee's protector but also allows him to challenge his previous notions of masculinity: "Frank is able to concretize his self-image as Cee's protector while also realizing that violence and manhood are not necessarily synonymous" (Visser 154). Frank's decision to break into the house and retrieve Cee demonstrates his courage and unwavering commitment to her safety. By taking such a bold step, he establishes himself as someone Cee can rely on in times of need. However, the true significance of this scene lies in how it dismantles the traditional association between manhood and violence. The act of rescuing Cee itself is crucial. Morrison's depiction of Frank achieving his goal without resorting to physical force against Dr. Scott becomes a powerful statement. This approach stands in stark contrast to any past experiences Frank might have had, where violence might have been seen as a defining characteristic of masculinity. Perhaps due to his experiences in the Korean War, Frank might have initially equated being a man with being aggressive and forceful.

The rescue scene allows Frank to discover a different kind of strength. It's the strength of courage, resourcefulness, and an unwavering will to protect someone he cares about. These qualities demonstrate that true masculinity does not rely on physical aggression, but rather on one's character and capacity for decisive action. Morrison portrays Frank's internal monologue after the rescue, where he grapples with this revelation: "I shot the Korean girl in her face. I am the one she touched. I am the one who saw her smile. I am

the one she said "Yum-yum" to. I am the one she aroused. A child. A wee little girl. I didn't think. I didn't have to. Better she should die" (62). After the revelation, he fully accepts the crime he has committed, and feels guilty. He also acknowledges the fact that he should not hide what he has done, or run away from it. Frank acknowledges the irony of his nickname "Smart Money," realizing that true intelligence lies in finding solutions that do not involve violence. This introspective moment highlights Frank's evolving definition of manhood:

> From this perspective, Frank's maturation requires an engagement with his memory of witnessing the fighting horses, symbolically representing his fascination with manhood as violence and aggression. After his traumatic experiences in Korea, having witnessed the deaths of his two closest friends, Frank begins to understand that his previous notion of masculinity as oriented to war, violence, and aggression is hollow and false. (Visser 154)

Throughout history, and possibly even in Frank's own past experiences, particularly when he served in the Korean War, masculinity has often been equated with physical strength and prowess in battle. A "real man" was someone who emerged victorious in a fight. However, Morrison presents an alternative perspective through Frank's character. The key element that disrupts the traditional definition of masculinity lies in how Frank achieves his goal. Morrison portrays Frank as successful for rescuing Cee without resorting to violence against Dr. Scott. This act allows Frank to discover an alternative form of masculinity which is built on courage, cleverness, and the will to protect; qualities that do not require aggression or dominance. Morrison depicts Frank's internal thoughts after the rescue, revealing his newfound understanding. By showcasing Frank's rescue without violence, Morrison emphasizes that being a man is not about brute force or winning battles. She rejects Frank's obsession with aggression and violence and expressly claims that Frank's newly discovered capacity for altruism helps him realize that manhood is not attained through military victory but rather through courage without violence.

The first step in the characters' healing journey is confronting the past. Cee's return to Georgia, the place where she experienced traumatic events, is symbolic. By revisiting the physical location, she begins to face the suppressed memories and emotions that have been in her mind. As she walks the familiar, yet unsettling streets, flashbacks and

nightmares erupt, forcing her to acknowledge her repressed trauma. These experiences, depicted by Morrison with stark imagery, are a crucial part of the healing process, and denial would hinder her progress. Cee does not have to face these demons alone. Frank's presence becomes a safe haven for her. His unwavering support and non-judgmental attitude create an environment where she feels comfortable exploring the darkest memories of her past. Sharing her fragmented recollections and fears with Frank allows her to process them, a vital step on the road to healing: "Frank's act of courage in undertaking Cee's rescue, told to the faceless scribe, aids the therapeutic process of coming to terms with trauma. Its successful outcome helps him confront what constitutes his most profoundly traumatic memory, that of his own shame and guilt" (Visser 155).

Regarding the subject matter of community healing, it is essential to delve into the many aspects that contribute to the restoration and well-being of communities. In her book, *All About Love*, hooks contends that by addressing and resolving the issues within romantic relationships among African American individuals, there is a consequential enhancement in community cohesion and strength. By engaging in this activity, society participates in a practice characterized by affection and care. Love serves as the fundamental basis for the constructive establishment of communal bonds with others who are unfamiliar (*All About Love* 58). Both heterosexual romantic connections and homosocial partnerships play a crucial role in the formation and development of communities. Female homosocial connections are devalued in white dominant societies, leading to their suppression and eventual eradication, which will be further discussed in the following pages. The suppression of women's relationships due to their objectification as sexual commodities contributes to the challenge posed by female-female connections against sexist oppression. Affirming women's presence and establishing relationships with them, whether as friends, romantic partners, or allies, has traditionally implied a rejection of males and the patriarchal system. In some instances, society establishes a connection between friendship and sexuality due to the commonly held assumption that intimate and emotional connections among women are similarly positioned as a means to resist male dominance (Binhammer 230).

One of the reasons for Frank's own suffering is due to the fact that he has raped a child. Frank only recalls the memories of the girl's death at a later time, with the help of the process of recounting his narrative. Frank's profound concern for Cee serves as the primary impetus in his life and influences his sense of self: "The process of trauma narrativization, which discloses Frank's deepest feelings, allows him to gradually identify with this authentic self in an upward narrative movement that is intensified by the use of motifs from the fairy-tale intertext" (Visser 157). Through his reconnection with his sister, he creates a place to reflect, which in turn becomes a place where he acknowledges what he has done.

Spending time with the women in the Georgia-Lotus community, particularly the women from the church, provides Cee with a much-needed sense of belonging and acceptance. These women, who share their own stories of hardship and resilience, create a safe space for Cee to feel less isolated in her struggles. As Cee confronts the past and allows receiving support from the community around her, a shift begins to occur. Morrison utilizes symbolic acts like planting a garden or cleaning the house to represent this transformation. These actions signify that Cee is able to control her life and nurture a sense of hope for the future. Her perspective on her trauma also begins to evolve. While the pain might never fully disappear, she gains a sense of understanding and acceptance of what happened. The degree of integration within a community plays a significant role in the process of recovering from trauma. In the realm of Morrison's literary works, it is evident that the communities formed by women are the most robust and essential. Women serve as custodians of culture, preserving and protecting the African community's ideals via their oral tradition (Visser 158).

Home can be separated from her previous works in its portrayal of being both a trauma narrative and a narrative of healing. While Morrison's earlier novels, such as *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, often depict characters grappling with isolation and internal struggles in the face of trauma, *Home* emphasizes the power of community and external support systems in the healing process. This shift marks a significant departure from the more solitary journeys undertaken by characters in her earlier works:

> *Home* differs from the ambivalent depiction of such communities in previous novels . . . By contrast, the final pages of *Home* speak unreservedly of healing, renewed self-esteem, and the will to move

> forward, qualities that are also foregrounded in the ending of the fairy-tale intertext. It is due to the physical and spiritual aid extended by the women's community that Cee surfaces slowly from melancholia and inertia to reach physical and psychic health, arriving "home" at last. (Visser 159)

In a similar vein, Morrison creates another women's commune in her previous novel *Paradise* (1997), similar to the one in Lotus. The commune is located in a town called Ruby, Oklahoma, named the Convent. The novel is about some African American women gathering through time and finding healing in each other's company. However, as depicted in the beginning of the novel, nine men attack the commune, scaring the women away while firing their guns. Similar to other novels published before the year 2000, this novel presents a gloomy conclusion, as opposed to *Home*, which sparks hope and promise of healing despite obstacles.

In *Home*, Cee's return to Georgia, the place where her traumatic experience occurred, becomes a catalyst for confronting the past. Georgia's history as a Confederate state is a stark reminder of the brutality of slavery and racial violence, which negatively impacts Cee and Frank's lives. They grapple with the lingering effects of that oppression, struggling to build a future within a society still marked by its legacy. The Deep South, often depicted as rural and lacking in resources, symbolizes the limited opportunities available to African American individuals. Cee and Frank find themselves trapped in a cycle of hardship, with few options for advancement or escape. Georgia and Lotus represents a double-edged sword for Cee and Frank, as it is their birthplace, a place that holds the memories of childhood and perhaps a yearning for belonging; yet, it is also a place deeply associated with pain and trauma. This creates a complex relationship with the concept of "home." While there is a desire for connection to their roots, the characters are burdened by the negative experiences they associate with the place.

However, Cee does not battle her demons in isolation since she finds solace and a sense of belonging within the community. She develops a strong bond with Frank, who becomes a constant source of support and the provider of a safe space for her to explore her vulnerabilities. Frank's demeanor shows his genuine interest, as "[h]e listened, not with patience, but with a kind of serene curiosity that made her feel safe" (87). The women in the community—although each has their own hardships—also provide camaraderie. Morrison describes their interactions as "a chorus of women's voices, a

rising, falling sound that seemed to hold here" (112). This sense of connection and belonging fosters a sense of security and reminds Cee that she has a support system while confronting her trauma.

The hopeful undercurrent that permeates *Home* is another element that distinguishes it from some of Morrison's earlier works. While acknowledging the lasting impact of trauma, *Home* injects a sense of hope for the future. Cee's journey is not solely about confronting the darkness of the past; it is also about rebuilding a life and finding a sense of peace. Cee begins to reclaim control of her life and nurture a sense of possibility: "This unmistakably positive tone of the ending of *Home* is remarkable in comparison to Morrison's previous novels, whose endings are generally more ambiguous" (Visser 160). The inclusion of a dedicated male protector figure, Frank, is another aspect that sets *Home* apart from some of Morrison's previous novels. While Morrison's female characters are often portrayed as strong and resilient, Frank's presence adds a new layer to the narrative. His unwavering support allows Cee to feel safe enough to confront her trauma. This focus on the importance of external support systems, coupled with the hopeful tone and emphasis on community, makes *Home* a unique exploration of trauma and healing within the broader context of Morrison's works.

Equipped with the necessary resources and network that Cee has established, she has the resilience to persevere in her pursuit of a more gratifying future. Morrison effectively conveys the idea that recovering from trauma may be a lengthy and challenging journey. However, by demonstrating bravery, receiving assistance, and accepting oneself, it is feasible to progress and welcome a more optimistic future. This focus on healing self-identity rejects the government and socially approved actions (particularly coercive sterilization) that have historically been used to degrade African American lives. If the surgical harm that Cee experiences brings to mind the ethical violations of reproductive racism, then the healing practice advocated at the conclusion of the book serves as a means to counteract these tendencies of control and oppression: "Against the backdrop of this racist power structure, Miss Ethel and the other women around Lotus forge forms of belonging that meld personal and collective responsibility into one. They reject self-reliant individualism and replace it with the communal enterprise of shar[ing] everything" (Gerald 155). The concept of dynamic

interdependency initiates the emergence of opposing health knowledge systems that prioritize providing care and fostering community, rather than focusing solely on clinical management. These systems operate independently from the medicalized spaces that perpetuate the marginalization and suppression of African American individuals. These institutions persistently aim to hinder the well-being and existence of African American people.

Morrison's last novel *God Help the Child* takes place in twenty-first century and revolves around Lula Ann Bridewell, a successful young African American woman also known as Bride. She has achieved a life of luxury, working for a cosmetics company and driving a Jaguar. However, beneath this glamorous exterior lies a deep well of emotional pain stemming from her childhood. Bride's dark skin is a source of tension with her light-skinned parents, particularly her mother Sweetness. Her mother harbors resentment towards Bride, neglecting and even abusing her daughter throughout her childhood. This background has left Bride emotionally scarred and distrustful of intimacy. The novel opens with the sudden departure of Bride's boyfriend, Booker Starbern. His abandonment throws Bride into a tailspin, triggering a series of flashbacks that unveil the emotional neglect and abuse she suffered at the hands of Sweetness. Bride becomes fixated on rescuing Sofia Huxley, a teacher convicted of sexually molesting children years ago when Bride was in second grade. As Bride delves deeper into her past, the narrative shifts perspectives, offering glimpses into the lives of those who have shaped her. Bride's father, Louis, is a man haunted by his own past and unable to accept his own daughter because of her complexion. Through these interwoven narratives, Morrison explores the lasting effects of childhood trauma caused by a mother's internalized racism, neglect and punishment towards her child on an individual's capacity for love and connection. Bride's journey is one of self-discovery, as she grapples with the emotional wounds of her past and attempts to forge a path toward healing and connection.

Morrison's *God Help the Child* delves into the harrowing reality of a traumatic child abuse, exposing its profound and lasting effects on the characters' lives. The novel depicts various forms of this abuse. Bride carries the burden of being neglected and emotionally abused as a child. This traumatic event shapes her perception of intimacy

and self-worth, leaving deep emotional scars. Bride describes purposefully making mistakes as a child to elicit punishment, but emphasizes it had to be "without touching the skin she hated" (23). This suggests an emotional detachment and a desire for some form of attention, even if it's negative. The impact of abuse is not limited to Bride. Booker, her love interest, is haunted by the tragic event related to his brother, Adam, who was sexually assaulted and murdered by a pedophile as a child. This event affects Booker's psyche and fuels his violent tendencies and emotional instability. Morrison masterfully portrays the long-term consequences of child abuse. Bride wrestles with self-loathing and a distorted sense of beauty stemming from her childhood trauma. Booker's life is a chaotic mess of violence and emotional turmoil, directly linked to witnessing his brother's fate. However, amidst the darkness, a flicker of hope emerges in Bride's journey of self-discovery. While the abuse undeniably shapes her, she refuses to be defined by it, seeks solace in her relationships, and attempts to break free from the cycle of violence that has plagued her. Through her struggle, Morrison seems to advocate resilience in the face of trauma.

Morrison has treated the subject of child abuse before in *The Bluest Eye* in which children, Pecola and Frieda, endure different forms of abuse. *God Help the Child*, has a similar theme however "[the novel] is not only about childhood abuse and trauma, but it is also about transformation and healing. Morrison describes the characters' restorative journeys towards redemption" (Lopez Ramírez, "Childhood Cuts Festered" 145). In her last novel, Morrison slightly changed her focus by not only discussing the effects of traumatic experiences but also exploring methods of healing those same traumas.

Morrison has always shown a genuine concern for the well-being and treatment of children, a matter of great significance to her. In her speech, "Remarks Given at Howard University Charter Day Convocation," Morrison says:

> It's important to know that nothing is more important than our children. And if our children don't think they are important to us, if they don't think they are important to themselves, if they don't think they are important to the world, it's because we have not told them. We have not told them that they are our immortality. (Morrison, "Remarks")

Morrison emphasizes the connection between a child's sense of self-worth and their overall development, arguing that when adults fail to instill a sense of value, it damages

their self-esteem and their place in the world. Furthermore, Morrison signifies them as the inheritors of the legacy and the future of society. This powerful example underscores the responsibility adults have to nurture children, which is tied to her childhood memories.

According to Childhelp reports from 2017, child protection organizations annually receive over 3.6 million complaints for child abuse, involving more than 6.6 million children ("Child Abuse Statistics & Facts"). The United States has a notably poor track history compared to other developed countries, with a median of four to seven children experiencing neglect or abuse on a daily basis. Research conducted by David Finkelhor, the Director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, reveals that twenty percent of girls and five percent of boys experience child sexual abuse. Additionally, twenty percent of adult females and five to ten percent of adult men have memories of being sexually assaulted or abused during their childhood (*The National Center for Victims of Crime* 2012). Exposed to such news, in *God Help the Child*, Morrison emphasizes the profound influence of parental dysfunction on children's self-perception and their relationships with the community and society as a whole, shedding light on the many causes of abuse. Sweetness neglects to provide a suitable and nurturing atmosphere for her daughter Lula Ann, as she passes on the disdain she has for her own race to her child. The racially prejudiced culture has a significant and disproportionate influence on her life and parenting. Morrison reflects on Sweetness' apprehension about giving birth to a child with a dark complexion, contemplating the fact that around twenty percent of white people have African ancestry, a consequence of the historical enslavement of African Americans. The secondary hierarchy of racism plays a crucial role in shaping Lula Ann's narrative (Iqbal).

In the novel, internalized racism highlights how societal beauty standards can infiltrate even marginalized groups, creating a hierarchy based on skin tone. While Bride's mother might experience some advantages in a white-dominated society, this "privilege" is limited. Racism remains a stark reality for Bride, and the emphasis on lighter skin inflicts deep psychological wounds. Her self-perception is warped by her mother's constant criticism, fueling self-loathing. Bride tells the story of when she and her mother were close when she was younger and after she falsely testified against her

teacher. She yearns to be close to her mother even if this closeness requires physical infliction of pain:

> As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. (20)

However, Bride is ultimately challenge this colorist ideology. Her creation of a makeup line for all skin tones signifies a rejection of the notion that lighter is better. Morrison portrays the "privilege" of light skin with nuances, revealing it as a double-edged sword that offers some societal benefits but exacts a heavy price on self-esteem and perpetuates internalized racism. Morrison states:

> Distinguishing color—light, black, in between—as the marker for race is really an error: It's socially constructed, it's culturally enforced and it has some advantages for certain people. But this is really skin privilege—the ranking of color in terms of its closeness to white people or white-skinned people and its devaluation according to how dark one is and the impact that has on people who are dedicated to the privileges of certain levels of skin color. ("I Regret Everything")

The novel contains other examples of suffering children due to adults' actions. The molestation and murder of his sibling, Adam, deeply saddens Booker, and his formerly close-knit and joyful family disintegrates as a consequence. Following the death of his brother, Booker's father adamantly abstains from engaging in any musical activities. Overwhelmed by despair, Booker believes that his life is unbearable without Adam's trumpet. Consequently, he requests his father's permission to enroll in trumpet lessons: "Music is one way Booker copes with the trauma that Adam's loss represents in his life. That is why he gets rid of his trumpet at the end of the book when he no longer needs it" (Lopez Ramírez, "Childhood Cuts Festered" 154). Booker's aunt, Queen, also creates situations that cause her children to suffer: "[S]he abandoned some of them [her children] to marry other men. Lots of other men. And she didn't or couldn't take the kids with her. Their fathers made sure of that" (169). Booker asserts that each of Queen's children harbored animosity against her for distinct reasons. Queen, in her youth, mistakenly believes that physical attractiveness is sufficient, but she realizes the

inadequacy of this belief. Unfortunately this realization does not benefit her offspring. She gets married several times and her spouses take custody of all her children after the marriages are dissolved. She is unable to raise any of them beyond the age of twelve. Despite having plenty of children, Queen lives in seclusion in the forest and maintains no intimate connections with them. Her state of isolation in the forest stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical image of women as central figures within the domestic sphere. Her seclusion suggests a rejection of societal expectations and a retreat from the traditional roles of wife and mother.

In California, Bride comes across a foundling infant, Rain. who has been emotionally scarred. Steve and Evelyn, an elderly hippie couple, provide care for Rain who has been a victim of sexual molestation and abuse. Her own mother had sold Rain to other men and she never had the opportunity to meet her father. Rain recalls the painful experience of being severely injured by an elderly guy, resulting in her bleeding. Sexual abuse is abhorrent when perpetrated by someone that the child is familiar with and relies upon, such as close relatives or caretakers. However, it is as despicable when the same individuals condone and permit such behavior. The consequences of long-term child sexual abuse are severe and profound. These include diminished self-esteem, a sense of worthlessness, a distorted perception of sexuality, social withdrawal, feelings of despair, and even suicidal thoughts (Lopez Ramírez, "Childhood Cuts Festered" 158). Relating childhood traumatic experiences with empathetic others may be quite beneficial for healing and coping: "The first successful step of Bride and Booker's resumed relationship as a couple consists of working together to help someone without thinking of themselves. They show unselfish love when they take care of Queen at the hospital" (Lopez Ramírez, "Childhood Cuts Festered" 160). After Bride takes charge of her life, her feminine traits are restored and her genuine transformation can be observed.

In addition, Morrison highlights the significance of "othermothers," referring to women who support biological moms by sharing the tasks of motherhood: "Biological mothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible" (Bell-Scott 47). Therefore, Morrison does not confine the concept of motherhood just to its biological dimension. Surrogate moms

may have a more intimate bond with children compared to their biological mothers. The siblings "returned to their spiritual home under the care of the black sisters. In *God Help the Child*, Booker is able to cope with his painful childhood memory with the help of his aunt who takes care of him. Later, when Booker's aunt was suddenly caught in a fire and her life is threatened, Bride and Booker accompanied her to the end of her life" (Wang 846).

In both *Home* and *God Help the Child*, Morrison highlights the idea of communal child rearing where a larger group rather than a nuclear family shares the responsibility of raising a child. In *God Help the Child*, however, the account of Bride's life is structured as a trauma narrative, wherein a past incident serves as the psychological and narrative pivotal point of reference for comprehending all subsequent occurrences. Bride's trauma narrative seems to be quite uncomplicated: during her childhood, she witnesses Sofia Huxley, her kindergarten teacher, engaging in abusive behavior towards other children and ends up providing the evidence for the grounds of her teacher's persecution. The story starts at the moment when the kindergarten teacher who was charged and found guilty of child molestation, is about to be freed from jail after her fifteen-year term: "This is signaled in the text as the trigger for Bride's identity crisis, which from the psychoanalytical perspective can be read in terms of the return of the repressed, as she associates her visit to Sofia to feelings of guilt, vulnerability and what appears to be a psychosomatic acting out of an actually unresolved trauma, as she seems to be physically returning to prepubescence" (Salván 68). Her repressed memories and emotions surface after her breakup with Booker, which also causes Bride's physical changes, such as her disappearing ear piercings and shrinking of her breasts. This type of transformation is a physical manifestation of unresolved traumas related to her childhood and her recent breakup. Bride's is eventually able to overcome her traumas by sharing her experiences with her friend Brooklyn and her lover Booker.

Morrison reflects on her own endeavors to create literature that avoids perpetuating the stereotype of African American people as solely sexualized, aggressive, or reduced to their inherent instincts in her book *The Origin of Others* (2017). She discusses the phenomenon "color fetish" in which individuals with dark skin are ostracized and

forced to conform to societal expectations based on their skin color. Morrison asserts that:

> The consequences of the color fetish are the theme: it is severely destructive force. […] In *God Help the Child*, color is both a curse and a blessing, a hammer and a golden ring. Although neither, the hammer nor the ring, helped make the character a sympathetic human being. Only caring unselfishly for somebody else would accomplish true maturity. (*Origin* 51)

These remarks sheds light on how Morrison portrays race in *God Help the Child*. Both works explore the damaging effects of internalized racism and colorism. While *The Origin of Others* critiques the stereotypes of aggressive or overly sexualized African Americans, *God Help the Child* focuses on Bride's struggle with her skin color due to societal expectations within the African American community. True maturity, a potential theme in Bride's journey, transcends skin color and arises from genuine care for others. When Bride encounters Rain and takes genuine interest in her well-being, her body changes for the better: "The magical realism in the book is strengthened during these pages as Bride's blackness seems not to matter one way or the other to these educated rural people" (Jensen 40). Bride's body slowly turns into its younger form, healing and recovering from the pain and dishonesty she experienced during her childhood. This transformation is a result of her decision to sacrifice her integrity and lie about the teacher's molestation to gain her mother's approval, affection, and validation, while failing to tell the truth about the boy who was assaulted. The owner of their property sexually assaults the boy as the six-year-old Bride witnesses the act through the window. She refrains from disclosing the incident because she fears retribution from the wrongdoer.

When Bride tells the story of falsely accusing her teacher of being as a molester, Booker reacts and says that she is not the type of woman he desires. As the events progress, Bride's body deteriorates: her piercings close, her breasts shrink and her body hair disappears. Bride visits Sofia bearing a gift basket including beauty items but Sofia justifiably attacks her. The woman's fifteen-year confinement in jail has undoubtedly resulted in a significant accumulation of wrath and resentment. Subsequently, Bride is involved in an accident while she is driving to meet Booker, resulting in the destruction of her costly automobile and the fracturing of her leg. Meanwhile, she safeguards the

little girl, Rain, from harm as locals threaten them with guns. Her innate parental instincts emerge while her physical state continues to decline. Yet, Bride's body is continuously evolving: "I read Bride's body as a symbol of her coming to terms with her past, her present and her future, forgiving herself for her faults and facing up to the ghosts of her childhood" (Jensen 41). Her body serves as a symbol of her resurfacing childhood trauma, as the novel touches upon "psychosomatic acting out," suggesting that these changes are physical manifestations of Bride's internal turmoil.

These physical changes can also be interpreted as a form of regression, which could symbolize a retreat from her current identity, a way of coping with her overwhelming emotions. It represents a state of vulnerability or a desire to escape the pain by returning to a time before the trauma occurred. The loss of physical maturity and acquiring unfeminine characteristics could reflect a desire to escape the burdens and complexities of adulthood and return to a time when she felt more powerless and exposed. From another vantage point, the changes in Bride's body can be seen as a representation of losing control. As a child, Bride could not control the abuse she witnessed. The physical transformations could reflect a similar sense of powerlessness in the face of resurfacing trauma. Her body is rebelling, perhaps mirroring the way she felt as a child when she could not control her situation. The significance of these physical changes is multifaceted. Firstly, they emphasize the severity of Bride's trauma. It is not merely a memory; it is deeply embedded in her psyche and continues to affect her physical well-being. Secondly, the bodily changes highlight the internal conflict Bride faces. She is trying to move forward with her life, but the traumatic events she witnessed and endured keep pulling her back. These physical manifestations serve as a constant reminder of the past and the work she needs to do to heal. Finally, these changes could be a sign that Bride needs to address her trauma directly. Facing the past and seeking help could be the key to regain control of her life and body. By acknowledging and processing the trauma, Bride might be able to break free from its physical and emotional grip.

Bride's mother, Sweetness insists on refraining from physical contact, and continuously undermines the perception of loving and compassionate parenting. Similarly, Sweetness portrays her father as detached, resulting in his treatment of her as a stranger. It is

important "for the development of the character and her reinscription of her body in a scopophilic logic where the visual, rather than the tactile, is the dominant form of relation" (Salván 610). The significance lies in Sweetness' decision to choose the name "Bride," given the cultural connotations associated with this word in patriarchal societies. Regarding the transition from younger years to becoming a "woman", Bride symbolizes a state of being at the threshold. In *God Help the Child*, the signifier "bride" indicates not the passage from protected to exposed sexuality, but rather the moment when such sexuality has become inscribed within the institutional framework of marriage (Salván 612). This is especially pertinent in a story that centers on the topic of child abuse. Bride, who is purportedly a survivor of abuse, reemerges as a bride, dressed entirely in white, appearing as a stereotypically "innocent bride" towards the end of the novel. This becomes particularly complex when considering Bride's past trauma. Lula Ann, the child survivor, transforms into Bride, the embodiment of a sanitized sexuality. The juxtaposition between Bride's internal regression and her outward performance as a successful, hyper-feminine woman creates a powerful tension, highlighting the complexities of navigating womanhood, sexuality, and trauma.

In her transformation from a rejected girl to a wanted woman, Jeri, Bride's companion and counselor, presents Bride as being a part of "consumer cannibalism" (hooks, *Black* 31). The rationale of Jeri's ideas may be elucidated in relation to "the commodification of Otherness" (hooks, *Black* 21). The readiness to defy racial barriers in the context of sexual encounters serves as a means to challenge the security of a rigid, uniform sense of self. Bride acknowledges her commodification by the beauty industry when she remarks on the responses of others around her. By defying traditional racial boundaries in the realm of sexuality, Jeri attempts to disrupt established power structures and challenge the idea of a singular, homogenous identity. Bride herself seems to be aware of this dynamic, acknowledging the reactions she provokes in others. Perhaps she recognizes the potential manipulation inherent in Jeri's approach, adding another layer of complexity to Bride's internal struggle. Furthermore "Booker's words to Bride upon leaving her, put into question her whole female identity, in much the same way as Jadine's is by Son in *Tar Baby*" (Salván 614). In both instances masculine characters are attempting to enforce their perspectives on the construction of African American female identities. However, while Jadine in *Tar Baby* ultimately escapes from these

constraints, which are manifested in Son's physical abuse towards her, Bride appears to wholeheartedly accept them by assuming the role of Booker's and by becoming the prospective mother of his child.

Bride's sense of self is restored as her connection with Booker is mended, and her return to a childlike state is reversed. The inclusion of Bride's pregnancy adds another layer to the exploration of her maturity. Traditionally, female maturity is often linked solely to reproduction. Here, the pregnancy could be interpreted as a sign of Bride taking responsibility for her own body and choices, a key aspect of maturing. However, it's important to consider that the novel is challenging this very definition. The pregnancy represents a shift in focus from a purely physical transformation to a more emotional and psychological one. It could symbolize Bride's willingness to create a connection and take on the responsibility of parenthood, showcasing a different dimension of maturity beyond just reproduction. Ultimately, Bride's journey highlights the complexity of achieving "female maturity." This is not a fixed destination but rather a process influenced by overcoming trauma, building meaningful connections, and experiencing personal growth. The novel does not offer a definitive answer on whether the pregnancy signifies complete maturity. The focus on "female maturity" could also be seen as a societal expectation that Bride is trying to break free from. True maturity, in the context of the novel, comes from self-acceptance and emotional well-being, not just fulfilling traditional roles. By combining Bride's emotional healing, the reversal of the regression, and the pregnancy, the novel suggests a path towards a more holistic understanding of female maturity. It is a journey that takes into account emotional connection, self-discovery, and the potential for nurturing which does not rely on conventional definitions. By presenting her maturity with physical attributes, "Morrison shows the unsustainability of this constant consumption in a magical realist breakdown of Bride's body" (Sullivan 14).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's yearning for blue eyes symbolizes the internalized racism that distorts her perception of her own beauty. Pecola's body reflects the internal struggle between her true features and the white beauty standard she desperately wants to embody. Similarly, Bride's physical regression symbolizes how trauma distorts her sense of self, showcasing the effort it takes to reclaim control over

her own body and identity: “In this way, Lula Ann Bridewell and Pecola Breedlove are peers: both struggle for the language to articulate the effects that racism, colorism, bodily commodification, and sexual abuse have had on them, and both experience narrative and bodily undoing as a symptom of social violence” (Sullivan 14). However, similar to Morrison’s earlier novels, in the *Bluest Eye*, Pecola’s path is tragically unfulfilled. The societal pressures and internalized racism are overwhelming. Pecola retreats into a fantasy world, ultimately descending into madness. There is no real agency in her pursuit of healing, and the external forces are too powerful to overcome. Conversely, *God Help the Child* offers a glimmer of hope. Bride’s trauma resurfaces, but she has her support systems in friends and a potential romantic connection with Booker. While the path is challenging, the possibility of emotional vulnerability and reconnection suggests a potential for healing through human connection and self-discovery.

Tar Baby and *God Help the Child* explore the similar construction of African American female identity, and the characters, Jadine and Bride, grapple with distinct challenges. Both women wrestle with internal conflicts. Jadine, raised on a small island, feels out of place in the wealthy white world, while Bride confronts colorism within the African American community. This struggle for self-definition is central to their journeys. Jadine strives to carve her own path beyond societal expectations, and Bride fights to reclaim her sense of self after her childhood trauma. The weight of the past looms large for both characters. Jadine’s island upbringing shapes but limits her, while Bride’s trauma defines her self-perception. However, Bride’s and Jadine’s way of coping is very different, as “Jadine eventually refuses to become a figure of femininity as offered to her by Son and her aunt Ondine, and returns to Paris to pursue her personal, individualistic goals. Bride, on the other hand, has a similar encounter with an older female figure, Queen, that will reconcile her with her own womanhood, and with Booker” (Salván 621). This statement implies that Bride finds solace and restoration inside her own cultural and societal context, whereas Jadine seeks it elsewhere. Morrison’s pre-2000 novels ultimately withhold a sense of complete closure. This focus on the ongoing challenges faced by African American women in constructing their identities and achieving wholeness aligns with the themes explored in many of Morrison’s earlier works. The earlier novels showcase resilience in the face of

adversity, but the endings leave room for further exploration and the ever-present influence of the past.

In *God Help the Child*, the interplay of gender and race relations creates a complex web of challenges for the characters, particularly the protagonist Bride. Her experiences highlight how societal limitations and past traumas intertwine, shaping her sense of self and her ability to connect with others. Race plays a significant role in defining Bride's reality. As an African American woman in an unspecified urban setting, the pervasive prejudice contributes to a sense of isolation and alienation, limiting her sense of belonging within the larger society. Bride's struggles, which are influenced by societal preferences for lighter skin, add another layer of complexity to her experience of race and identity. Distorted gender roles further impact Bride's journey. The trauma of witnessing the sexual abuse of a young boy, accusing the teacher for abusing her, and meeting a sexually assaulted child shape her relationships with men: "the effects of child sexual abuse resonate throughout families, precipitating other forms of violence, rupture, and fragmentation, which demonstrate the inseparability of racialized, sexualized, and gendered social structures and bodily aggressions" (Sullivan 14). Bride guards herself against intimacy and vulnerability, creating a barrier to forming healthy connections. Additionally, the novel lacks a strong portrayal of female solidarity. Bride's interactions with other women are often fleeting, and the absence of a nurturing female support system reinforces her sense of isolation and highlights the limitations placed on women within this society. Although Brooklyn is her friend, they do not go as far as sharing their problems and trying to resolve them. For the most part of the novel, especially in her journey to finding Booker, Bride is alone. She seems to be close to Brooklyn at the beginning of the novel and reconciles with Booker and other African American characters at the end, but throughout her journey Bride is taking actions on her own.

However, the impact of race and gender is not solely negative. Bride's vulnerability to exploitation, a reality for many African American women due to the intersection of racial and gender inequalities, is brought to light by her experiences. In this context, racism operates not by directly excluding blackness from the domain of aesthetics, but by associating it with gendered and sexualized systems of objectification that are as

repressive and degrading. In this way, "the desiring gazes Bride's blackness attract fail to bring her intimacy or affirm her humanity. Instead, her blackness makes her an enviable commodity, positioning and distinguishing her among the 'young and eatable' bodies of the world of fashion and beauty she moves in" (Sullivan 14). Despite the objectification and isolation she experiences, Bride's yearning for connection is evident. The potential for healthier relationships with Booker and Queen suggests a desire for intimacy and a sense of belonging. Both characters act as potential counterpoints to the negative dynamics Bride encounters. Booker, for example, offers a glimpse of hope for a relationship built on trust and respect. This connection is a step towards dismantling the negative gender dynamics that have shaped Bride's life. Similarly, Queen, Booker's aunt, represents the possibility of positive female mentorship. Through this connection, Bride finds the guidance and acceptance she craves, fostering a sense of self-worth and belonging within a female community: "In Bride's story, Morrison offers a quest for love and intimacy that is also quest for bodily healing—a suturing of wounds both physical and psychic that can address histories of violence, hatred, alienation, and rage" (Sullivan 14). This supportive connection could foster a sense of self-worth and belonging, potentially leading to a more holistic healing process for Bride.

Morrison consistently challenges the Eurocentric notion of race as a biological imperative throughout her literary career. Her work argues that race, rather than being a fixed and inherent category, is a social construct shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. Bride grapples with a society that devalues African American features and enforces beauty standards that exclude them. Their experiences highlight how societal perceptions, not biology, determine an individual's place within the racial hierarchy. Morrison further deconstructs race by depicting the fluidity of racial categorization, particularly in contrast to the historical "one-drop rule." This rule dictated that anyone with even a single drop of "African blood" was considered African American. Bride's struggles with societal beauty standards and her own internalized racism highlight how social perception, not a single drop of ancestry, determines an individual's place within the racial hierarchy. Her character challenges this rigid categorization and demonstrates the constructed nature of race. The consequences of this social construction are recurring themes in Morrison's work. Her characters experience marginalization, oppression, and alienation due to their perceived race. They

navigate in a world where racial categories dictate opportunities, social interactions, and even self-perception. This focus on the social construction of race underscores the ongoing struggle for racial equality and the need to dismantle a system that disadvantages people based on arbitrary classifications. In an interview with Charlie Rose in 2015, Morrison states: "Color is a substitute for racism. Race is just human beings. There are privileges to certain kinds of colour. These are social constructs" (Rose). Furthermore, as her mouthpiece, Booker carries the same sentiments as Morrison, regarding race:

> Complaining about her mother, she told him that Sweetness hated her for her black skin. "It's just a color," Booker had said. "A genetic trait—not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin." "But," she countered, "other people think racial—" Booker cut her off. "Scientifically there's no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught, of course, by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it." (73)

A contemporary to Morrison, hooks also argues that there is a prevailing worry that African American individuals in America now seem to possess more freedom compared to their ancestors, but they tend to have much lower self-esteem, particularly in comparison to previous generations (*Rock* 19). hooks posits that racism and the internalization of racial shame have undermined the self-esteem of African American individuals, particularly women, impacting both their self-perception and how society perceives them. In her work *Black Feminist Theory* (2002), Patricia Hill Collins elucidates the persistence of derogatory depictions targeting African American women: "As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols or creating new ones" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 69).Therefore, the portrayal of African American women in a bad light is a result of systemic racism and has promoted certain belief systems "such as racist shaming and colourism to become societal norms" (Thompson 5).

In *God Help the Child*, the exploration of gender relations sheds light on the complex dynamics of community building. While the novel does not depict a traditional, well-

established community, it reveals how distorted gender expectations and past traumas can significantly hinder the formation of healthy connections. Bride embodies the isolating effects of these distortions. The trauma of witnessing childhood sexual abuse makes her wary of intimacy and vulnerability, especially with men. This emotional armor prevents her from forming trusting relationships, leaving her isolated and disconnected from the possibility of true connection within the community. Furthermore, although Bride has some friends such as Brooklyn and his boyfriend Booker to lean on at times, her support circle is not emphasized as much as it is in *Home*, where the community is essential to the healing process. The scarcity of a safe space for women to connect creates a void within the community, highlighting the importance of female bonds in fostering a sense of belonging. However, despite the bleak landscape, *God Help the Child* offers glimpses of hope for community building through healthier gender relations. Booker embodies this possibility as his patience and genuine interest in Bride suggest the potential for a relationship built on trust and emotional support. Such a connection serves as a stepping-stone towards a more connected community, where healthy intimacy contributes to a sense of belonging and security.

The encounter with Queen offers another ray of hope. Queen's acceptance and guidance nurtures Bride's journey of self-discovery. Through this mentorship, Bride might navigate womanhood on her own terms, fostering a stronger sense of self-worth and connection within the community. It is important to note that Bride's journey of self-discovery, although solitary at times, represents a crucial first step. By confronting her trauma and reclaiming her agency, she becomes more open to forming healthier relationships in the future. This personal growth lays the foundation for fostering trust and ultimately building a more robust and supportive community. The novel portrays the devastating effects of past trauma and distorted expectations, yet it also offers glimpses of hope for healing and connection. The potential for healthy relationships with Booker and Queen suggests that individual journeys of self-discovery are vital precursors to building a more positive and supportive community in the future.

Morrison's last two novels, *Home* and *God Help the Child*, delve into the complexities of gender relations and their influence on the health of communities. However, despite

this shared theme, the novels present contrasting perspectives on the role healthy gender dynamics in fostering thriving communities. Both narratives recognize the importance of female connection in cultivating a sense of belonging and support. In *Home*, Cee's return to her childhood home allows her to reconnect with other women. These connections offer a vital support system and a sense of belonging within the community. Conversely, *God Help the Child* offers protagonists finding comfort in unfamiliar others of the same ethnicity, but not in familial connections. Bride's isolation from her family and the absence of a mother highlights the critical role such connections play in building a sense of community.

The novels explore the challenges and triumphs of establishing healthy relationships within African American communities. While hardship impacts these characters' lives, both narratives ultimately depict the potential for healing and connection fostered by strong male and female bonds. In *Home*, Cee and Frank Money's relationship embodies the healing power of sibling love within the African American community. Cee's return home awakens deep-seated pain from her childhood, yet the female community and Frank's unwavering presence offers a safe space for confronting these traumas. Their relationship is not without conflict, but their shared history and understanding of the hardships they have endured create a foundation for forgiveness and support. This dynamic reinforces the idea that African American communities can provide a unique space for healing through strong familial bonds. Similarly, *God Help the Child* offers a glimpse of hope for healthy romantic relationships. Bride, scarred by past experiences of abuse and isolation, initially struggles to trust or connect with men. However, her interaction with Booker hints at the possibility of a relationship built on mutual respect and emotional vulnerability. The significance of these dynamics lies in the way they contribute to the well-being of the community. Strong male and female relationships, whether familial or romantic, provide crucial support systems. The novels do not portray these relationships as effortless endeavors. Past traumas and societal pressures present obstacles. However, the novels ultimately highlight the resilience and strength found within African American communities. By confronting their pain and working towards healthy connections, the characters in these novels pave the way for a future where thriving relationships within the community can flourish.

While both novels explore the significance of healing journeys for fostering healthier relationships, they differ in the extent to which this goal is achieved. In *Home*, Cee's confrontation with her past traumas allows her to move towards a future with more positive connections. Here, healing serves as a prerequisite for creating a more robust community. Similarly, Bride's journey of self-discovery in *God Help the Child* lays the groundwork for potentially healthier relationships in the future. In conclusion, *Home* and *God Help the Child* acknowledge the critical role of positive gender relations in building thriving communities. While *Home* suggests that these connections are possible and offer a glimmer of hope for a stronger community, *God Help the Child* focuses on the hurdles in establishing them within a fractured world. Ultimately, both novels leave the reader pondering on the path towards creating a community where healthy and supportive relationships between men and women contribute to its overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how Toni Morrison's last four novels—*Love*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, and *God Help the Child*—focus on building and maintaining communities. In these novels, Morrison's exploration of the importance of solidarity in resolving conflicts marks a significant change compared to her previous novels. For African Americans, as is the case of other oppressed groups, forming interpersonal relationships within the community can be difficult in a dominantly white patriarchal society. The characters of color in the Morrison's novels face the oppressive white system and a number of challenges occur in their search for a fulfilled life. Morrison's African American characters are burdened with traumas of the past that often restrict them or render them powerless. Yet, they can be redeemed and find a peaceful existence if they become aware of the healing potential of their homosocial and heterosexual relationships and acquire a cultural awareness in acknowledging their indispensible role in the community they inhabit. Morrison invites readers to be aware of diverse communities and emphasizes the importance of relationships and support between friends, siblings, and couples. She longs for an equal and inclusive community that values multiplicity among its members and promotes healthy connections.

In her novels and critical essays, Morrison frequently examines the dynamics between African American men and women as well as the relationship between race and gender. Her novels scrutinize how African American men and women interact with differing levels of power. When racism and sexism coexist, relationships become unhealthy, and the possibilities to improve or remedy the situation are limited due to historical and cultural pressures. This intersection of gender and race is the major significant theme in Morrison's works. Her female characters frequently deal with racism and sexism at the same time, which is a "double burden" when compared to white women's problems. Morrison tries to move beyond stereotypes based on gender and race; instead, she embraces diversity and sheds light on the realities that African American men and women face by providing the readers with an understanding of their struggles.

Toni Morrison offers a framework for examining literary works from an African American viewpoint in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary*

Imagination. Her approach reveals the methods of how publications by white authors strategically construct Africanist presence in American history for ideological purposes, namely, to belittle and marginalize people of color. Morrison employs the term "Africanist" to denote the implied African American identity that African individuals have come to symbolize, as well as the complete range of viewpoints, assumptions, interpretations, and misunderstandings that accompany the study of African Americans from a Eurocentric standpoint. She posits that white authors project their own worries, desires, ambitions, and internal struggles onto African Americans. Her examination of Africanism in literature prompts significant inquiries about the interpretation of history and the influence of race on the formation of cultural identity. She invites readers to critically examine the underlying prejudices and preconceptions present in conventional methods of literary analysis. This pushes readers to reassess their comprehension of the established literary canon and to acknowledge the viewpoints and experiences of oppressed individuals. By doing this, she promotes a thorough approach to literary analysis that recognizes the issues of race and identity and seeks to understand the entire range of experiences and points of view that shape contemporary American culture.

This first chapter of this study examined Morrison's novels *Love* and *A Mercy*. The examination concentrated on the character's experiences, which are impacted by the consequences of slavery and the significant outcomes of institutionalized racism. These novels show the negative effects of racial discrimination as well as how cultural preconceptions can change the viewpoints and self-perceptions of the female protagonists, Christine and Heed from *Love* and Florens from *A Mercy*. The narratives depict the multifaceted interpersonal interactions in communities, highlighting the difficulties of forging meaningful bonds when confronted with injustice in society. W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," which studies how African Americans attempt to define their identities while struggling with their shared past is embodied by the characters in these novels. Their internal problems and other people's perspectives work as a mirror of the actual nature of dominant white American culture. These novels center on the themes of survival and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. In her works, Morrison explores the lasting effects of slavery, both before and after it was abolished. She illustrates the difficulties of creating one's identity, the capacity to endure hardships and recover from it, and the necessity of communities in a

culture where structural racism is the norm. The stories explore the characters' attempts to overcome their personal traumas and build relationships. Complex relationships, power struggles, and the obstacles they encounter in the search of their identity present diffuculties in their efforts to form strong communities. The story of the female characters in particular highlights the severe effects of systematic oppression on homosocial relationships. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing and eliminating these establishments to create healthy communities that support the prosperity of African Americans.

Love presents Heed and Christine as rivals while displaying their affection for one another as young girls. This contrast draws attention to the later failure in bonding and the total breakdown of a relationship between the two women due to the actions of their own family members who should be offering solace and protection in the first place. The girls are forced to mature too soon, which eventually keep them from developing their own sense of self and healing from the traumas they experienced as children. Ultimately, their inability to be honest with one another, which results from their guilt and the sexualization of their bodies, keeps them from reconciling and, eventually, forming a community. Bill Cosey plays the major role in the destruction of this friendship by marrying Heed and isolating Christine. Cosey's typical patriarchal behavior ensures that the system continues to work in favor of men and oppresses women. Similarly, the relationship between Florens and the blacksmith in *A Mercy* illustrates the challenges faced by individuals while trying to heal from past traumas and creating a community based on solidarity. Although the blacksmith is presented as a healer in the novel, he cannot continue his relationship with Florens since she cannot accept an inclusive love due to her lack of support in her upbringing. Each character carries the burden of their past traumas, and their attempts to find solace in the other person fails. Even though they might produce a sincere bond initially, their past emotional traumas are too deeply ingrained to be completely healed. Eventually, these traumas get in the way of forming a successful, mutually healing relationship.

This study examined the impact of racism on the novels' characters and its influences on their life. The novels showed the repercussions of institutionalized racism as well as the impact of slavery. Characters—women in particular—fight the effects of racial

prejudice, which distorts their opinions of themselves and limits their capacity to reach their full potential. The main characters navigate their life while carrying the cultural responsibilities imposed upon them as African Americans. Their inner conflict hinders their development and self-awareness even more. The disrupted homosocial and heterosexual relationships show how systematic oppression shatters bonds among communities. When characters are struggling with social barriers, it becomes difficult to build trust and encourage intimacy. The analysis of the inner tensions and how others view the characters reflects the social gaps and challenges that African Americans face. This phenomenon underscores the difficulties of establishing authentic relationships in a society that is racially segregated in practice, if not legally.

These novels demonstrates a significant transition from a narrative method that mostly focuses on individuals to the one that is centered on the importance of communities, although becoming part of a nourishing community may depend on the character's circumstances and ability. Morrison's progression in her storytelling provides the readers with a more intimate and comprehensive examination of the personal challenges, victories, and intricacies of her characters. Her later works demonstrate a notable advancement in her writing career, highlighting her flexibility as a writer and her skill in adjusting her narratives to explore new themes. Morrison's research attempts to reorient attention from the analysis of racial objects to that of racial subjects:

> It seeks to move from analyzing the described and imagined to studying the individuals who do the describing and imagining. Additionally, it aims to move away from the perspective of those who are being served to understanding those who are doing the serving. (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 90)

Morrison's shift in focus towards more community-based stories enables her to delve into the depths of the characters' interpersonal relationships, uncovering the profound psychological and emotional impacts of racialization, gender, and social constraints.

The second chapter of this thesis examined Morrison's last novels, *Home* and *God Help the Child*, in terms of their exploration of the intricacies of gender relations and their impact on the well-being of the community. Nevertheless, despite this common topic, the works provide divergent viewpoints on the significance of gender dynamics in promoting thriving communities. Both novels recognize the need of female connection

in creating a feeling of support and belonging. In *Home*, Cee is able to reconnect with her brother Frank Money, and other women in her hometown after returning. These relationships provide her with a sense of belonging in the community and a feeling of vital support. Instead of relying on her own family, the main character of *God Help the Child*, Bride, looks for comfort in a romantic relationship, as well as other women of her race. Bride's mother's detachment and her isolation from her family highlight the importance of connections in creating a community.

Both novels explore the challenges and triumphs of building positive relationships in African American communities in detail. The plots eventually demonstrate how strong connections can repair social ties, even if the characters encounter obstacles. In *Home*, the relationship between Cee and Frank Money is a prime example of the healing power of sibling love in African American culture. When Cee returns home, her long-standing emotional struggle from her early years surface. However, Frank's support and the presence of the female community in Lotus offer a safe space in which Cee can confront and make peace with her traumatic memories. Their sibling relationship may not be free of conflicts, but their shared past and understanding of the challenges they have encountered serve as a foundation for understanding and support. This phenomenon confirms that African American communities, with community-based foundations, have the ability to offer a unique setting for healing. Likewise, *God Help the Child* offers hope for a committed love relationship. Bride, who has been profoundly impacted by past abuse and social isolation, finds it hard to trust or connect with other African Americans. Yet, her relationship with Booker demonstrates the potential of forming a healthy connection based on mutual admiration and emotional vulnerability. The need for such relationships is critical since it leads to the well-being of the community at large. Healthy male and female relationships, among the family members or in romantic liaisons, are vital for the order of society. In the presented works, the partnerships are not depicted as easy to maintain. The struggles they encounter in the process are due to the past traumatic experiences and complicated social expectations. The works, in the end, display the strength and perseverance typical for African American communities. The female characters demonstrate that healthy relationships can bloom in the community if people are willing to face their traumas and grievances and search for human connections with genuine effort.

Both novels explore the value of healing journeys in fostering better relationships. Through her interaction with her past tragedies, Cee moves closer to a future marked by fulfilling and happy relationships. In this situation, building a stronger and more resilient community depends on the healing process. Similarly, Bride's self-exploration process lays the groundwork for the future for stronger relationships. Ultimately, both *Home* and *God Help the Child* explain the importance of healthy gender dynamics in creating thriving communities. *Home* suggests that these relationships are possible and offer hope for a more unified society and *God Help the Child* highlights the difficulties in creating such connections in a racist society. *Home* stands out from some of Morrison's earlier works also because of its optimistic undertone. Although feelings of sorrow have an impact on the character; *Home* inspires a hope for the future. *God Help the Child* also offers a hint of optimism. Bride has flashbacks related to her trauma, but her friendships and romantic relationship with Booker act as support systems although she is portrayed as being on her own. Despite the challenging path, the possibility of emotional transparency and reconnecting with others suggests a chance for self-discovery and recovery through her interactions. In the end, both narratives promote the virtues of belonging to a community where strong and supportive relationships between men and women are crucial to the well-being of the individuals.

Morrison's later novels examine the nature of racialized gender relationships in assisting the formation of communities. The idea of intersectionality, which deals with the interdependence of social identities including sexuality, gender, class, and race, provides a tool in assessing the challenges encountered by the characters. The intersectional paradigm is applied to the study of how gender and race interact to shape the experiences African American men and women in these novels. African American men and women experience different kinds of prejudice and oppression, which affects their ability to work together and form healthy interpersonal relationships that benefit the community. This study concentrated on how white dominant standards affected African American communities, especially in the context of their interpersonal relationships. Additionally, Morrison's evolving perspective on redefining and relocating power, gender, and race in contemporary African American communities was examined. Community building and solidarity and the characters' connection to the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality were among the major preoccupations in

her later novels. Morrison's complex portrayals of the African American experience can certainly lead to a more in-depth discussion of the prejudiced and narrow-minded viewpoints prevalent in the society and foster appreciation for the maintenance of strong and nurturing African American communities.

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