Gender melancholia, humanity and authentic selves: an analysis of the disruptive power of women's relationships in Passing, Jazz and Sula

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May 2006
Gender Melancholia, Humanity and Authentic Selves: An Analysis of the Disruptive Power of Women's Relationships in *Passing, Jazz* and *Sula*.

by

Karen B. Manahan

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
Of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in
The English Department

Lehigh University

4/28/2006
This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science (or Arts)

Date

Thesis Adviser

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family for their continued support. In particular, I would like to express my extreme gratitude to my mother, Kathleen, and my father, Thomas for reminding me that help of all kinds has always been only a phone call away. I would also like to thank my brothers, Sean and Matt, for teaching me to be brave and above all, to ask questions.

I would also like to thank Brian Haveri for being my constant support throughout my time at Lehigh University and in particular during this process. Nobody edits or provides insight and clarity quite like an accounting major.

I would also like to thank Prof. Dawn Keetley for her guidance throughout this process.

Finally, I would like to thank the entire English Department Faculty and Staff for their assistance and support throughout my time here at Lehigh University.
Abstract

Beginning with Judith Butler's theory of gender melancholia and coupled with her
discussion of illegibility, this thesis explores the effects of grief that cannot be socially
expressed on identity. Broadening Butler's argument, it argues that cultural
prescriptions involving race, class and gender can create environments where false
identities are created as a means of remaining legible or within the normative
structures. These false identities are sometimes created with varying levels of
consciousness of the social forces that demand them. Looking at Nella Larsen's
Passing and Toni Morrison's Jazz and Sula, it seems that with varying levels of
success, women's relationships with one another can break these false identities and
help to create authentic identities by creating an environment that fosters honesty and
communication.
The fundamental nature of grief allows for an acknowledgement that a person or a relationship was not only alive in either the physical or figurative sense but also real. Grief becomes a physical and often public expression of loss that essentially recognizes the importance of a person or object. However, one’s ability to grieve the loss of a loved person or object that is not considered socially acceptable or appropriate becomes much less clear and much more difficult. In some cases, the lost object cannot even be acknowledged by the mourner until the true relationship or importance of that person or object is recognized. In her article “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Heterosexual Matrix” Judith Butler uses Sigmund Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia as a basis for arguing that rather than a primary incest taboo, a homosexual taboo creates the first defining loss that enables gender identity formation. This socially produced loss of a mode of desire then creates masculine and feminine identities. Extending this argument in her article “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” Butler suggests that the rejection of certain love relationships such as those of gays and lesbians, creates an inability to properly grieve for that which society tells us is unrecognizable. This refusal to recognize love or a love relationship then becomes synonymous with a denial of one’s “access to the human” (30).

Butler works from Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” to “The Ego and the Id,” focusing on Freud’s change from seeing melancholia as pathological to melancholia as the fundamental determining factor of identity. Working through Freud’s Oedipal theory, Butler argues that rather than the incest taboo delineating who
we can desire and love, it becomes clear that without the homosexual taboo as prior to it, Freud's argument cannot stand on its own without assuming opposite sex desire.

After highlighting Freud’s superficial discussion of a primary bisexuality, it becomes clear to Butler that: “within Freud’s thesis of primary bisexuality, there is no homosexuality, and only opposites attract” (63). However, Butler disagrees. Butler’s description of the homosexual taboo and its relation to identity formation works in much the same way as Freud’s Oedipal theory. For Freud a young boy has a heterosexual desire for his mother but must let go of this desire and in doing so he identifies with the father. In this way, the incest taboo helps to create the boy’s “masculinity” by eventually aligning him with the father. As Butler sums up, in the case of a prohibited heterosexual union:

it is the object which is denied, but not the modality of desire, so that the desire is reflected from that object onto other objects of the opposite sex. But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. (59)

What Butler is suggesting then, is that rather than a boy simply desiring his mother he has also desired his father. And, not only has his father been denied to him as an object of love but prior to this, the mode of desire, or homosexual desire, has been denied to him as well. In our culture then:

it is not primarily the heterosexual lust for the mother that must be punished and sublimated, but the homosexual cathexis that must be subordinated to a culturally sanctioned heterosexuality. (59)

Using this as the foundation for identity formation, Butler suggests that our melancholic gender and our melancholic homosexual desire cause us to manifest our
loss as our "femininity" or "masculinity." Since men can still love women, though not their mother but cannot love men or their father the process of melancholia takes place both for the object, in other words the father, and the mode of desire. Men then subsume this melancholia and manifest this denial of desire as their gender:

Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identifications is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire. (63)

Using the prohibited object as an example and a prohibition, Butler suggests the "masculine" and "feminine" dispositions are reinforced and therefore so is heterosexual desire. Focusing on these internalizing strategies of melancholia, it becomes evident that our melancholic grieving is in fact made visible through our culturally expressed masculinity or femininity. Despite the fact that Freud naturalizes these masculine and feminine "dispositions," for Butler, these "are not the primary sexual facts of the psyche, but produced effects of a law imposed by culture and by the complicitous and transvaluating acts of the ego ideal"(64). Further, Butler argues that the more one manifests "masculinity" or "femininity" as a natural disposition the less grieving has been done for this primary loss.

Although there appear to be many problems with this as an origin theory, namely the inconsistent historical presence of the homosexual taboo, I would like to discuss how this theory, if looked at as functioning within our modern society, relates to the creation of gender, race and class identity. Rather than suggest as Butler appears to, that this is an unconscious process which is identical for everyone, it seems more
helpful to simply explore melancholic grief that stems from social restrictions and how this grief manifests itself. As a way of explanation for the potential problems in her theory in *Undoing Gender* Butler says, "we come into the world on the condition that the social world is already there, laying the groundwork for us" (32). In this sense, Butler is suggesting that despite the changing norms or ways of life, there is a set way that the social world functions and currently, as Butler sees it, these norms appear to include a homosexual taboo. Furthermore, it can be and has been argued that taboos involving race and class can create similar situations of repressed grief, falsity of self, or misrecognition. By further troubling identity formation as seen through the homosexual taboo by examining intersections of race and class, I hope to examine the ways in which these social restrictions and denials lead to an identity that makes one "real" and "legible" to society as a whole, but also an identity that lacks authenticity.

Having created a foundation for identity formation, Butler outlines our society as being made up of individuals who are unalterably dependent on one another. Within this society are certain norms or rules that guide individuals not only towards specific desire but also towards a particular definition of humanity. She extends her argument to explain the ways in which this is evident within our culture in terms broad enough to encompass marginal groups in general. For example, the sexual rights of the gay and lesbian community are not seen as the same as of the heterosexual community. However, the identities of both groups are, “physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another” (22). Butler claims then that specifically the oppression of certain groups by others, though horrible, contributes in a backwards
way to the humanization of that group by forcing a social recognition of its existence (30-1). Despite the clearly negative effects of oppression and violent persecution, Butler seems to suggest that there is a worse alternative. For Butler:

To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human. (30)

In this sense, there are those who are completely unrecognizable to society, who speak the “language” of the human but cannot be identified or assimilated. And, as Butler says, “violence against those who are already not quite lives, who are living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark” (Gender 25). This violence then seems to provide a physical and mental way for those who fear the unrecognizable to erase the legibility that was previously created for any particular minority group and reinforce the ‘rules’ that apply to the majority of society. In Butler’s words this violence, “emerges from a profound desire to keep the order of binary gender natural or necessary, to make of it a structure, either natural, cultural, or both, that no human can oppose, and still remain human” (35). Besides a binary gender structure, it is easy to see how a profound desire for class or race structures can also create these situations of violence. This structure, which denies legibility to certain groups or modes of desire, creates an inhuman space which is not a recognizable and functioning space. And, as Butler explains, this space cannot be comfortably confronted without challenging legibility itself:

In confronting the unspeakable...are we confronting a socially instituted foreclosure of the intelligible, a socially instituted melancholia in which the
unintelligible life emerges in language as a living body might be interred into a tomb? (Antigone’s Claim 81)

For Butler then, it seems likely that in order to remain “human” one’s grief for something unrecognizable could easily have to be displaced or misrecognized. Displaced or misrecognized grief then manifests itself as culturally prescribed gender, race and class roles. These roles are identifications, ways in which groups of people can be classified and understood by society as a whole.

With this in mind, I would like to discuss the working through and recognition of this grief in violent and non-violent ways, and the use of female relationships to do so, within three specific novels involving African Americans in the early to mid 20s: Passing, Jazz and Sula. In each text I will explore the problem of a false but socially legible self or life which is produced by a society that renders certain marginal selves and lives, in part, illegible or inhuman. While it is possible to construct a life that is legible, the consequences of ignoring one’s grief or refusing to acknowledge the social restrictions in place are great and often lead to repression, falsity and grief.

Remarkably, it is the connections and relationships between women, quite possibly because they share a marginal space that appear to help break false identity and allow for the emergence of something more authentic. Within these three novels I would like to note a progression of communication, honesty and connection in the relationships between women in which I see Passing as the least hopeful and Sula as the most.

Before exploring Passing as a text, I would like to suggest that by returning to and broadening Butler’s model of gender melancholia, it seems that Irene Redfield
manifests a cultural and racial ideal aligned closely with class, more so than a gender ideal, in a way that suggests un-mourned grief. Without suggesting this model remains a perfect fit, Butler’s notions of melancholia and illegibility connected with identity seem helpful in exploring Irene Redfield’s and Clare Kendry’s struggle with race, especially as it is linked with class, particularly because Clare and Irene are able to visibly conceal themselves from the racial discriminations in place. Though black men and women are by no means relegated to a completely illegible position in this text, the restrictions and discriminations linked with race which Irene seeks to avoid and ignore are what appear to create her false self. It seems helpful then to suggest that rather than complete illegibility, oppression and discrimination can help to create an inauthentic self without necessarily relegating one to the inhuman.

Nella Larsen’s novella, *Passing*, focuses on Irene Redfield, a young light-skinned black woman whose desire to live a comfortable middle-class existence without acknowledging issues of race leads to a violent resistance of those who live either outside or between the borders of what Irene considers an ideal life. Her seemingly perfect existence with her husband, who is a respectable doctor, and her two children, remains unperturbed until Irene re-encounters a friend from her childhood, Clare Kendry, who has permanently “passed over” into the white world (25). Clare, a sensual and seductive woman whose feelings are always on the surface, holds an irresistible attraction for Irene; and Clare’s desire to return to black society seems to be connected specifically with Irene. Though on the surface Irene’s involvement with the Negro Welfare League and her perception of Clare as simply
wanting a frivolous connection to “her poor black brethren” suggests that she identifies closely with her own race, as the novella progresses, Irene’s separation and distance from anyone not of her social status suggests that Irene wishes only to avoid race as an issue altogether (55). Yet, Irene has remained in black society, despite being able to “pass.” When questioned by Clare as to why, Irene explains simply that she didn’t have to pass because she had “everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money,” making her choice seem more about convenience than loyalty to her race (25). On the other hand, Clare seems insistent on returning to black society, and her recognition and friendship with those not in her social class confuses and upsets Irene. Eventually it appears to be Clare’s re-emergence in Irene’s life that shocks Irene into recognizing her desire for both a racially unrestricted existence at any cost and possibly her desire for Clare herself¹. Rather than admit to her feelings for Clare or recognition of her similarities to Clare, Irene projects this desire onto her husband, Brian. Though Irene resists fully acknowledging race as a definitive factor in her life and the identity she has constructed, it is her relationship with Clare Kendry that sets her on a path at least towards self awareness. Finally, in an attempt to control the chaos that Clare has caused, and as Butler suggests, to prevent Clare from upsetting particular class and race structures, Irene becomes involved in Clare’s death, most likely pushing her from the fifth story window, though her precise culpability remains unclear.

¹ Barbara Johnson, Judith Butler and Deborah E. Mc Dowell all cite Irene and Clare’s relationship as having strong sexual undercurrents. Though the potentially homosexual relationship between Clare and Irene is interesting and to some extent relevant to the argument, it seems equally important to explore how Clare affects Irene as well as the specific reasons for it.
By the time that Clare and Irene re-meet, it is clear that Irene has firmly established herself and her family in a black middle to upper-class bourgeoisie that seems to mimic its white counterpart in most of its superficialities. However, maintenance of this class status seems hinged on strict parameters of general behavior, especially sexuality, which in essence manifests as an almost absence of authentic feeling entirely. For Irene to live an undisturbed upper-class life, where "perhaps, a little more money" is her only real concern it appears that she must necessarily deny her sexuality and her race. The taboo of the "exotic" black woman or the "seductress" which was a concern for black women at the time became something that had to be contradicted and combated continuously. Irene expends a massive amount of effort protecting herself and her children from even acknowledging anything that distinguishes race, like lynching, which she angrily suggests her children do not need to learn about. And despite Brian's insistence that it is a necessary education, Irene tearfully replies that her children should not hear about "the race problem. I won't have it" (103). Just as willfully as she ignores the realities of race discrimination, which she is able to escape in part because of her light skin color, she also ignores sexuality. Irene easily links sex with "queer ideas" and "dreadful jokes." easily setting up Brian to angrily retort that, indeed, sex is nothing more than a "grand joke" (59-

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2 For a more complete discussion of this topic see Deborah E. McDowell's essay "That nameless...shameful impulse": Sexuality in Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Passing" or Thadious M. Davis' introduction to the 1997 edition of Passing. Both McDowell and Davis discuss the exotic stereotype given to black women and Davis details the ways in which black women came together as a community and discussed means of combating this stereotype.
60). With effort, Irene has controlled these realities and skillfully forced them into the background. But Clare disturbs this carefully constructed existence.

As is clear even at first meeting, Clare’s constant “shade too provocative” presence intrigues and attracts Irene precisely because she exudes what Irene represses. Irene has awakened a “wild desire” in Clare as well, but for Clare her desire seems to be that of returning to black society rather than attempting to ignore race as an issue altogether:

you can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of...It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases. (11)

Here, Clare is quite clearly voicing the struggles of her repressed identity. Her “pale life” as a lower-class black woman who has passed over into upper-class white society has forced her to deny her “other” which, though confusing, seems to be her authentic self. In fact, Clare’s acknowledgment of that self as an “other,” as considered an “other” by the white and wealthy society she lives her life in, speaks to her awareness of both her desire and the difficulty in achieving it. Her longing to return to herself, an incredible difficulty in her circumstance, reminds her of that misrecognized loss, of the “pain” that will never leave her until she is able to re-connect. Clare’s meeting with Irene, who is also passing, on top of the Drayton Hotel awakens this longing within her and she writes to Irene after, saying that she is “lonely, so lonely...I cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before”” (11). Importantly, it is Irene who sparks this longing and is seen by Clare as a means of accessing this “other” once again.
During this same meeting, the reader is first introduced to Clare’s uncanny ability to read Irene’s character correctly, “as if she had been in the secret of the other’s thoughts” (23). It is here that Clare first puts Irene into a position where she must question her motives and even confront her anger at being unable to fully achieve her desire for a “white” or legible social existence. In essence, Clare forces Irene to acknowledge unpleasant realities of race. Before discovering who Clare is and therefore while she believes Clare is a white woman, Clare’s unflinching stare causes Irene to wonder if Clare just might possibly know that she is passing “and gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar” (16). Irene suggests that she wasn’t “ashamed of being a Negro” and it was only “the idea of being ejected... that disturbed her” (16). Yet it seems that rather than a simple “inconvenience,” to be ejected would mean that Irene would have to confront race as a problem in her life, and it would imply that she is still not recognized by the society she has identified herself with. It is this, then, that Irene finds hateful.

Despite associating herself with upper-class white society, Irene is also aware that as a black woman she must act in a particular way to engage with this culture, and this rule should apply to Clare as well. At first, only given by “another woman” would Clare’s smile at her waiter seem “too provocative” yet when Irene learns Clare’s identity, and therefore that she is a black woman, “now Irene was sure that it was too provocative for a waiter” (18). Though Irene does her best to ignore race entirely, it seems she is also in part conscious of the rules she must obey in order to become a part of the legible existence she desires.
This meeting on top of the Drayton Hotel begins the re-connected relationship between Irene and Clare which is to be the center of the novella. Quickly, Clare becomes a part of Irene’s social circle and barely a moment passes where Irene is not either with Clare, thinking of her, or talking about her. Though Irene resists her attraction to Clare and claims that she had “allowed Clare Kendry to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire” it is clear that it is not simply Clare’s voice “so appealing” and “so very seductive” that attracts and confuses Irene, but her entire attitude (33). Clare’s “having” nature, in which she claims she will “do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away,” bothers Irene, perhaps because it so clearly mirrors her own subtle methods of manipulating those around her to get what she wants (81). Despite Irene’s protestations against a revival of the friendship, Clare becomes an intimate family friend, suggesting that Irene does have a desire for Clare and what Clare promises; even if it is a desire she does not want to acknowledge. For Irene, Clare, as a woman who has successfully passed over creates a “fascination, strange and compelling,” perhaps it is even the recognition of her desires within Clare (28).

As the novella progresses, it becomes clear that Clare often voices those thoughts and feelings that Irene perhaps suppresses or does not recognize as her own. Irene attempts to mask this identification by constantly suggesting Clare’s unrecognizability to her. When Irene receives the first “appealing” letter from Clare it appears “almost illegible” (11). As she “puzzles” through Clare’s writing, Irene is struck with “humiliation, resentment and rage” as she is reminded once again of
Clare’s ability to confuse her carefully drawn perception of herself (11). For Irene, Clare’s outburst of feeling in her second letter “roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps- that is, not too consciously-, but none the less, acting” (52). Yet as the relationship progresses, it is Irene that often finds herself masking her feelings and “acting” in public to preserve outward appearances. Time and again, Irene feels compelled to suggest to herself that Clare is beyond her understanding, yet her own actions fit neatly with Clare’s mindset and more often than not, Irene attributes to Clare what she actually does herself.3 Despite her best attempts to avoid feeling and often avoid the reality of being a black woman in the 1920s, Clare’s presence as a black woman like herself who has been accepted into the dominant society Irene desires forces Irene to question the true meaning of race.

While Clare, as a symbolic white woman, is technically a member of the section of society that defines legibility, it is Irene who acts as the dominant culture and refuses to acknowledge the aspects or desires of those in her life that do not fit into her sense of the normal or socially acceptable.4 Clare easily mingles with Irene’s maids with as Irene puts it, “an exasperating childlike lack of perception” and suggests that Clare wouldn’t have “been so friendly with white servants.” only highlighting Irene’s general refusal to associate with those outside of her class (79). As Brian had so ironically put it, even the Negro Welfare League dance, which Irene organizes.

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1 Larsen's use of Irene as an unreliable narrator has been discussed in several essays and fits well with the notion that she is denying recognition.

2 Davis also discusses Irene’s desire to identify with white society.
seems overpopulated with upper class white society and, "pretty soon the coloured people won’t be allowed in at all" (69).

It seems fitting then that Irene occasionally manifests white bourgeoisie behavior and even utilizes recognition as a means of suppressing those that are different or those that challenge her standards. After a second meeting with Clare at her home, in which Irene is unwittingly forced to “pass” in front of Clare’s racist husband, she says of seeing Clare again that “she had only to turn away her eyes, to refuse her recognition” which would effectively remove Clare from Irene’s realm of legible and meaningful existence (47). In a similar manner, Irene also refuses to acknowledge Brian’s desire “for some place strange and different which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress” (47). In an attempt to force those in her life to fit the standards she has adopted, Irene often ignores or willfully misinterprets and manipulates people, just as she had skillfully done with Brian in order to suppress his “strange” desires. Irene even masters the objective gaze and looks upon her husband as an object, even perhaps as a white woman looking at a black man. While studying her husband with a “sort of curious detachment” she suggests that

yes, wouldn’t he perhaps have been merely ordinarily good-looking but for the richness, the beauty of his skin, which was of an exquisitely fine texture and deep copper colour. (53-4)

Though this appears to be celebrating his attractiveness as a black man, when linked with a later conversation, Irene’s comments take on another connotation. Hugh Wentworth, a wealthy white man who is friends with Irene and attends the Negro
Welfare League dance. remarks to Irene about white women’s particular interest in certain black men:

‘They’re always ravishing about the good looks of some Negro, preferably an unusually dark one. Take Hazelton there, for example. Dozens of women have declared him to be fascinatingly handsome. How about you Irene? Do you think he’s –er- ravishingly beautiful?’ (76)

Irene replies:

‘I do not! And I don’t think the others do either. Not honestly, I mean. I think that what they feel is—well, a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you: something so different that it’s really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty.’ (76)

She feels comfortable and confident voicing the opinions and feelings of the majority, yet she is not in point of fact a part of it, as she is occasionally and painfully reminded, particularly by Clare. With a detached and possibly objectifying gaze, Irene had studied her husband’s features, who as she sarcastically reminds Clare could “not exactly ‘pass.’” (37). In a remarkably similar fashion, Irene dissects this fascination with color and comfortably expresses what she feels must be the reason for white women’s attraction to black men. She even goes so far as to imply her repugnance at such an attraction, easily implying that her own analysis of Brian’s attraction fits simply in this category as well. Coupled with her un-restrained exclamations over Clare’s beauty, a woman who easily passes as white, the reader is made aware that Irene also finds the accustomed notions of beauty, which more or less ignore or fetishize black men and women, to be her own.
As the novella draws to an end, Irene's grip on her particular perception of her life begins to slip. Again, Clare's uncanny ability to read Irene's mind, or at least of seeming to, unsettles Irene and brings about moments of pure emotion and honest contemplation. Perhaps created in her mind as a means of protection, Irene suddenly 'finds out' about an affair she believes is happening between Clare and Brian and "feeling" seems to threaten. She suddenly wants "to laugh, to scream, to hurl things about" but instead she forcibly restrains herself and simply continues the tea party she is in the middle of hosting, maintaining the deception (91). The "acting" she had tried to attribute to Clare is in fact a reflection of her own attitudes and actions. Her manipulation of all those in her life to achieve the kind of life she desires, and her ability to mask her own feelings makes her a consummate actress. It begins to dawn on her that perhaps her perception of things might be false and "within her she felt a hardness from feeling. not absent, but repressed.... as if in a house long dim, a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows" (89, 91). The ghastly shapes, or the realities of her existence that she had repressed, are beginning to take form and it seems they in no way fit with Irene's vision of what her life had been and should be. Irene had said to Clare that she had "everything I want" making it unnecessary to pass, but eventually Irene recognizes the "everything" that she has is a carefully constructed social existence that denies race as a factor, rather than seeing it as a reality.

Larsen continues to have Irene second-guessing her perception of things, as she suddenly finds it difficult to decide if now what she was seeing was "as it always
was...Queer, that now she didn’t know, couldn’t recall”(93). Laced within Irene’s moments of coherence and contemplation, she finally addresses race head on:

She was caught between two allegiances, different yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, someone would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself or the race. Or, it might be, all three...For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. (98)

At this moment, it becomes painfully clear that Irene’s true concerns and desires are not linked to any infidelity that may or may not exist between Clare and Brian. Irene acknowledges momentarily that she has always been able to separate herself from her race before Clare ruined this, despite the fact that they seem inexorably entwined. Unlike Brian, whose obvious inability to “pass.” leaves him visibly susceptible to racial discrimination and violence, Irene has always been able to avoid race. It is the problems associated with race, the discrimination, the violence and the exclusion that have come to suffocate and control Irene’s existence. At this moment, Irene recognizes that any action, including inaction, renders her guilty of some infraction to an allegiance she feels she must have. For Irene to continue the life she has led, a life of security, she must inevitably sacrifice either her existence as she has known it, her purported allegiance to her own race, Clare, or perhaps all three. This suggestion that she might destroy “all three” implies that Irene is vaguely aware that to destroy Clare means she must once again ignore race as a “problem” despite acknowledging in this moment that it is a factor. In a moment of absolute honesty, Irene finally considers what has always driven her actions:
Security. Was it just a word? If not then was it only the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things? (107)

In this moment, it seems clear that Irene feels that security in her life, in the life she has chosen, does prevent her from love, ecstasy and an authentic self. The security that she has constructed for herself by denying the “burdens” or problems associated with being black in the 1920s have also “unfit” her life for anything authentic, for any of the genuine feeling which Clare expressed that made Irene increasingly uncomfortable. Irene begins to recognize that her outward appearances, her literal whiteness, had in part protected her from the turmoil of feeling. Irene is able to mask that she is different, and outside the legible and accepted existence, and therefore that she would have any “hurt” inside of her stemming from racial discrimination. Irene’s recognition “that she could bear anything, but only if no one knew that she had anything to bear” once more becomes a means of escape and denial (94). She is able to “bear” it simply because no one, including herself at certain times, knows that she has anything to bear. In this way, Irene again chooses security.

In almost an instant, Irene retreats from these moments of open and honest meditation. In the midst of being awakened, and as Irene feels her life becoming unreal, she reacts with violence. Rather than construct a new perception based on the realities Clare evokes, Irene decides to buttress her life and rid herself of Clare’s influence.

From the visions and dangers which she now perceived she shrank away. For them she had no remedy or courage. Desperately she tried to shut out the
knowledge from which had risen this turmoil, which she had no power to moderate or still, within her. And half succeeded. (96)

Irene understands that this knowledge she is beginning to access is inevitably life changing, if not shattering. Her efforts to ignore, repress and “shut out” this knowledge within her are admittedly only a half success. Irene’s ability to use a relationship between Clare and Brian as a cover for her other, more dangerous desires and realizations seems to shelter her from full recognition. Moreover, it remains enough to allow Irene to retain her existence as it is, without attempting to incorporate anything new. As Butler explains, Irene is responding violently to this encroachment on the normal:

the violent response is one that does not ask, and does not seek to know. It wants to shore up what it knows, to expunge what threatens it with not-knowing, what forces it to reconsider the presuppositions of its world, their contingency, their malleability. (35)

Irene forces Clare into a position of competition, disavowing any of the previous meditations she had about race and security. Rather than accept and assimilate any new information or the possibility of an alternate existence, Irene feels compelled to resist.

Finally, at a Christmas gathering on the fifth floor of a friend’s apartment, Clare’s husband barges in and confronts Clare about her racial identity. In a moment, Irene makes her decision: “One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (111). Already painfully aware of Clare’s ability to wreak havoc on her life, Irene knows that Clare’s freedom to re-join black society would unhinge her plans forever. It is these final definitive
moments that "Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly" (111). Rather than continue to meditate on the choices she has made and the possible desires she has repressed, she chooses to remain in the normal never allowing herself to re-access these moments of clarity. In a confused instant, with Irene's arm on Clare's, Clare is suddenly falling out the five story window and to her death. While everyone else rushes to the ground level to Clare, Irene stays above, struggling to avoid the truth, the reality of what has just happened. Perhaps suggesting her culpability, Larsen says that "Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost" (111). The imagery of the scene hearkens back to that of the tea party where Irene smashes a tea cup and covers her inadvertent violence with the suggestion that she had been struck with the inspiration to destroy it and "be rid of it for ever" (94). Ultimately, with Clare's death comes Irene's protection from having to openly "bear" the pain of race and therefore confront the problem of legibility.

Despite moments of clarity and connection that would seem to enhance one's ability to access grief or an authentic self, Irene and Clare's relationship inevitably reads as competition rather than partnership. Irene even suggests that Brian sees her as an "obstacle" between himself and Clare, once again highlighting the competition between the two women rather than the admittedly peculiar friendship between them (93). For a time Irene is aware of this repression and even suggests that her lack of "acute, unbearable pain seems unjust, as if she had been denied some exquisite solace of suffering which the full acknowledgment should have given her" (106-7). Yet, it seems that Irene never reaches "full acknowledgment," denying herself this pain by
ultimately refusing to see anything more than an infidelity between Clare and Brian. In the end, she continues to manifest her melancholia, her grief at the illegibility that racial discrimination can cause, as not only social prescriptions which are specifically linked to class and race ideals but also a willful ignorance of the effects of racial discrimination on those around her. Irene’s violence is clearly negative, whether literal in that she pushes Clare to her death or figurative in that she refuses to acknowledge the realities of race that Clare represents. However, this is not always the case. In certain ways, violence can be wielded by women and even taught to other women as a means of preserving a sense of self that is not molded by a normative society. While Irene inevitably forced Clare into a position where she remained competition and a disturbance to her pursuit of an ideal existence, women’s relationships can also be seen as fostering identity exploration.

Though not entirely void of the willful misrecognition and competition in *Passing*, Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz* works through identity and grief utilizing women’s relationships as well. Within the novel, the restrictions placed on African Americans due to race combine with the oppression of gender to create a hostile environment for the formation of identity as well as for the development of equal and honest love relationships. The triangulation between the three main characters Violet and Joe, a middle-aged married couple, and Dorcas, an 18-year-old girl, instigates particularly in Violet a violent recovery of self. However, violence in this context is not entirely negative and in fact is linked with a successful identification of a false self and a conscious move to dismiss it. Violet’s ‘murder’ of her false self seems linked
with her relationships with Dorcas and Alice Manfred, and her consciousness of how false selves develop is then conveyed to another young woman, Felice, with the apparent intention of educating her how to avoid the creation of a false self.

Violet and Joe Trace, though married in the country, became part of the Great Migration to city-life in the early 1900s. At first, the city, rather than enhancing something false or misleading about Violet and Joe seems to enable them to get in touch with who they believe they really are and, "they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were" (35). There is a sense of hope and freedom as people truly begin to feel that, "history is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last" (7). However, Morrison makes it clear that that history continues to affect the present and the future as she described details about the race riots laced with a general tension between men and women. There is an undercurrent of violence, not always at hand, but nonetheless affecting the mood of the novel. Newspaper headlines detailing the violence against women appear self-explanatory, but Alice Manfred, a self-described "unarmed" woman, suggests that they are not. In fact:

black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose. Who else were the unarmed ones? The ones who thought they did not need folded blades, packets of lye, shards of glass taped to their hands. Those who bought houses and hoarded money as protection and the means to purchase it....Those who swelled their little unarmed strength into the reckoning one of leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods designed to hold or withhold, move or stay put, make a way, solicit, comfort and ease...Any other kind of unarmed black woman in 1926 was silent crazy or dead. (77-8)

The tensions and forces acting upon black women specifically here, but not exclusively, that seem to create specific safe but perhaps false identities are not
entirely subtle and women are reacting consciously to these forces. Alice’s detailed description of the “unarmed” women who fight back reveals an awareness of the violent and non-violent ways of combating these pressures. On some level then Violet, Joe and Dorcas must be aware of these forces as well. But, although all three exhibit similar indications of false identity, I would like to specifically discuss Violet’s transition from “dancing on a train” to silent and “Violent” and finally back to “Violet,” because it is Violet in particular who checks her occasional reactions against the normal but ultimately conquers these impulses and creates her “self:” herself (30, 75).

Violet is described early on as the child of a “suicide” but also a strong independent woman who “chose” Joe (95). As she enters the city, it is clear that she and Joe are in love and feel alive and real. However, soon Violet’s “cracks” begin to show:

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things....The globe light holds and bathes each scene, and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time. (23)

As Morrison aptly notes, though the globe light illuminates what is ‘normal’ or legible social behavior, each person must reckon with the cracks and crevices that lay outside the norm. If these norms are based on gender or race, it becomes much more difficult to navigate the cracks because even visibly one is unable to blend in or escape. The every day routine, which would seem safe and simple, becomes a site of deviation for
Violet as she begins to recognize how awkward and insincere it can feel. First, these cracks of Violet’s appear innocuous. One day on the way to work, she simply sits in the middle of the street and is unable or unwilling to get up. Soon, her behavior becomes less able to be ignored. Again, on her way to work, a young girl asks Violet to watch her baby brother while she goes into her home to get a record. Violet takes the baby out of the carriage and walks away, contemplating how her life could change if she simply stole the child. After some commotion, Violet returns the baby and appears angry that anyone would suggest she would steal the child saying “last time I do a favor for anyone” (22). Finally, Violet disconnects from language. During regular everyday conversations, Violet’s speech becomes peppered with “words connected only to themselves” (23). Returning again to Butler, Violet is beginning to recognize that her life and her ‘self’ lie within the cracks of normal life. The language of the normal begins to fail her and she literally becomes unintelligible. So, for a time Violet remains silent, and perhaps “unarmed” as Alice suggests, attempting to conceal her departure from the norm. Morrison however, makes it clear that Violet is not alone in suppressing these feelings. Women just like Violet

fill their mind and hands with soap and repair and dicey confrontations because what is waiting for them, in a suddenly idle moment, is the seep of rage. Molten. Thick and slow-moving. Mindful and particular about what in its path it chooses to bury. Or else, into a beat of time, and sideways under their breasts, slips a sorrow they don’t know where from. (16)

Here, Morrison poetically captures the essence of melancholic grief and foreshadows Violet’s inevitable plunge into a consciousness of what has been denied her.

Endeavoring to avoid confronting this rage or grief, women perform the customary
actions of women, filling their time in order to keep these slips and cracks at bay. These slips and cracks inevitably contain and are therefore capable of releasing the rage and grief that these women cannot find acceptable ways to express.

In Michelle Loris’s article “Self and Mutuality: Romantic Love, Desire, Race and Gender in Toni Morrison’s Jazz” Loris provides a similar argument. Her foundational claim suggests that the mothers of Violet, Joe and even Dorcas lacked independence and a self which denied their children’s the ability to form a self as well. These characters must then create a “false self” that allows them to “stave off chaos” and violence (54, 58). Though Loris’s claim certainly applies to violence done to these three, Violet ultimately wields a positive violence, though not a physical violence. She becomes an “armed” black woman who “did not carry pistols because they became pistols” (Morrison 78). In order to access a “Violet” not created by something or someone else she recognizes that she must enact violence, in other words kill the false self that has been molded by the world she lives in. Morrison deftly makes a connection between authentic identity and one’s ability to choose a love as opposed to being told who one is allowed to love. Only after destroying a false self is Violet able to love who and how she wants to love.

Loris also explores how it is that Violet is able to regain this independence. Compellingly, Loris argues that Violet is empowered by other women, namely Dorcas and Dorcas’ aunt, Alice Manfred. Violet’s obsession with Dorcas begins as a jealous curiosity that transforms into something much different. As Violet progresses in her self-exploration, she begins to wonder “if she isn’t falling in love with [Dorcas] too”
Staring at the picture of Dorcas that she borrowed from Alice, she becomes mesmerized and sees Dorcas as "an inward face- whatever it sees is its own self. You are there, it says, because I am looking at you" (12). Though she dislikes Dorcas from beginning to end and finds her "haughty" and a "sneak" it is through her exploration of Dorcas that Violet begins to explore herself. Dorcas’s "inward face" rather than objectifying Violet, as it might seem to, instead seems to reveal Violet’s subjectivity. Violet moves from attempting to cut Dorcas’s face while she lay in her coffin, perhaps as an attempt to maintain the safety of the norm and to forego having to speak the unintelligible just as Irene did, to studying her inward face as she comes to study herself. Importantly, Violet ultimately refuses to position Dorcas as simply competition, or an obstacle between herself and her husband, as Irene had done with Clare.

Similarly, Violet’s conversations and unconventional friendship with Alice is an investigation of Violet’s motivations and the restrictions placed on herself and on black women in general. It is here that Alice investigates the differences between helpless victims and the “armed” and “unarmed” black women of the day. Unlike Alice, other women “had not surrendered,” and this appears to include Violet, too (77). When asked by Alice what Violet’s reasons for coming to her were she replies, “I had to sit down somewhere. I thought I could do it here. That you would let me and you did” (82). It is Alice, another woman, who allows Violet the space to search for and discover the “me” she had felt was missing in her life. In Alice’s presence, Violet literally and figuratively “sits” and “rests” from the pressures outside of her and she
voices the unintelligible thoughts she was unable or unwilling to voice before. “Tell me something real” she demands of Alice and eventually through honest conversation with one another they are able to work out some sort of an answer (110). Unable to “sit” before, even though she tried to in the street, Alice allows Violet this opportunity as well as the opportunity to speak clearly: “no apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was- clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy” (83). Violet, believing that Alice is suggesting that she “give up,” forces Alice to passionately declare instead that “Nobody’s asking you to take it. I’m saying make it, make it!” (113). Together, Alice and Violet stumble upon and then grasp their own subjectivity, deciding at last to “make” themselves.

Finally, later, when Violet and Joe appear reconciled and perhaps in love again, Violet explains to Dorcas’ best friend, Felice, how it was she was able to regain herself.

‘What’s the world for if you can’t make it up the way you want it?...it will change you and it’ll be your fault because you let it...[I] forgot it was mine. My life, I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else...White. Light. Young again...the two of us. Had to get rid of it...Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her’

‘Who’s left?’

‘Me.’ (208-9)

Violet is clear that the world she and Felice live in can quickly but almost imperceptibly take your life from you and form you how it chooses. However, it is
“your fault” if you stop paying attention. stop fighting and therefore allow it to happen. Violet’s wish to be someone else, someone “white,” or really the wish for the norm, the ideal, and the legible was not a wish for herself and in order to regain an identity of her own making she was forced to “kill” those false selves. Though Violet does not seem to remain close to Alice or Felice, it seems important that Violet passes on her knowledge and her advice to Felice as a means of protecting and educating her. Significantly, Felice becomes a strong woman who is “nobody’s alibi, or hammer or toy” (222). And Alice returns to her hometown, possibly reconciling with the woman who stole her husband, suggesting that her relationship with Violet opens her up to the companionship and strength women can receive from one another (222).

More optimistically, *Jazz* offers women the ability to explore themselves through other women and successfully access a self and a life they can call their own. As Alice describes when she discusses armed and unarmed women, the conscious fight against an inauthentic self or identity is often fought by communities or groups of women. Morrison seems to suggest that when women come together as a group, rather than see each other as competition, they are able to make changes and make selves. Violet’s suggestion that it is “your fault” suggests that women can be and should be aware of the forces that act upon them and should also be aware of how to fight them. However, in many ways women still remain competition for one another. Though Dorcas helps Violet find herself and see herself as a subject, she also remains an object of disdain as the “haughty” girl who stole her husband’s heart. And, ultimately, Violet’s relationships with women lack even the lasting passion seen
between Clare and Irene. Finally, despite the positive description of Violet and Joe’s new-found love for one another, in terms of viewing the strength and power of women’s relationships, having the focus return to heterosexual married existence feels somewhat disappointing. Although Morrison portrays romantic love, the choice of loving someone as particularly one’s own and connected to one’s identity, as healthy and important, it might have been additionally powerful for Violet to have continued to foster her relationships with Alice, Felice, or other women in general. However, turning to another Morrison novel, *Sula*, it becomes evident that women can work through one another to regain self and access grief and sustain important and lasting relationships with one another.

Within *Sula*, Morrison efficiently constructs a town filled with melancholic grief and comprehensively outlines several important relationships between women which provide a stronger basis for a community analysis than either *Jazz* or *Passing*. In this novel, women’s relationships take center stage but are also easily identified as embedded within the social structure of the town and society as a whole. Therefore, I hope to explore more fully the social effects on Nel and Sula’s relationship as well as its development and continuation throughout the course of the novel.

From the beginning, the intense relationship between Sula and Nel can be construed as socially inappropriate as it interferes with each woman’s ability to be a wife, mother and recognizable human. While growing up, the two women are considered almost as one by themselves and their community. Though not overtly sexualized the relationship borders on romantic attachment and has subversive
elements that lead the reader to believe the relationship lies outside the borders of
typical social bonds. However, Nel eventually marries and for a time Sula leaves
town. After a rupture of the rules that come to govern Nel’s life, Sula and Nel separate
only to meet again on Sula’s deathbed. Years later, as Nel passes Sula’s grave she is
finally and irreversibly struck with her loss and realizes how important Sula had truly
been.

The foundation of Nel and Sula’s relationship begins in an all black town
called “Bottom” in the early to mid 1900s and it is immediately clear that mourning is
an important but difficult task for those who live there. Morrison opens her novel with
Shadrack, the town’s local drunk who most likely suffers from post traumatic stress
disorder after serving in the war. After Shadrack returns from a particularly brutal
battle, he is unable to find the boundaries and focus in his life that he feels are
necessary to continue living normally. Recovering in a hospital, Shadrack attempts to
eat but only after he is convinced that his rice, tomatoes, and meat “would stay where
they were- would not explode or burst forth from their restricted zones” (8). As he
struggles to contain his world in recognizable and normal dimensions he begins to feel
that he had, “no past, no language, no tribe, no source….he had been harboring a
skittish apprehension that he was not real” (12-13). Shadrack cannot handle the sudden
shift from a world of order to that which makes him unrecognizable and inhuman even
to himself. As could be seen with Irene, Shadrack is responding violently to this
encroachment on the normal. Once again, as Butler put it, he is attempting to “shore
up” what he knows and “expunge” or contain what threatens him. Fighting for
normalcy, Shadrack is imprisoned until a police officer reads his papers and gets him a ride back to his home town. It is in those first few days back that Shadrack struggles for a way to live life recognizably.

Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it... It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day. (14)

Shadrack’s need for normalcy, to avoid the unexpected, forces him to create a space for this fear of the unknown. “National Suicide Day” becomes Shadrack’s way to allow for the borders of normalcy to have a space without disrupting his everyday life. Though his initial reaction was a violent one, Shadrack eventually works through this to create a space for everything. Shadrack recognizes his reality and is aware that his creation of this space is a means of containing all extraneous factors safely. However, despite this assimilation, Shadrack’s space for the unexpected remains artificial. It also becomes clear that after recognizing Shadrack’s disorder and his relatively peaceful way of living, the people of Bottom begin to accept his deviations.

“Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things... In fact, they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives.” (15)

At first it appears that Morrison, using Butler’s language, describes the ways in which the people of Bottom non-violently assimilate Shadrack’s non-normative behavior into their society. Rather than violently opposing his way of life, they accept him and even
eventually participate. Their nonviolent response, “lives with its unknowingness about
the Other in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond that the question opens is
finally more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common” (35).
Rather than upsetting the order of things, Shadrack is incorporated and is in part used
to reinforce this order. However, the reality appears to be that Bottom only accepts
Shadrack because his deviation from the normal is restricted to one day of the year.
Since the rest of the year he seems to be a recognizable, functioning part of the
community, playing by the rules that are already established. Shadrack’s ‘suicide day’
becomes less frightening and it becomes much easier to ignore its deeper implications.
His day-to-day “craziness,” which includes nudity, drunkenness and even the ability to
curse white men and women without retribution, can still somehow be recognized and
accepted, but his attempt to control death cannot. The town then, rather than
embracing difference, seems to force these differences into artificial positions.

As black women, Sula and Nel are considered socially inferior both to black
men as well as all of white society. Already, they are the voice of the minority or a
voice as Butler suggests that is often unheard or unacknowledged. A black woman’s
role at this time was to provide for her family and in essence to “make someone else”
namely a man (92). Both girls grow up in households without true father figures but
have models with which to perceive what is proper female conduct. For Sula, her
grandmother Eva is particularly representative of a woman’s proper place. Eva has
given as much as she possibly can for her children’s sake having literally given up a
limb to provide for her family. Her role of mother is taken seriously enough to become
the main identifier in her own life. Though she lives most of her life without a husband, she reminds us that this was “not by choice” and “ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (92). Eva’s desire to see men and women in places that they ought to be concerns her son, Plum, as well. When Plum comes back from the war and refuses to live like the man Eva expected him to be she decides she must kill him. Just as Shadrack’s ill presence was initially opposed, Eva’s inability to understand Plum leads to his death. Reflecting on this Eva says:

‘After all that carryin’ on, just gettin’ him out and keepin’ him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain’t got the room no more even if he could do it...I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.’ (72)

Eva’s desire to fulfill her role as mother and maker leads her to choose to kill her own son rather than let him live, as she thought, pathetically. Her literally violent response to Plum’s departure from the normal comes from a feeling of direct responsibility for both his actions as well as his life. Rather than being guided by her desire, which would be to let him live, she is guided by the rules that govern acceptable male and female behavior. Eva feels a responsibility to maintain the binary gender roles to such an extent that any deviation from this must be purged. Whether consciously or not, Eva systematically and violently enforces cultural prescriptions of male and female behavior.

As Sula and Nel grow up, they seem at first to reject the society that demands the responsibilities and roles that are described for women. Sula and Nel have another
plan, and one that seems at least for a time to be conscious: “because each had
discovered years ago that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and
triumph were forbidden to them. they had set about creating something else to be.”
(52). Morrison describes their discovery in terms that suggest Nel and Sula are
cognizant that they must make choices in order to create a legible existence, even if
only for themselves. Morrison describes their intimate relationship as in many ways
undermining the rules of proper society. For these two women. “in the safe harbor of
each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and
concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55). Nel and Sula’s relationship,
clearly the strongest of any we have explored, is based on a shared understanding of
the ways the world works and a shared understanding of the ways people can forge an
authentic existence outside of normative society.

As Nel and Sula grow up, Morrison’s progression of their potentially
subversive relationship grows more steadily into something akin to romantic love. The
potentially seditious acts of the girls remain subtle until one afternoon when the girls
are playing by the river.

Sula lifted her head and joined Nel in the grass play. In concert, without ever
meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel
found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it
was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked around and found
one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage
and began tearing up the rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a
generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig.
At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and
poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat
hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula
copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup... Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel's twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too... Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole... until all the small defiling things they could find were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. Neither one had spoken a word. (58-9)

In this moment, the reader begins to sense a budding sexual connection between the two girls⁵. Nel and Sula are engaging in pseudo sexual acts with their twigs; stripping away the bark and “rhythmically” and methodically making holes in the earth. The combination of the two holes seems to be the culmination of the sexual connection between the two girls marking a merge in both the physical and mental sense. But then Nel’s twig breaks, possibly foreshadowing the break of the relationship to come. Sula, who has calmly followed Nel’s lead, seems to be capable of continuing on this path of exploration. Her twig, unlike Nel’s, remains intact suggesting perhaps her desire for something more. This also foreshadows the coming break and seems to suggest that Sula is capable of acknowledging and sustaining this relationship where Nel, who eventually enters Bottom society, is not. It is also important that Sula is constantly "copying" Nel's movements as though they might be unnatural to her. Sula is content that her twig can do something other than a distinctive male sexual gesture. Both girls, however, remain silent, perhaps recognizing the danger of this moment and never verbally acknowledge actions that could be construed as improper and wrong. Even more intriguing, directly after this moment, Sula and Nel accidentally drown a young

⁵ See Barbara Johnson’s article and Judith Butler’s essay for a more comprehensive look at Nel and Sula’s relationship as a romantic attachment.
boy and remain silent about their involvement. Taking the sexual metaphor further, the girls who had just expertly wielded “twigs” and then buried them have just done a similar act. The girls accidentally kill the first male they see following the hole-digging solidifying themselves as outside the boundaries of gendered behavior. Rather than ‘mothering’ the young boy as they should, they react violently. This moment binds them to one another even more closely and seems to lead to a further blending of self. In addition, the young boy’s death is trivialized by white society. Sula, in particular, seems wracked with guilt and rushes into Shadrack’s house to see if he had witnessed her and Sula’s inaction. He simply says “always.” and Sula remains shaken by the sight of him for the rest of her life (62). Perhaps it is here, when faced with Shadrack’s existence, that Sula consciously chooses to remain on the borders, creating her own life because she sees how little hers is valued.

The highly developed intimacy seen here continues to develop throughout the girls’ childhood and young adult lives. Sula’s mother Hannah was known for her “easy way” with the men of Bottom which was accepted casually by the men but was disliked for its lack of “passion” and “attachment” by the women (44). From Hannah, Sula had learned that sex was “pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (44). Nel’s mother, on the other hand, was pristine, prissy and disapproved of Hannah’s loose ways. Eventually as the girls become more aware of their own sexuality, they begin to explore the world of men together. Nel and Sula’s reaction towards men in general was not that of the typical female friends:
They never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or
competed against each other for them. In those days a compliment to one was
a compliment to the other. (84)

Unlike Irene and Clare or even Violet and Dorcas, men were not a means of separation
between them, nor were they a means of connection. For the girls, men appeared
unnecessary in many ways. Once again, the sharing of men without jealousy or anger
suggests a connection that goes beyond simple friendship. At this age the girls still
seem to be looking towards each other for the emotional needs of a romantic
relationship and find, “in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52).

In a similar way, Morrison suggests that the speedy intimacy with which the
girls become friends is due to the fact that, “they had made each other’s acquaintance
in the delirium of their noon dreams” (51). Again, there is a romantic element to the
nature of the friendship and a language most often reserved for a significant other.
Interestingly, there is a certain distinction between the two girls’ afternoon dreams.
Nel’s dreams involved a “fiery prince” who “approached but never quite arrived” (51).
Most importantly for Nel though was that, “always, watching the dream along with
her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes” (51). Meanwhile Sula’s dreams were of
herself, “galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and
smelling roses in full view of a someone who shared both the taste and the speed” (52).
Nel’s dream, more traditional, has a prince coming to presumably rescue her although
he never arrives. Sula, on the other hand, seems to embody the prince in her dream,
breaking free of traditional “femininity.” For her, there is no definite male figure like
that of the prince in Nel’s reverie. Importantly, both dreams include a privileged onlooker who shares in all aspects of the dream.

However, this relationship at least in its outward form eventually begins to change. Jude, a young local man, asks Nel to marry him and she accepts. Unbeknownst to her, Jude’s true reasons for his proposal come from a, “rage and determination to take on a man’s role anyhow” (82). In fact, Jude’s determination to be a man “anyhow” stems specifically from his unrecognizable manhood in the white world. Though stronger and more qualified, Jude is rejected time and again from working on building the roads surrounding Bottom in favor of less qualified men who are white. His unrecognizability forces him to enter into a specifically male gendered role, giving him an identity and a humanity that he felt was lacking. For Nel though, this acceptance is a step back from the world she had created with Sula and in this way she re-enters traditional society. In this world, “the two of them together would make one Jude,” and Nel’s desires and emotions would be put on hold for her husband and children (83). In Butlerian terms, it appears that Jude’s rage and grief at his racially derived unrecognizability is being subsumed and then manifested in a melancholic “masculine” response. Rather than recognizing Nel as a human being as well, his desire seems to be that just as the white men ignore his reality while incorporating him into their lives in some sort of legible social position, Jude can use Nel as a way to make him recognizable though it simultaneously erases her own identity.

However this acceptance of a societal legibility is not necessarily forced onto Nel. For Nel, Jude had “selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship
was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” (84). Nel’s desire to be seen as an individual, as a separate entity, has pushed her towards this decision, though in fact it does not accomplish this end. Perhaps Nel recognizes that Nel and Sula are viewed as one simply because no one else is a part of or seems to access the separate world they have created together. In order to be seen singly, though certainly not in the sense Nel might expect, she must engage in typical gendered and cultural behavior, just as Irene or Violet had. Though Nel realizes she is seen apart from Sula, she is not seen as an individual but rather a means to accomplish “a man’s role anyhow.” Despite this desire, her connection to Sula remains quite close. At her wedding, looking for reassurance about the wedding night from her husband, Nel instead focuses on Sula’s form walking down the road. It is Sula’s image that the reader last sees before Nel’s first sexual encounter with her husband which places an emphasis on Sula’s importance to Nel over Jude’s importance to Nel.

After Nel’s wedding Sula leaves town for many years. Upon her return, she immediately reconnects with Nel and Nel feels as though she’s “getting the use of an eye back….talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (95). However, unbeknownst to Sula, things have changed between the two women. Sula sleeps with Jude and Nel walks in on them. Horrified, she is thrown into a deep grief which she attributes to the betrayal of her friend but more importantly to Jude leaving her. Sula, however, is at a loss as to the reason for this anger and hurt Nel feels:

She had clung to Nel as both the closest thing to an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she had bedded down with Jude. They had
always shared the affection of other people, compared how a boy
kissed...Marriage, apparently, had changed all that...she was ill prepared for
the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. ...Nel had been the first
person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she
had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits...Now Nel
belonged to the town and all of its ways. (120)

Unlike Nel, Sula has continued to view their relationship as her deepest and most
important connection. Sula it seems has been conscious of her identity as lying outside
the social fabric since early childhood. Nel, however, chooses to re-enter society and
accepts these rules and prescriptions. For Sula, the rules of society do not pertain to
her relationship with Nel because it falls outside that governing realm and in fact, only
there had Nel been “real.” Sula had always envisioned that she and Nel lived in the
“slant of life” that made it possible to be happy in this world without having to
necessarily conform to all expectations of a black woman in Bottom. Nel, however,
has internalized the rules that had not applied to her before marriage and holds Sula to
this new standard of conduct. Sula, while away from Bottom, became aware of the
impossibility of the type of connection with a man that she had with Nel:

She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover
that a lover was not a comrade and could never be-for a woman. And that no
one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and
touch with an ungloved hand. (121)

Sula is not willing to place her needs and desires below that of a man or of children.
Her need to love and be loved as she pleased had always been fulfilled by her mutual
relationship with Nel until this rupture. The “friend” and lover Sula seems to be
looking for is Nel. Sula recognizes that no man can connect with her to the “ungloved”
part of her self which Butler would suggest still aches with the loss of one entire mode
of desire or recognizability. Nel, on the other hand, had fulfilled that primal version of herself that she could touch with an ungloved hand, and had seemed to erase or break through the social taboo that had been set up as an interior moral directive.

Later, the reader discovers Sula’s justification for sleeping with Jude. When Nel finally asks Sula for an explanation, Sula says: “well there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That’s all. He just filled up the space” (144). To Nel, it appears as if Jude simply filled a space where Sula needed him. However, looked at in another way that seems more fitting, Jude takes up space between Sula and Nel. Once he became Nel’s husband he physically and socially took up a space between the two women and could not be moved. His official importance over Sula stood in her way of being as close to Nel as she had been. So, Sula’s need to re-enter that space next to Nel necessitates in her mind sleeping with or sharing Nel’s husband. However, Jude’s position as husband becomes a space that displaces the space that contained Sula and Nel’s illegible love and the social legitimacy of Jude’s position creates a barrier between Nel and Sula which causes Sula to desire to re-claim that space for her and Nel once more.

This anger and hurt of Nel’s seems to Sula to be a misrecognition of the real loss. Reinforcing this supposition, rather than grieving her lost relationship with Sula, Nel waits for a grief over the loss of her husband that never comes:

Hunched down in the small bright room Nel waited. Waited for the oldest cry. A scream not for others, not in sympathy for a burnt child, or a dead father, but a deeply personal cry for one’s own pain... But it did not come. (108)
Nel’s pain and grief cannot come until she acknowledges the true cause behind it: her loss of Sula. Coming back to Butler’s concept of gender melancholia, Nel’s desire to go back to her pain, “a scream not for others” suggests a desire to recognize and respond to her first loss. Her denied homosexual desire, which had been explored if only subconsciously through her relationship with Sula, becomes this “oldest cry.” “But it did not come” and Nel cannot access this cry until she identifies her loss of Sula.

Sula herself goes through a transformation and grieving process. After she loses the friendship of Nel, she remains in Bottom but is considered by most to be a pariah. Eventually she begins a sexual relationship with a local man named Ajax. One time, while making love, Sula begins to mentally describe to herself the stripping away of the physical Ajax. She says:

I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs… I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below… I will water your soil to make it moist… And when do the two make mud? (131)

Though Sula is involved in an intense and somewhat possessive relationship with a male, the language of this passage draws the reader back to the “hole” digging scene with Nel earlier. In essence, it seems as though Sula is looking for a replacement for the relationship she had with Nel. Sula is describing Ajax as potential soil, free of the “twigs and pebbles” that she’s seen in other situations. After she and Nel combined holes, the broken twigs as well as any surrounding “defiling things” were thrust into the hole and then it was covered. Here she is once again looking for a combination of
the holes but without that break and wants to know “when the two make mud.” Rather than suggesting that she will complete Ajax as Jude thinks Nel will complete him, Sula senses that her relationship with Ajax, as with Nel, will create something new. Yet as soon as Ajax senses that Sula has begun to need him he disappears from her life and Sula is left alone once again.

If we are to read Sula and Nel’s relationship as unacceptable in society, either as a lesbian relationship or simply that of two women who would prefer to remain each other’s closest relationship then Nel’s lack of recognized grief at the rupture can be explained using Butler’s analysis of sexual relationships that are forced into the background or even the invisible. Nel and Sula’s intimate connection is not recognized by Nel as more important than her relationship with Jude or even her own children. This thought had become unacceptable to Nel once she married and joined with the rest of Bottom society. Sula, on the other hand, had continued to reject the roles she was expected to conform to: marriage and motherhood. Once Nel and Sula break after Sula sleeps with Jude, Sula becomes an outcast. This refusal to become a part of functioning society causes Sula to be considered by all of Bottom as a demon and a “devil” (117). In this way, Sula is also relegated to her own place in society. Sula becomes a self described “pariah” and is aware that the townspeople, “framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men.” (122). This “hatred” seems sprung from the illegibility of Sula’s position. As a black woman who sleeps with men simply to satisfy her own desires, she oversteps the acceptable limits of her gender’s roles and supposed desires. This assertion, made specifically by Butler in Antigone’s
Claim describes the inhuman space where one’s actions are considered dangerous by society.

She is not of the human but speaks in its language. Prohibited from action, she nevertheless acts, and her act is hardly a simple assimilation to an existing norm. And in acting, as one who has no right to act, she upsets the vocabulary ... that is a precondition of the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be. (Antigone’s Claim 82)

Rather than specifically kinship ties as in the play Antigone, Sula is upsetting the natural order of love and desire or rather gender and sexual norms. Sula’s actions or non-actions are actions of the human by the inhuman. Her actions, unlike Shadrack’s, are not assimilated “to an existing norm” but instead are seen as dangerous and must be counteracted. Her mere presence raises questions for the townspeople of Bottom that they would rather have left unexplored. In this way, Sula has become the unrecognized and demonized non-human that Butler describes.

Oddly enough Sula also provides a way for Bottom to function even more towards its purported ideal. strengthening the enforcement or enactment of the “rules” of the social order. For Bottom.

Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (117)

Once Sula is negated, the ‘human’ life of Bottom can continue more “normally” than it had even before she arrived. Here, Sula’s situation is consistent with Butler’s conception of each person and each group as affecting each other in meaningful ways. Though she is shunned by the community she is also an essential part of it. Though
they had functioned somewhat outside of the acceptable or ideal before Sula came, cheating on their spouses, ignoring their children and neighbors. Sula’s extreme deviance causes them to reinforce the norm. Sula cannot be tolerated like Shadrack’s suicide day simply because her daily existence shakes the foundation of the normal. However, when Sula dies, her assigned and proper place is void. Without her “evil” presence to inspire them, the townspeople become lax in their enactment of the rules (117). For the townspeople of Bottom, when Sula died, “the tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made” (153). In essence, when Sula is dead, the town no longer functions in a way meant to protect from or prevent her existence.

Over two decades later, the society of Bottom has changed drastically. Nel goes to visit Sula’s mother Eva, who reminds Nel of her and Sula’s interchangeability, and on her return passes Sula’s grave. Suddenly, the “ball” of pain and grief she had been carrying since her rupture with Sula breaks:

‘All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.’ (174)

Finally, Nel recognizes her grief for what it truly is and at last is able to mourn her loss. Her love for Sula above all others is recognized and therefore becomes valid, even if only to herself. As becomes clear, Nel’s love for Sula, whether friendship or more, lost its social legitimacy after her marriage to Jude. Once she had lost Sula, her ability to recognize either the previous relationship or the loss was in part consciously foreclosed as a means of protection:
And it is not simply that these are relations that cannot be honored, cannot be openly acknowledged, and cannot therefore be publicly grieved, but that these relations involve persons who are also restricted in the very act of grieving, who are denied the power to confer legitimacy on loss... How does one grieve from within the presumption of criminality, from within the presumption that one’s acts are invariably and fatally criminal? (Antigone’s Claim 79)

According to Bottom, Nel’s grief for Sula would have been criminal and therefore Nel’s belief that it had been Jude she missed becomes a mask for her true feelings. Her inability to grieve Sula, a pariah, a cheater and a “devil” forces her to put Jude in Sula’s place to form a legitimate loss. But with her popped ball of grief Nel allows the reader to see the movement from Butler’s description of misrecognition and dehumanization to recognition by legitimizing her feelings for Sula.

The relationship between Sula and Nel can never be recognized and accepted by Bottom society as anything more important than an everyday female friendship while the loss of Nel’s husband, a lawful relationship, is considered real or as Butler would say “human.” However, Nel’s final grief over her loss of Sula allows it a legitimate claim as meaningful even if only to herself. Sula’s desire to continue to live with Nel outside the boundaries of the roles and relationships their society prescribed for them created a split that was not healed until Nel recognized Sula’s importance to her. Following Butler’s assertion that, “if we’ve lost, then it seems to follow that we have had, that we have desired and loved, and struggled to find the conditions for our desire.” Nel is then finally acknowledging her desires as well as her legitimate grief over an important loss (17). While Sula’s life outside of life eventually lead to her
death, the melancholic feminization of Nel begins to break with the assertion of the loss of Sula, legitimizing both Nel’s grief and Nel and Sula’s important relationship.

Nel and Sula refuse to become competition for one another and ultimately remain each other’s most important relationship, even if it is only after Sula’s death. Optimistic, more so than in *Passing* or *Jazz*, the relationship between two women remains the means of accessing the power to legitimate one’s identity and one’s desires. Rather than succumbing to the demands of prescriptions and discriminations, women, when working and acting together, are finally able to “make” themselves.
Works Consulted


About the Author

Karen B. Manahan was born in Summit, New Jersey on April 15th, 1983 to Thomas and Kathleen who, after two boys, were very excited to welcome a little girl. Ms. Manahan graduated from Lehigh University with High Honors in May of 2005. While attending Lehigh University, Ms. Manahan was initiated as a member of Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society and was also honored as a Presidential Scholar. Ms. Manahan was a presenter at “Crossing Over: Learning to Navigate the Borderlands of Intercultural Encounters Symposium” at Cleveland State University in October of 2005.
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