Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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"[On the slaveships, some Igbos] wished to die on the idea that they should then get back to their own country. The captain in order to obviate this idea, thought of an expedient viz. to cut off the heads of those who died intimating to them that if determined to go, they must return without heads. The slaves were accordingly brought up to witness the operation. One of them by violent exertion got loose and flying to the place where the nettles had been unloosed in order to empty the tubs, he darted overboard. The ship brought to, a man was placed in the main chains to catch him which he perceiving, made signs which words cannot express expressive of his happiness in escaping. He then went down and was seen no more." (qtd. in Cowley and Mannix 108)

In this recollection of a 1788 slaveship, Dr. Ecroide Claxton admits the inadequacy of language to convey the escaping man’s happiness: He “made signs which words cannot express.” Suicide often provokes the rhetorical impasse here encountered; the sign is clear but incommunicable. Claxton cannot translate the joy of the man who, “flying to the place” of escape, found the way out of the horror and defied the captain’s command that the Africans remain onboard. During the Middle Passage, some people fought back physically; others survived in more covert ways; still others jumped overboard. On several ships, “there was an epidemic of suicide at the last minute” (Cowley and Mannix 111). 1 Although this leap to freedom, and death, haunts African American literature (Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, James Baldwin’s Another Country, Suzan-Lori Parks’s The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, Dawn Turner Trice’s Only Twice I’ve Wished for Heaven, Shay Youngblood’s Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery), the act of suicide often goes unnamed. And the flying potential of Africans and African Americans as an imagistic and thematic trope has generated far more critical discussion than its metonymic twin, suicide. 2

Despite the number of self-inflicted deaths in Toni Morrison’s novels and the fact that she wrote her master’s thesis on alienation and suicide in William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, there has been little critical attention given to the repetition of self-destruction in her own work. 3 In Beloved (1988), a woman jumps overboard during the Middle Passage; in Jazz (1992), Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, climbs into a well, drowning herself in 1892; in Sula (1973), the shell-shocked veteran Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day on 3 January 1920; on the opening page of Song of Solomon (1977), Robert Smith leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital on 18 February 1931; in The Bluest Eye (1970), Pecola Breedlove wills self-disappearance through a longing to possess the eyes of another face (“Please God . . . Please make
me disappear’” [59]). These bodies do not tell a history of capitulation to dominant powers but comprise one part of a larger multivalent narrative of black survival in North America. The act of self-destruction overtly participates in racial and class struggles, revealing, to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault, “a body totally imprinted by history” (148).4

A dual impulse toward erasure and survival, corresponding to the “happiness” of the man who leapt off a ship in 1788, distinguishes Morrison’s thematic. In A Taste of Power, Elaine Brown traces the Black Power Movement in the United States to African insurrections and to “the first Africans who had leaped from slave ships in suicidal rejection of slavery” (355). In Morrison’s work, suicide operates on two revolutionary levels: Within the story, it functions as a political form of resistance—a break in history—and within the narrative structure, it comprises a discursive strategy, an organizational axis around which meanings revolve—a break in textual time. First, I want to discuss the difficulty of talking about suicide and its ontological relevance to revolutionary struggles. Then, I will turn to Morrison’s novels, reading them not according to their publication dates but according to the chronological order of the represented suicides in U.S. American history. I begin with an extended reading of Beloved, the novel that relies most subtly and structurally on a suicidal movement.

The last chapter of Beloved begins, “There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship’s, smooths and contains the rocker” (274). The postbellum narrative returns to the Middle Passage as a negative signifier—the rocking of this loneliness is not like a ship’s—and makes a final gesture toward the others: “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there” (275). “Down there” are millions of Africans killed during the slave trade, including some who chose to jump overboard. In an often overlooked passage in Beloved, a woman “is not pushed” into the sea but chooses to go. The allusion to this suicided other in the final pages of Beloved shifts the narrative into awareness of its own passing, its own inevitable silence: “This is not a story to pass on” (275). The novel, like Levinas’s preface to Totality and Infinity,5 begins to undo itself, to commit a kind of suicide. How one reads the act of self-destruction bears on the interpretation of this ambiguous choral line.

Those who find the ending an abdication of the necessity not only of telling the story but also of intervening in the continuing story of colonial violence probably have little interest in thinking about suicide as a resistant strategy, much less as a form of survival. Mae Henderson offers an interpretation closer to my own. She emphasizes that this is not a story to be “PASSED ON—not in the sense of being retold, but in the sense of being forgotten, repressed, or ignored” (83). In this reading, the text affirms its own life and insists on active remembrance. Acts of self-destruction in Morrison’s novels occupy (like Levinas’s face) a penultimate position, coming (again) just before the end of the story.

Speaking of Race and Suicide

In a conversation with Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith describes how, in a white supremacist culture, actions and concepts that have nothing to do with race become imbued with racial meanings:

Therefore, Black people have the option of taking things—sexuality, behavior, conflicts, whatever they don’t like—and saying, “That’s white.” Lesbianism is not the only thing seen as a white thing. A real good example is suicide. Black people say, “Yeah, suicide is a white thing.” (124)
Barbara Christian speculates in "Layered Rhythms" about Morrison’s interest in Woolf in the 1950s: "...what did you want with the work of a woman who killed herself. You know the way black people feel about suicide. As your narrator commented in your novel Sula, the black people of the Bottom feel that suicide is ‘beneath them’" (489). Kevin Early’s 1992 empirical research documents a similar disassociation; in interviews, pastors in a Southern black community expressed "a deep sense of the incompatibility of suicide with the black experience" (25). Resistance to the word suicide generally proceeds from a reluctance to identify oneself or one’s community with victimization, powerlessness, hopelessness. Sometimes suicide does signify precisely these realities; it can also indict a brutal, dehumanizing culture that makes life unbearable. Suicide is now the third leading cause of death among young black men; it is eighth in the nation overall. 7

In 1965, Huey Newton cofounded the Black Panther Party with Bobby Seale. (Brown took over the leadership in 1974, becoming the first woman to lead a paramilitary operation in the United States.) Newton’s 1972 collection of essays To Die for the People, which was edited by Morrison, explains his commitment to the Panthers and to armed struggle against white supremacy. In Revolutionary Suicide (1973), Newton rethinks suicide in political terms: "If the Black Panthers symbolize the suicidal trend among Blacks, then the whole Third World is suicidal, because the Third World fully intends to resist and overcome the ruling class of the United States" (5). Newton reflects on the theoretical intersection between suicide and revolution, playing off the ideas of Emile Durkheim and Herbert Hendin. While in prison, Newton read Durkheim’s sociological analysis and learned about Hendin’s research in the May 1970 issue of Ebony. In Black Suicide (1969), Hendin argued that suicide rates among black people in urban areas are often as high as those of whites and that the white rate only surpasses the black rate after age 45 (6). Black men in New York City between the ages of 20 and 35 kill themselves twice as often as do white men in the same age group (3), and among young black women suicide is "decidedly more of a problem than it is in the white population of the same age" (5). Hendin’s research led Newton to think about the cultural implications of suicide and to wonder if the hopelessness that many young black people experienced could be directed away from "reactionary suicide" and into "revolutionary suicide."

By aligning revolutionary suicide with black power rather than powerlessness, Newton fashions the title of his book into a "neoteric phrase in which the word ‘revolutionary’ transforms the word ‘suicide’ into an idea that has different dimensions and meanings, applicable to a new and complex situation" (5). This emphasis on the transformative aspect of "revolutionary" prevents "suicide" from slipping into submission to a hostile, governing culture; and the insistence on "suicide" testifies to the severe and likely repercussions of black resistance. Newton strategically blurs the difference between risking one’s life in order to confront oppressive forces and reluctantly taking one’s life in order to end unbearable suffering. In his work with the Prison Information Group (GIP), Foucault moved toward a comparable understanding of revolutionary suicide. The GIP published the letters of a man who killed himself while in prison, which Foucault considered political documents "‘expressing a new genre of political reflection.’" Foucault increasingly theorized a connection between "‘a permanent temptation to commit suicide and the birth of a certain form of political consciousness’" (qtd. in Miller 1993). Newton clarifies the term for the Black Panthers: "Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the oppo-
site. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible” (3):

The concept of revolutionary suicide is not defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope—reality because the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death, and hope because it symbolizes a resolute determination to bring about change. Above all, it demands that the revolutionary see his death and his life as one piece. (6)

This dialectical vision of life and death, hope and suicide, infuses Newton’s understanding of the black liberation movement.

Newton paraphrases “an old African saying, ‘I am we.’ If you met an African in ancient times and asked him who he was, he would reply, ‘I am we.’ This is revolutionary suicide: I, we, all of us are the one and the multitude” (371). Newton locates revolutionary suicide in a cosmology that does not separate supernatural from natural, individual from community. He contrasts this worldview with Western conceptualizations of “I” and “suicide”: If the “I” already is the “we,” there is no suicide, no death. Through a chain gang, Beloved starkly dramatizes this ethic of responsibility and the connectedness of bodies. One man’s sudden action would threaten the entire group: “A man could risk his own life, but not his brother’s. So the eyes said, ‘Steady now,’ and ‘Hang by me’” (109). The forty-six men communicate, calmly, persuasively, and no one runs—until they can do it as a group. In Morrison’s fiction and Newton’s theory, the body, the site of revolutionary suicide, is a material, individual phenomenon as well as a psychological, collective entity.

Having seen black people tortured and brutalized, Newton possesses a certainty about death that is neither abstract nor vague. He cites this as a distinguishing feature between people of color and white allies: “In this we are different from white radicals. They are not faced with genocide” (4)—or with the political demand to consider suicide. To face death, to be faced with genocide—Newton’s writing relies on the rhetorical mobilization of face as a verb, as an action beyond “seeing.” To face something (the truth, the facts) implies a reluctant if comprehensive acceptance. For Newton, to face reality is also to dedicate oneself to changing it: “Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions” (3). Newton seizes on the word suicide, radically investing it with political power and connecting it to movements throughout the “third world.”

A former prisoner of war under the Nazi regime, Emmanuel Levinas also theorized about the ethical imperative to face history and one another, though he came to a different conclusion than did Newton about the efficacy of violent resistance. His philosophical writings, particularly Totality and Infinity (1969), patiently dismantle certain totalitarian and arrogant foundations of Western thought. He dedicated Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (1974) “to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism.” Levinas understood that to resist violent regimes is to put one’s life at risk. And to understand violence, we must understand the face: “Violence can only aim at a face” (Totality 140). Levinas attaches profound primacy to the face; as a physical revelation, it establishes the context and terms for his reconsidera-
tion of desire, the trace, the other. "To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question"; "my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival" ("Dialogue" 24). Newton’s revolutionary discourse shares with Levinas this field of inquiry—what responsibilities (what loves) override the individual? What does it mean to belong to a community? What responsibilities arise from “facing” the other, the self, and the world? Both Newton and Levinas help to name the ethical crisis, the crash of alterity, registered by suicide in three of Morrison’s novels, Beloved, Sula, and Song of Solomon.

Beloved: “It is hard to make yourself die forever”

Newton distinguishes revolutionary suicide, which is fueled by hope, from reactionary suicide, which is fueled by despair:

By hoping and desiring, the revolutionary suicide chooses life; he is, in the words of Nietzsche, “an arrow of longing for another shore.” Both suicides despise tyranny, but the revolutionary suicide is both a great despiser and a great adorer who longs for another shore. (371)

This “longing for another shore” characterizes Morrison’s use of suicide, resonating most powerfully with Beloved’s desire to cross over to the other side, to “join” with the woman whose face she has lost. Morrison has referred to the loss of African lives during the Atlantic crossing as a “whole nation that is under the sea,” and she dedicated Beloved to this other nation, the “sixty million and more.” The Middle Passage, as Barbara Christian argues in “Fixing Methodologies,” hovers at the margins of cultural discourse; it “has practically disappeared from American cultural memory” (7). When, in Beloved, an unnamed woman jumps into the Atlantic Ocean, suicide becomes an act of staggering communal significance, another story that is not to be passed on. Christian correctly calls attention to the marginalization of the Atlantic Crossing in theory and in culture, but even her essay does not address this other unspeakable act. If Beloved is a “fixing ceremony” for the disremembered, as Christian convincingly argues, the “fixing” includes the memory of a woman who left a girl longing for her return.

The questions of responsibility and choice that surround Sethe’s story of love and murder extend to Beloved’s memory of the slavership and to the act of suicide that emerges amid spatial gaps and signs. The figure of Beloved is as haunted by “the woman with my face” who disappeared on the Middle Passage as Sethe is by the daughter whom she killed. Beloved’s lyrical monologues (210-17) coalesce with the ongoing experience of a girl crushed in a slavership: “All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too” (210). This fragmented account provides a glimpse into slave vessels that routinely exceeded the fatally high number of “cargo” legally permitted. Dr. Alexander Falconbridge, a surgeon on four slaving voyages, testified in Parliament that there was “not so much room as a man in his coffin either in length or breadth” (qtd. in Cowley and Mannix 100-01). Captain Ernest H. Pentecost laments the lack of sensibility in Africans, who, “notwithstanding the strictest injunction against it,” “cannot always be prevented from the filthy habit of depositing their natural excretions upon the spot where they sleep” (xxv). Unable to cry or vomit, Beloved explains, “some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat” (210). In 1629, the wife of a British governor recorded that one ship had been “so pestered with people and goods; so full of infection that after a while they saw little but throwing people overboard” (qtd. in Pentecost xxvii).
For women, the violence of the Middle Passage included rape, sexual torment, and assault. When Sethe tells Beloved and Denver what little she knows of her own mother’s life, Sethe begins to remember “something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind” (61). The act of telling revives the past; as Lynne Pearce argues, the past in Beloved is “reconstituted through dialogue” (187). But the past is also, as Laura Doyle demonstrates, reconstituted through bodies. The materiality of words and the semiotics of touch move Sethe’s childhood memory into consciousness. Through a “slit” in her mind, Sethe recalls what she had learned from Nan after Sethe had tried to identify her mother’s dead body among those killed on the plantation. Nan had taken Sethe’s hand and “yanked her away from the pile before she could make out the mark”—the circle and cross burnt on her mother’s rib. Nan told her in a language Sethe could no longer remember that she and her mother were on the sea together. “Both were taken up many times by the crew. She threw them all away but you,” “Nan had said. Sethe’s father was the only one her mother had ‘put her arms around’” (62). This assertion of the past, of “something privately shameful,” forces Sethe to confront her mother’s repeated rapes on the ship. The shame felt by the surviving daughter conveys the terrorist effects of sexual violence, even a generation removed. The forgotten language, the yanking hand, the reaching arms return Sethe to her mother’s life, and, as Deborah Horwitz writes, “if Sethe remembers her mother, she must also remember that she believes her mother deserted her” (159). In this storytelling moment and double remembrance, the child Sethe’s desire to identify her dead mother coexists with the desire of the listening Beloved to recognize the face of a woman who jumped from the ship: “Sethe’s is the face that left me,” she concludes (214). But neither Sethe nor Beloved can find her beloved in the pile of bodies that is lost to history.

Even though she carries on her back the marks of a past that make such a leaving comprehensible, Sethe assures herself that her mother had not chosen to leave her. In her monologue, she wonders why her mother was hung along with many other slaves:

I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma’am and nobody’s ma’am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she, now? (203)

For Beloved, this is the very question she has for the woman she watched go overboard: “All I wanted to know is why did she go in the water in the place where we crouched? Why did she do that when she was just about to smile at me?” (214). This unrealized smile marks the penultimate moment of suicide. Beloved recalls the white men who push the dead bodies through the ship’s porthole, but she makes it clear that “they do not push the woman with my face through she goes in they do not push her she goes . . . she goes in the water with my face.” Rather than gloss over or ignore the suicides of the Middle Passage, Morrison presents the wrenching absence and longing to join the (face of the) dead. Beloved, who insists “she took my face away” (212), must travel through the act—or, more precisely, the place—of suicide in order to (re)appear on the other side: “I have to have my face I go in” (213). The text turns toward suicide, and Beloved materializes through time and water. This leap gives birth to the ghost.

When the “I” jumps overboard, the narrative performs what Ross Chambers calls “textual ‘suicide’”—the enactment of the death of the narrative ‘I’ in favor of the continued life of a textual sujet d’énonciation” (112). In his chapter on Gérard de Nerval and Hubert Aquin, Chambers notes this crucial distinction: “Suicide as writing, writing as suicide, unlike the act of physically killing one-
self, is not final: rather it is a prolongation (153). Beloved’s movement into
the water prolongs for the reader the
telling of history and inserted an oppositional body into the narrative. This rev-
olutionary return to the future embeds the memory of the Middle Passage into
the memory of Sethe’s coerced decision
to kill her daughter. The “historical
becoming” of Beloved, the narrative
click, is achieved through suicide and
the desire for a face. The four mono-
logues depart from the previous narrative
form and appropriately conclude
with Beloved’s attempt to retrieve
“her” face. Levinas offers this
metaphor to convey how desire for the
face breaks form: “The other who man-
ifests himself in the face as it were
breaks through his own plastic essence,
like someone who opens a window on
which his figure is outlined. His pres-
ence consists in divesting himself of the
form which, however, manifests him”
(“Trace” 351). Opening the window
makes the form disappear, annihilates
the reflected self. In order to make
Beloved manifest, the window of his-
torical realism must be opened.
Beloved, who can no longer see “her”
face, crashes into the watery place of
reflection. This narrative strategy reen-
acts the paradox of suicidal thinking:
The self has to be killed to survive. The
infinite and signification of the face
move the text through the ontological
space of self-destruction, and the
divestment of realistic form manifests
the presence of a ghost, bodied forth
through the Middle Passage.

After Beloved returns “like a good
girl” and Sethe gets “close enough to
see the face,” Sethe’s bladder fills and
she has to run to the outhouse (51). The
text here sustains the indistinction of
the pre-oedipal moment with the
reminder that the face Sethe sees is not
“her face” (i.e., Beloved’s face) but “the
face.” Beloved likewise associates Sethe
with “the face” she is missing. Lynn
Pearce notes that “it is by addressing
Sethe in the present that Beloved is
able to realize the nature of the rela-
tionship between their two ‘faces’ in
the past” (191). Beloved says that she
“left me there with no face or hers.
Sethe is the face I found and lost in the
water under the bridge. When I went
in, I saw her face coming to me and it
was my face too.” Beloved substitutes
Sethe for the other woman: “Sethe
went into the sea. She went there. They
did not push her” (214). This perceived
choice generates Beloved’s starving
anger and increasing resentment
toward Sethe. Beloved accuses Sethe
of leaving her behind. Of not being
nice to her, not smiling at her. She said
they were the same, had the same face,
how could she have left her? . . . She
said when she cried there was no one.
That dead men lay on top of her. That
she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without
skin stuck their fingers in her and said
beloved in the dark and bitch in the
light. Sethe pleaded for forgiveness,
counting, listing again and again her
reasons. (241-42)

Pleading for forgiveness for a history
that both is and is not her own, Sethe
struggles to answer Beloved’s impossi-
ble question, “Why did you leave me
who am you?” (216). Sethe provides
her reasons, but she cannot explain
(because she is and is not) the missing
face.

Beloved: “now I am her face”

The narrative merger of the
African woman’s decision to kill
herself with Sethe’s decision to kill her
children creates a Bakhtinian intersec-
tion of novelistic planes, a time/space
of simultaneity and disjunction. Just as
Sethe’s actions (and her mother’s
flight) cannot be evaluated outside the
context of U.S. American slavery, the
black woman’s decision to jump over-
board cannot be approached outside
the context of captivity, murder, and
rape by white men. The text reverber-
atates with these “contending forces” of
personal responsibility and political
oppression, struggling to give voice to
a past whose spatial borders are
impassable, unlike the ones that separated "free" from slave states in 1856. In order to cross over into this history, the text elides the narrator and the unresolved discourse of Sethe. The third-person narrator "disappears" after the present has "clicked" into the past: "When the click came Sethe didn’t know what it was" (175). Then it came: Beloved was humming a song she couldn’t know. Unless. Relieved and "giddy," Sethe takes over the narration (183-84)—"I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all." Her narrative ends with the only remaining question—"How bad is the scar?" (184).

The next time Sethe assumes the narrative voice (191-98), she speaks directly to her daughter: "You had the sweetest face" (192).

Denver knowingly suspects that Beloved—a murdered daughter, a raped girl, an African loaded onto a slavership—is more than a sister or daughter (266). This shifting subject who does not "fit" into any story completely is an appropriate conduit into the incomplete history of Africans who chose to kill themselves rather than endure further torture, degradation, and brutal uncertainty. In her early response to the novel, Deborah Horvitz suggests that the girl on the ship is Sethe’s mother and that Beloved acts as the ghostly fulcrum between generations, occupying the position of Sethe’s mother and daughter; Beloved is then abandoned by one mother, killed by the other. Elizabeth House closely examines Beloved’s monologue and the misrecognitions that occur throughout the novel. She offers a compelling reading of Beloved, not as Sethe’s murdered daughter, but as the child of a suicide who has been living with a white man; he abused her sexually and recently died, which explains her escape and arrival at 124 Bluestone. House writes, "The lonely girl sees the creek, remembers the water under the ship’s bridge where she last glimpsed her mother, and concludes that her lost loved ones are beneath the creek’s sur-

face" (20). House assumes that "the woman with my face" is Beloved’s mother ("in the girl’s eyes, her mother willingly abandoned her" [18]) and then argues that Sethe and Denver misread Beloved as their lost daughter/sister while Beloved misreads Sethe as her lost mother. The epigraph to the novel from Romans 9:25, according to House, anticipates these misidentifications: "I will call them my people, which were not my people."

These problems of identification accord with the communal alterity of suicide and with the dislocating effects of the Middle Passage that make any attempt to identify one’s ancestors difficult, if not impossible. Beloved describes the woman on the ship only as "the woman with my face," consistently avoiding the word mother. Earlier she asks Sethe, "Your woman she never fix up your hair?" (60). "My woman? You mean my mother?" Sethe provides an answer without waiting for clarification from Beloved. The later monologues continue this ambiguity. Sethe’s monologue begins, "Beloved, she my daughter," and Denver’s opens, "Beloved is my sister," but the third and fourth refuse familial markers, "I am Beloved and she is mine." Beloved’s speech consists of rhythmic, simple sentences without conventional syntax—"I am not big" (210); "I am small" (211)—and is distinguished by the repetition of the word face and the conspicuous absence of the word mother, especially in an overall narrative preoccupied with a mother-daughter relationship. Horvitz builds a wonderfully clear and evocative interpretation of the monologues, highlighting the fluidity of identities in this section: For her, the suicidal moment constitutes "perhaps the most heart-breaking" image in the novel (164). But Horvitz, like most critics, assigns a privilege to the mother-daughter relationship. She writes, "The loss of the underwater face represents not only the death of a woman, but the death of a mother and therefore the rupture of the mother-daughter.
bond, probably the strongest, most important relationship women can have” (163).

I want to shift Horovitz’s emphasis: It is not the death of a mother but the loss of a face that gives this scene its emotional complexity. While the mother-daughter relationship can be powerful, fraught, killing, and loving (most certainly in Morrison’s work), it does not exhaust human capacity for connection. The woman who jumps overboard may be a sister, aunt, twin, grandmother, friend—or mother; the loss of any of these faces would devastate a girl crammed in a slaveship, loving a dead man’s teeth: “We are all,” as she says, “trying to leave our bodies behind” (210). The anonymity of the woman who jumps and her unclear, yet absolute, relationship to the speaker unhinges the act of suicide from the plot; it cannot be clearly placed or neatly tied to other characters. From this alterity emerges “a hot thing”—an object of longing with whom the self wants to “join.” This longing is immediately connected to a face: “I want her face a hot thing” (211).

A face, Levinas writes, is the “phenomenon which is the apparition of the other” and that which comes from “beyond” (“Trace” 351, 354): “A face enters our world from an absolutely alien sphere—that is, precisely out of an absoluteness, which in fact is the name for fundamental strangeness” (“Trace” 352). Beloved sees the face of the other in an “absolutely alien sphere”—in a suicidal moment on a ship that seems a grave. The suicide of the unknown woman begins the intentional return of Beloved, who waits for someone to “say me my name” on the bridge (212):

her face comes through the water a hot thing . . . I have to have my face I go in . . . I am looking for the join I am loving my face so much my dark face is close to me I want to join . . . I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me I see me swim away a hot thing (213)

Beloved watches herself swim away from a perspective, a language, detached from her body.

Intersubjective identity and the desire for symbiosis are figured through a radical substitution of body parts—“now I am her face my face has left me.” The “underwater face” that Beloved desires is, like Levinas’s “abstract face,” not a gentle thing; it is a demanding “wretchedness” that, in its nudity, supplicates and will not be ignored:

The approach of the face is the most basic mode of responsibility . . . [The face] is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. Secondly, the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. (“Dialogue” 22-24)

Levinas identifies the penultimate of the face, “the other before death,” as the mode and proof of responsibility.

Beloved and Sethe are bound to faces that condemn as much as comfort, faces that make an appeal at the moment of death. Beloved wants to follow the woman who has killed herself, and Sethe allows herself to be consumed by Beloved, unwilling to be an accomplice (again) in her death. Both characters have faced death, personally and through another, and their refusal to forget constitutes revolutionary suicide. They risk safety and life, knowing the alternative means an intolerable existence. Beloved equates Sethe wholly with the face—“Sethe is the face” (my emphasis), not Sethe has the face. In this revision of Lacanian desire, the face, not the gaze per se, achieves primary significatory value and initiates reciprocal fictions, fictions that have material impacts on psyches and bodies. Insatiably hungry, Beloved demands sweets and goods from the others, but “when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire” (240). She is not imposed upon by desire; Beloved creates it. Levinas wonders about this very process—“Is the desire for another an appetite or a generosity?” (“Trace” 351). Desire does
not proceed from a lack but “is born in a being that lacks nothing, or, more exactly, it comes to birth on the other side of all that can be lacking him or can satisfy him” (“Trace” 350).

This more exact reference to the birthing on the other side corresponds with the suicidal beginnings of Beloved’s desire. Lacking nothing because the “I” has disappeared—“I am gone now I am her face”—Beloved crosses over into another living time, with an appetite. Denver asks, “What’s it like over there, where you were before?” (75); Sethe wants to know, “Didn’t you come from the other side?” (215). In Ohio but from “over there,” Beloved exists as a trace of both the past and the other, the “absolutely absent.” Paul D, who is “moved” by Beloved in ways he cannot fully comprehend, must withstand the destabilizing effects of her body:

the desire that drowned him there and forced him to struggle up, up into that girl like she was the clear air at the top of the sea. Coupling with her wasn’t even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. . . . [Afterward he was ashamed but] he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. (264)

Paul D’s struggle to stay alive during sex with Beloved, to breathe at the top of the sea, confirms the haunting, embodied presence of the Middle Passage on this other side. In a reversal of the suicidal urge, Paul D fights against drowning, against the pull of death, but does so only after he has revisited the “ocean-deep place he once belonged to,” a place where joining is inseparable from dying.

In Beloved, the desire for the face acts as an interface between the living and the dead. Beloved and Sethe try to “join” with the dead, and the “click” of the past into the present is subjectively and temporarily achieved. It is the non-coincidence of memories and materiality—“That ain’t her mouth” (154); “Sethe’s is the face that left me” (213); “He [Bodwin, whom Sethe mistakes for Schoolteacher] is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing” (262)—as well as their coincidence that Beloved represents. Levinas, also, describes the relationship with the other as time: “It is an untotalizable diachrony in which one moment pursues another without ever being able to retrieve it, to catch up with, or coincide with it” (“Dialogue” 21). The impossible pursuit of one moment by another seems particularly relevant to this narrative in which time circles and reverses. Sethe had warned Denver about the lastingness of pictures and places, about the possibility that one moment can catch up with another: “The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again.” Denver calmly concludes,

“If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.”
Sethe looked right in Denver’s face.
“Nothing ever does,” she said. (36)

The absence of permanent death in the text (Sethe explains, “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is” (203)) extends to the representation of suicide, which does not, in this text, signify an end. After going into the water, Beloved knows, “I am not dead I am not there is a house” (213). She surfaces from that other nation and walks fully dressed—“a hot thing now we can join a hot thing”—toward a house wracked with a baby’s spite. The narrative is held in place, in the present, by a longing to return to the millions whose names can never be known, and by history, the history of a face: “All of it is now it is always now.” The corporealization of Beloved through the act of suicide parallels the text’s final willingness to call into question its own assumed face. Like the suicide that is flight and death, the text clamors for the only seemingly impossible: a history that must be written and not passed on.
**Sula: a leaf-dead promise**

for the bird who flew against our window
one morning and broke his natural neck:

my window
is his wall
in a crash of
bird pride
he breaks the arrogance
of my definitions
and leaves me grounded
in his suicide (Lucille Clifton, _Good Woman 76)_

*Sula* opens with loss, with the sacrifice of a place to suburban capitalist enterprise. Separated into years that cannot contain themselves, the narrative knows more than it says, and from the first sentence, the future has already happened: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood" (3). Written during the U.S. American war against Viet Nam, *Sula* mourns the disappearance of a neighborhood and the deaths of "Peace." The novel returns to the impacts of World War I on black Americans, 400,000 of whom served in a segregated army. Between 1917 and 1923, there were 363 lynchings in the United States, reaching a peak in 1919 when large numbers of veterans returned to the country (Barrett 29). This is also the year that introduces Shadrack, whose name revives the revolutionary figure in the Book of Daniel. When the "handsome but ravaged" veteran makes his way back to Medallion, Ohio, he experiences a radical break between inside and outside, now and then.

Levinas prefaces *Totality and Infinity* with thoughts on the relationship between morality and war: "Does not lucidity, the mind’s openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?" (21). Levinas contends that "violence does not so much consist in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitment but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action" (21). Shadrack has caught sight of the permanent possibility of war, and he no longer recognizes himself. Yet he does retain one possibility for action: National Suicide Day, which emerges from the discrepancy between his pre- and postwar hands and provides the frame for this narrative of collective mourning.

After the war, Shadrack must battle with his phenomenal body, with the unpredictability of his hands. This outsider inside the Bottom illustrates Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory that "it is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body" (Phenomenology 106):

With extreme care he lifted one arm and was relieved to find his hand attached to his wrist. He tried the other and found it also. Slowly he directed one hand toward the cup and, just as he was about to spread his fingers, they began to grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk all over the tray and the bed. (9)

Relieved when he is straitjacketed and his hands are "confined," Shadrack then becomes anxious about other body parts: "If his hands behaved as they had done, what might he expect from his face?" (10) But when he sees himself reflected in toilet water, it is precisely his face that assures him of his reality:

He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn’t exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indiscernible presence, he wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk of letting one edge of the blanket drop and glanced at his hands. They were still. Courteously still. (13)

His "indiscernible" black face provides him with immediate comfort, calming his "terrible fingers."

National Suicide Day merges into the Bottom calendar; the people "absorbed it into their thoughts, into
their language, into their lives” (15). The narrator ironically explains, “Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day” (7). Shadrack’s annual holiday encourages people to avoid death’s random blows and free themselves of fear, to control death and resist disorder by killing themselves. It is not until 1941, the novel’s penultimate chapter, that the ritual ends in actual deaths. Without the illusion of military purpose22 and with the death of Sula, Shadrack falters. He realizes that “he had been wrong. Terribly wrong. No ‘always’ at all. Another dying away of someone whose face he knew” (157-58). He had tried to stop time and to circumvent capricious death, but the loss of “someone whose face he knew” forces him to reevaluate his ambitious holiday.

Shadrack gathers his things, but “it was not heartfelt this time, not loving this time, for he no longer cared whether he helped them or not.” After his realization that his “visitor was dead and would come no more,” a spatial break occurs on the page. The narrator then forecasts, “Years later people would quarrel about who had been the first to go.” There is a missing referent here—where the people had gone. Before we know where and what, we know there is uncertainty about who initiated the movement on 3 January 1941. Most people assume that the Deweys were responsible; a few people know Dessie “had opened her door first” (158). She stood there laughing, and the narrator can only speculate why:

Maybe the sun; maybe the clots of green showing in the hills promising so much; maybe the contrast between Shadrack’s doomy, gloomy bell glistening in all that sweet sunshine. Maybe just a brief moment, for once, of not feeling fear, of looking at death in the sunshine and being unaffected. Dessie’s laugh prompts Ivy to laugh, which encourages the children to giggle. By the time Shadrack arrives, “he [is] facing a line of delighted faces” (159).

Neighbors call out to others “to help them open further this slit in the veil, this respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before” (160). This rending of the veil of double consciousness23 leads inevitably to the abandoned government project on River Road that had denied jobs to the people living in the Bottom in 1927. This was also the year that Marcus Garvey was deported to Jamaica.24 The implications of this loss of momentum and hope explode as Shadrack’s holiday edges over into its referent. The gathering destroys the remnants of the proposed bridge: “Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (161). This killing motivation compels them further than they had intended: “They didn’t mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far . . .” (161-62). Even if Shadrack’s followers “did not mean to go in,” they did. The progression toward the tunnel corresponds with Wilhelm Stekel’s claim, a claim supported by Sigmund Freud and Karl Meninger, that suicide always involves murderous impulses turned inward. Charter Suicide Day did, in fact, include the option of homicide: Shadrack explained that this was “their only chance to kill themselves or each other” (14). The Bottom residents are not, however, interested in killing each other but in “wip[ing] from the face of the earth” the unfinished sign of their economic disenfranchisement.

The “choler” component of the melancholic holiday takes over, trans-
forming an existential parade into a suicidal uprising: “Led by the tough, the enraged and the young they picked up the lengths of timber and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not mixed or even been allowed to haul” (161). Shadrack’s previously solo performance ends with people crushed and drowned in the New River Road tunnel. Designed to preempt death and, as Alan Wolfe writes in a different context, to “undo the end of history itself” (222), Suicide Day leads not to glorified, individual deaths but to a political protest in which identity is collective: The bodies of the indistinguishable Deweys are never found, and no one knows who went first. For those people in the Bottom who “did not believe that death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate” (90)—the march toward the tunnel advances with a fatal intention. By the next January 3, Shadrack’s National Suicide Day will be replaced by an international one.

In a comparison of Mrs. Dalloway and Sula, Eileen Barrett observes, “While Woolf shows how England sacrifices individual white men to maintain its world dominance, Morrison shows how an entire black community is sacrificed to racist domination” (26). The black community was also sacrificed in the U.S. American war in Vietnam. James Westheider summarizes this loss in Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War: “Young blacks were being channeled into the military, either indirectly by the lack of economic opportunities in the civilian sector that forced them to seek employment in the armed forces, or directly by the more coercive draft” (20). The overrepresentation of African Americans in combat—“the death rate for blacks was roughly 30 percent higher than the death rate for U.S. forces fighting in Southeast Asia” (13)—resulted from several overlapping factors. In addition to the lack of educational and economic opportunities, Westheider cites the draft under Robert MacNamara’s “Project 100,000.” Each year, 100,000 young men would be enlisted who otherwise did not meet the army’s mental aptitude test; they were, theoretically, given educational assistance unavailable to them as civilians. Of those recruited for this program between October 1966 and June 1969, 41 percent were black, and most lacked high school diplomas; 37 percent of the total recruits were assigned to combat (35). There was also a willingness on the part of many African Americans to volunteer, either for money and job security or for patriotism (14-15). Some studies have shown that black veterans suffer in larger numbers and more extensively from post-traumatic stress disorder than white veterans (175). Other African Americans, most visibly members of the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, and SNCC, routinely criticized drafting procedures and rejected any complicity in U.S. imperialism. Three years after joining the Nation of Islam in 1964, Muhammad Ali was sentenced to five years in prison for his refusal to fight in Vietnam, to go into the tunnel.

By 1965, peace has many tombstones, Eva can’t tell Nel from Sula, and Shadrack makes a final appearance, a “little shaggier, a little older, still energetically mad” (173). The text gravitates back to the association of Sula and Shadrack, to the eccentrics who, unafraid of the free fall, crash into closed windows, breaking definitions. The epilogue begins, “Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed” (163). This narrative recognition of only seeming improvement (in 1965, the U.S. war in Vietnam intensified, Malcolm X was assassinated, and the Watts riots began) presages Nel’s visit to the cemetery and her own epiphany that she had been missing Sula, not Jude, all those years. Sula’s death and Shadrack’s loss of genuine concern for others precede the catastrophe at the tunnel, but white supremacy assures it.

Sula, published in 1973, turns on a mass drowning that connects both
“world” wars and the “conflict” in Viet Nam. Suicide emerges in the novel as an atmosphere made sound by Shadrack’s ringing bell, a “sane” institution to counter the insanity of war, and a spontaneously riotous response to racist government hiring practices. The people of the Bottom may feel that suicide is “beneath them,” but National Suicide Day dislodges suicide from the presumable realm of the solitary and the hopeless. Shadrack’s holiday hints at a transformative and revolutionary ethics, a configuration of love and belonging that is more explicitly developed in *Song of Solomon*.

*Song of Solomon*: “Solomon cut across the sky. Solomon gone home”

Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air? (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 268)

On the first page of *Song of Solomon*, an insurance agent leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital. Robert Smith had left this note on his door:

At 3:00 P.M. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all.

(signed) Robert Smith,
Ins. agent

The narrator reports that Mr. Smith did not “draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had,” since no one read his note until a few hours before the event. The only people able to witness the performance on a Wednesday afternoon were “the unemployed, the self-employed, and the very young” (3). As rose petals scatter and a woman sings, “O Sugarman done fly away / O Sugarman done gone,” Smith “leaped on into the air” (9). The singing, the red petals, the audience, the comparison to Lindbergh establish the performativity of the moment. For now, the scene is about flying, not falling.

The possibility of a return to Africa through the act of flying occurs in numerous historical and literary accounts of the slave trade. Gay Wilentz observes, “Clearly one’s perception regarding whether the slaves killed themselves or flew back to Africa is culture bound” (63). The trajectory of Smith’s promised flight “from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior” also suggests the movement of enslaved Africans who escaped from the South into Canada. On the ground, interpretations of Smith’s blue wings vary. The hospital personnel “wondered if one of those things that racial-uplift groups were always organizing was taking place.” Others regard the flight as “some form of worship” (6), probably Father Divine from Philadelphia. Or, more simply, the man on the ledge is a “nut-wagon” (7). *Song of Solomon* begins with multiple acts of reading suicide, with characters trying to discern meaning from ambiguous signs. Smith’s written intent—“to fly away on my own wings”—may be fatal, visionary, spiritual, nutwagonish.

The opening does not describe Smith’s physically destroyed body; he disappears from the page intact in midair. The suspension remains until chapter nine, when Corinthians remembers the suicide as an adult: “It was all mixed together—the red velvet, the screams, and the man crashing down on the pavement. She had seen his body quite clearly, and to her astonishment, there was no blood” (199). The narrator summarizes the feelings of the community at the time: “Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done” (8). It turns out that Smith, a member of the Seven Days, had a more interesting life than the neighbors realized. The Seven Days, a secret attempt to counter the violence of whites against blacks, was founded in 1920 (the same year as the first Suicide Day) "when that private from Georgia was
killed after his balls were cut off and after that veteran was blinded when he came home from France in World War I’” (156). Hospital Tommy, one of the founders of the society, details for Guitar the white privilege that permeates the Armed Forces as well as U.S. culture: “. . . you not going to have no ship under your command to sail on, no train to run, and you can join the 332nd if you want to and shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler’s backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three.” Hospital Tommy further assures Guitar that you will never have “your own special toilet,” and you will never “walk into a bank and tell the bank man you want such and such a house on such and such a street” (60). Guitar, enraged by the false promise of the American Dream and the distance between real justice and “their laws and their courts” (155), joins the Seven Days. He explains to Milkman that the group is not about hate: “What I’m doing ain’t about hating white people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love’” (160). Like Shadrack’s concern for the people in the Bottom, Guitar’s love demands a willingness to face, and force, death.

Elaine Brown explores the centrality of love in the Black Power Movement: “The answer was love—the love that was inside the madness. It was about not forgetting. It was about living and dying for freedom” (355). Twenty-five years after the height of her involvement with the Black Panthers, Brown stresses the need to survive—to refuse, because of one’s commitment, to take unnecessary risks. She says that she would never tell anyone “black and in America” to put down a gun, but she warns young people against idealizing violence and death:

And that’s the other thing.
My theme is that love of your people.
Then you gonna have to realize that this may have to be a lifetime commitment
and that the longer you live, the more you can do. (A. Smith 230-31)

Song of Solomon engages with this complex of love, commitment, and revolution, beginning with Smith’s suicide note: “I loved you all.”

The sequence of Song of Solomon encourages us to read the history of the Seven Days back into the opening tableau. Although Smith’s reasons are never fully revealed, Henry Porter, another member, alludes to Smith and the philosophy of the Seven Days during his own crisis five years later. Stationed in an attic window, threatening suicide and screaming for someone “to fuck! . . . or I’ll blow my brains out!” (25), Porter turns his shotgun toward himself after the arrival of Macon Dead, who characteristically demands back rent from the suicidal tenant. “Gimme hate, Lord,” he whimpers. “I’ll take hate any day. But don’t give me love. I can’t take no more love, Lord. I can’t carry it. Just like Mr. Smith.” (26). Porter interprets Smith’s suicide as a refusal of the weighty responsibility of membership and love in the Seven Days. The tense moment is comically undone: The shotgun’s “length made it difficult; his drunkenness made it impossible” (25). Rather than destroying himself, Porter pees over a gathering of women below him.

Within the first thirty pages of Song of Solomon, we learn that the “longing for another shore” that compels revolutionary action may result in active resistance or tired surrender. Ralph Story argues that Smith was “committing revolutionary suicide—an idea which most Western readers and even some contemporary Japanese have had a hard time embracing despite the fact that in Japanese culture the idea of ritualistic suicide has long been considered both noble and manly” (149). According to Newton’s
definitions, Smith’s jump from the top of Mercy Hospital seems more reactionary than revolutionary. As a participant in the Seven Days—a society made up “of a few men who are willing to take some risks” (155)—Smith had engaged in revolutionary suicide; in choosing to kill himself, he abandoned the revolutionary cause and chose reactionary suicide, the “reaction of a man who takes his own life in response to social conditions that overwhelm him and condemn him to helplessness” (Newton 2). On the level of causality, the immediate effect of Smith’s leap is less enigmatic: Ruth Dead goes into labor and gives birth to Milkman. The flight achieves another symbolic function: Suicide, as in Beloved and Sula, activates the plot, induces labor, allows a living body to cross over. The narrator explains that Smith’s wings “must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing that Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself” (9).

Marked by suicide, Milkman must journey southward as an adult and track his family’s history in order to regain any interest in his life. In Shalimar, Virginia, men “looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers” (269). Milkman does not see the faces of others, so his comfortable consciousness cannot, as Levinas writes, “be put into question.” His transformation begins only after he is stripped of his bourgeois clothes and sensibilities during the hunting scene. Resting near a tree, Milkman realizes that he thought he “deserved to be loved—from a distance, through—and given what he wanted. . . . Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness” (280). Guitar’s insistence that love motivates his work returns to Milkman after the hunters have killed the bobcat. With the repetition of “It is about love. What else?” (285), Milkman yanks out the heart of the dead animal. “What else?” punctuates the action, becoming an increasingly nonverbal question.

The Atlantic Ocean again signifies a space of violent rupture as well as return in Song of Solomon. After Susan Byrd tells Milkman the story of his great-grandfather’s flight, Milkman races to Sweet’s home: “Come on, let’s go swimming. I’m dirty and I want waaaaaater! . . . I need the sea! The whole goddam sea! . . . I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!” (330). Sweet points out that they’re in hill country, there is no sea, but there is “some water comin down below the ridge on the other side. Real deep; wide too” (331). In the wide water with water moccasins, Milkman repeats the tale:

“He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddamn!” He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water. Up again. Still pounding, leaping, diving. (331-32)

Milkman imitates the flight of his ancestor, splashing in water and clearly alive: “He didn’t need no airplane. He just took off; got fed up. All the way up! No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby” (332). His excitement about his great-grandfather’s escape from slavery is subdued only after he learns of Hagar’s death. Coming into consciousness in Pilate’s basement (like the dropped son of Solomon who survives the fall, landing in the saving trees that populate Morrison’s novels [327]), Milkman manages to link his own treatment of Hagar to Solomon’s flight, and, finally, he hears Sweet’s question “Who’d he leave behind?” (332). “Jesus Christ,” Milkman realizes, “he left twenty-one children!” Milkman apprehends Hagar’s death through the past and the communal impact of male flight: “While he
dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying” (336).

Earlier, Milkman had coldly ended their relationship, and Hagar had tried to kill him, systematically, for six months, on the thirtieth of each month: “Totally taken by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own” (137). Guitar refers to Hagar as one of the “doormat women”: “They loved their love so much they would kill anybody who got in their way” (310). Eventually Hagar turns her melancholic rage against her own body and embarks on a purchasing frenzy, buying a Playtex garter belt, I. Miller No Color hose, Fruit of the Loom panties, two nylon slips, a little two-piece Evan Picone, a nightgown, make-up, and perfume. In a rainstorm with breaking bags, Hagar undergoes, in Michael Awkward’s words, a “virtual disassociation of sensibility,” a “grief-inspired aphasia” (493). Not until she presents herself before the loving eyes of Reba and Pilate does she see the futility of her venture: “It was in their eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair” (318). Hagar’s fever confirms the deadly implications of consumer culture and the romantic lies of the beauty industry.30 In a familiar Morrison stylistic, the narrator assumes we already know what happens next and, after a spatial break on the page, simply comments, “The neighbors took up a collection because Pilate and Reba had spent everything getting Hagar the things she needed to fix herself up. It didn’t amount to much, though, and it was touch and go whether she’d have a decent funeral” (320). In contrast to the public and performative (“noble and manly”) representations of flight and suicide, Hagar dies privately and quietly.31 At the funeral, Pilate integrates every mourner into her pain, calling out to the attending faces: “She nodded at the face and said ‘My baby girl.’”

Then, like a hunted elephant “who has just found his anger . . . [L] Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, ‘And she was loved!’” (322).

*Song of Solomon* asks who is responsible for the bones of the dead. Pilate learns that she has been carrying her own father’s bones, not, as she assumed, the white man murdered by Macon. (Nel similarly learns that she has been “carrying” Sula, not Jude, for twenty-four years). The novel culminates in a scene of possible flight, murder, or suicide. Just as the Middle Passage haunts Sethe’s escape and white supremacy haunts the mass drowning in *Sula*, slavery haunts Milkman’s journey to the South. At Solomon’s Leap, Milkman, like his ancestor, must choose. Kneeling beside Pilate—the unintended victim of Guitar’s bullet—Milkman “knew there wouldn’t be another mistake; that the minute he stood up Guitar would try to blow his head off. He stood up” (340-41). Milkman rises, knowing he faces certain death. On a nearby rock, Guitar puts down his rifle and also stands, murmuring, “‘My man . . . My main man.’” The brothers join in Newton’s dialectical vision of hope and reality: “The revolutionary must be prepared to face death.” Milkman calls out to Guitar, “‘You want me? Huh? You want my life?’”

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother.

Milkman leaps into the air, learning “what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could _ride it_” (341). This ecstatic surrender to the free fall defies, momentarily, the laws of gravity, and the body destroyed by the act remains “outside” the text.

For many critics, Milkman’s flight is triumphant, a spiritual awakening: “In this one moment he finally possesses his mythic heritage” and “gives it new meaning,” writes Deborah Guth.

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**REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE IN TONI MORRISON’S FICTION**

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"... Solomon's original flight defined freedom as an escape from the present; but as Milkman leaps into the air and into the arms of the 'brother' poised to kill him, he embraces the present as well as the legendary past and defines freedom as a complex connectedness" (584). Wahnema Lubiano rightly disagrees with the critical tendency to equate flight with transcendence: "To refer to that act as transcendent reduces the text to a chronicle of a journey to wholeness that is rewarded by transcendence. Such an interpretation does not do justice to the narrative complexities of the novel" (97).

Lubiano also, however, identifies suicide as one of three "troubling interpretations" of Milkman's leap.32

Lubiano argues that Milkman's "climactic leap" offers no hope; it is "a move forward which must also be read as a journey back: back to the behavior of a slave ancestor, back to nothingness, back to death" (112). This sentence triplicates the "behavior of a slave ancestor" with "nothingness" with "death," a conflation that confirms the haunting presence of the Middle Passage in contemporary imaginations and yet does not fully account for suicidal acts in Beloved, Sula, and Song of Solomon. The enigmatic flight of Milkman gestures toward revolutionary suicide unattached to a single individual: "It did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost." It does matter that Guitar is there. If he were not, the narrative would have ultimately turned against both the Seven Days and Guitar. Of the active Days members, one kills himself, another quits and gets married, and Guitar ostensibly becomes an irrational, crazed assailant— In Milkman's words, the "hawk-headed raven-skinned Sunday man": "Either Guitar's disappointment with the gold that was not there was so deep it had deranged him, or his 'work' had done it" (334). Guitar hunts down Milkman because he needs money to fund a bombing to duplicate the one that killed four girls in Birmingham. Milkman asks Guitar if he is trying to kill him because of the money:

"Yes."
"Because I ripped you off?"
"Because you ripped us off? You are fuckin' with our world! I told you I had this funny feeling."
"That I was going to cut you out?"
"Cut us out. Yes." (301)

Guitar twice stresses the we, rejecting Milkman's automatic individualization of the situation. Obviously the strategies of the Seven Days can be dismissed (as they are by Milkman) as ineffectual and unethical, but Guitar speaks for those who are tired of responding ethically to lynchings. Guitar forces Milkman to face history and to enter into revolutionary awareness. Guitar's sense of responsibility is intimate and violent and aims at a face; it also violates the principal obligation of Levinas's system of ethics— "Do not kill me" (Degnin 105). It cannot be forgotten that the retaliatory commitment of the Seven Days proceeds from white tyranny. Nor can it be forgotten that this commitment takes Pilate's life.

Morrison does not grant more than this: The leap is the beginning. Milkman's ambiguous flight that may be life, may be death, is a suicidal reckoning with pain. Solomon flew without wings, and Milkman leaps without "even bending his knees." There is no crash of bones on pavement. Exposed to Pilate's exceptional and vulnerable face, Milkman is borne by a new epistemology and led by a lodestar, the North Star; the return to a slave ancestor at Solomon's Leap is a return to survival. If this is suicide, it is revolutionary suicide, a hopeful, costly, imperfect escape into night, into uncertain arms. Suicide frames the novel, acting as a touchstone for communal struggle, despair, and resistance. It does not offer an answer but shapes the questions. In his introduction to Levinas's essays, Seán Hand writes, "In the age of Auschwitz, Levinas shows that to be or not to be is not the ultimate question: it is but a commentary
on the better than being, the infinite demand of the ethical relation" (7-8). In these three novels by Morrison as well, revolutionary possibilities inhere in the unsaying, in the unliving, and in the mutinous refusal to forget.

1. Hugh Thomas quotes from Jacques Savary at the end of the seventeenth century: "These slaves have so great a love for their country that they despair when they see that they are leaving it forever; that makes them die of grief, and I have heard merchants who engage in this commerce say that they die more often before leaving the port than during the voyage. Some throw themselves into the sea, others hit their heads against the ship, others hold their breath to try and smother themselves, others still die of hunger from not eating" (412). Thomas also describes instances of forced feeding (420). James Walvin writes, "Given the chance, slaves flung themselves into the ocean, diving off the main deck, slipping through port-holes, or leaping from the small boat carrying them from shore" (56). Steven Spielberg's film Amistad (1997) attempts to capture this genocidal chaos, including the suicide of a woman who is holding her infant when she leans overboard. According to Mannix and Cowley, 50 percent of enslaved Africans died during transportation in the 320 years of the slave trade (110, 123).

2. See, for example, Heyman, Awkward, Hirsch, Lubiano, Lee, Butler Evans. For folk versions of the flying capacity, see Hamilton. In an Interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison discusses flying in Song of Solomon: "My meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts" ("Language" 26-27). In Song of Solomon, Susan Byrd explains the "old folks' lie" to Milkman: "Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa" (326).

3. Critics generally agree that Morrison's fiction exposes racist ideologies and consequent self-destructiveness. See, for example, Berger: "Racial violence shapes the social and political space of her novels while in the foreground . . . are forms of individual and collective suicide" (410). Referring to The Bluest Eye, Cornel West writes, "Morrison's exposure of the harmful extent to which these white ideals affect the black image is a first step toward rejecting these ideals and overcoming the nihilistic self-loathing they engender in blacks" (28).

4. In an essay on Nietzsche, Foucault writes that the task of genealogy is to "expose a body totally imprinted by the history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (148).

5. Levinas concludes his preface to Totality and Infinity with a reflection on the "word" of prefaces. It is not a "word of honor. But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the forward or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights" (30).

6. Barbara Smith notes the bravery involved in ntozake shange's for colored girls / who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf: "She's dealing with a lot of myths, by saying that we have even considered it, if it's supposed to be a white thing" (124). The racializing of suicide appears in several U.S. American fictional texts. In William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses, a journal entry reads: "23 Jun 1833 Who In hell ever heard of a nigger drowning him self" (267). In Richard Wright's Black Boy, a white co-worker tells Wright that he would kill himself if he were black but then adds: "I don't reckon niggers mind being niggers" (208). Audre Lorde parodies this attitude in the title of her poem "Black People Don't Commit Suicide," in which she recalls the people who killed themselves at Jonestown, the majority of whom were black. Alan Wolfe writes, "What Lorde the poet argues against is the use of suicide either to include or exclude blacks from a 'normal' modernity and a 'full reality' of their own making. Blacks are already precluded from the benefits of that modernity and can only resist having even their deaths used as signs of their powerlessness" (63).

7. For a summary of studies on race and suicide in the United States, see Lester 121-22. For more on suicide by African Americans, see Alston and Anderson; Committee on Cultural Psychiatry, esp. 11-28; Hendin, Suicide; Holinger, esp. 41-55; and Canada's epilogue to Reaching Up For Manhood. For discussion of Durham's relevance to African Americans, see Early, Powell, Moore. In The Encyclopedia of Suicide (1988), Glen Evans and Norman L. Farberow provide national statistics that show the suicide rate is "higher for young blacks than it is for whites" (233). Cornel West mentions these statistics in Race Matters: "if cultures are, in part, what human beings create . . . in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide, then black foremothers and forefathers are to be applauded. In fact, until the early seventies black Americans had the lowest suicide rate in the United States. But now young black people lead the nation in the rate of increase in suicides" (24).
According to the World Health Organization, overall rates of suicide in Europe and North America are higher than in Africa (see Bohannan).

8. For a reading of suicide against the grain of a Western concept of catastrophe, see Montgomery, Bowers.

9. "Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's like a whole nation that is under the sea" (qtd. in Furman 80).

10. A conservative estimate of lives lost as a result of the slave trade is 60 million. Some historians calculate the number to be as high as 200 million. See Morrison's interview with Bonnie Angelo. In Beloved, Baby Suggs alludes to this incalculable loss: "There's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time" (244).

11. John Newton, the "reformed" slaver, recounts how the African women present "no danger of insurrection, and they are carefully kept from the men; I mean from the black men" (Cowley and Mannix 86). He continues: "When the women and girls are taken on board a ship, naked, trembling, terrified, perhaps almost exhausted with cold, fatigue, and hunger, they are often exposed to the wanton rudeness of white savages. The poor creatures cannot understand the language they hear, but the looks and manner of the speakers are sufficiently intelligible." Under these circumstances, "even the solicitation of consent is seldom thought of" (87). Beloved refers directly to the practice of separating African men from the women and the frequency of rape on the slaverships. For more on John Newton, see Morrison's "Rediscovering Black History" and Walvin 40-58. Thomas (408, 418) briefly deals with sexual abuse on the ships.

12. James Phelan admits, "No matter how we arrange or rearrange the information about Beloved, there is something that does not fit with the experience of everything else" (714).

13. Lorraine Liscio identifies some of the risks involved in Morrison's strategies of representation in Beloved, including attempts to inscribe pre-ocipal or prelinguistic structures of thought.

14. In one of the few other essays that discuss this moment in the text, Iyunolu Osagie, following House's reading, offers a similar interpretation: "Beloved's mother's decision to throw herself overboard is prompted by the harrowing experience of watching dead captives unceremoniously pushed overboard with poles by the white overseers" (432). Osagie further suggests that Beloved thinks about suicide herself on the bridge; Beloved tells Paul D, "She told me" to jump (65).

15. Christian refers to the passage as a "four-hundred year holocaust that wrecked tens of millions of Africans from their Mother, their biological mothers as well as their Motherland, in a disorganized and unimaginably monstrous fashion" ("Fixing" 7). Sally Keenan also parallels the mother-child relationship with African American history, suggesting that Beloved is "not only the lost daughter, but she is also all the dead victims of slavery, reaching out to the living, demanding to be remembered" (72). In her essay on motherhood and female resistance to slavery, Keenan does not discuss the woman in Beloved who kills herself.

16. Derrida closes "Mnemosyne" with a recognition of this spatial difference: "The death of the other, if we can say this, is also situated on our side at the very moment when it comes to us from an altogether other side" (39).

17. Lucille Clifton wrote this poem in response to the Watts riots.

18. For war statistics, see Hunt 448.

19. In the Book of Daniel, the Israelite noble Hananiah, renamed Shadrach by Babylonian captors, is forced to work for the King of Babylon. He survives Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, which had been "heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated" (3:19). Although Morrison's Shadrack survives the flames of World War I, "this Shadrack has not been saved whole from the fire" (Reddy 33). Patricia Hunt also cites the "black nationalistic theologian" Hananiah in the Book of Jeremiah who more aggressively calls for freedom from captivity (450).

20. The relationship between suicide and war has been anxiously debated. Kant insisted that fighting in a war is the opposite of suicidal behavior. Durkheim, on the other hand, described the army as a case of chronic altruistic suicide. He believed that the likelihood of suicide increases with the amount of time spent in the service; officers and others with prolonged exposure to military discipline and spirit are the most vulnerable: "The profession of soldier develops a moral constitution powerfully predisposing man to make away with himself" (239). Although national suicide rates usually drop during wars, they tend to rise at the end of wars.

21. In Beloved, Paul D's hands also become something "other," beyond his control—"On their own, they traveled. Nothing could stop them or get their attention" (107). The "miracle of their obedience" occurs when he works alongside the other forty-five men in the chain gang.
22. By 1941, Shadrack "had improved enough to feel lonely" (155); "more and more he relinquished the military habits of cleanliness in his shack": "The messier his house got, the lonelier he felt, and it was harder and harder to conjure up sergeants, and orderlies, and invading armies" (158).

23. Mae Henderson explicates how Morrison employs Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to refer to a "division within the race" (69).

24. The deportation of Garvey changed the political climate, "effectively ending a vibrant Black Nationalist movement until its revival in the 1960s" (Reddy 42). Barrett suggests that Shadrack's parade "commemorates, in its way, the 1917 anti-lynching demonstration, when more than 5,000 marchers walked silently through the streets of New York under a banner that read, "Your Hands are Full of Blood" (29).

25. Ralph Story suggests that Smith's insurance company resembles the North Carolina Mutual and Provident Association "which conceivably began, as did most black insurance companies, as a secret society" (153). For more on how Morrison's novels "bear witness" to the past, see Holton.

26. In Race Matters, Cornel West also writes, "A love ethic has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal consciousness. Rather it is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people" (29).

27. In her essay in The Black Woman, Frances Beale similarly writes, "To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day patterns" (99).

28. The responsibility of love presents itself at every death scene in Song of Solomon. Morrison has said that she considers Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise (1998) parts of a trilogy, each dealing with a different kind of love (see Menand 78). Morrison was attracted to the historical record of Margaret Garner and James Van der Zee's account in The Harlem Book of the Dead of a young woman who would not name her murderer because, in both cases, Morrison says, "A woman loved something other than herself so much, she had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself" (qtd. in Henderson 65). This "suicidal" placement of one's life-value "outside" the self recalls Levinas's assertion that our "ethical relation to the other" is "prior" to our relationship to ourselves, that ethics demands, nonmetaphorically, our life ("Dialogue" 21). For women who have been inordinately called upon to sacrifice their own needs and pleasures for others, this philosophical axiom and its fictional representation are particularly vexing matters. Also see Henderson 73.

29. Deborah Guth reads this scene of disembowelment as a symbolic allusion to both racial persecution and a "far more ancient drama of male rivalry and lust for power" (583).

30. Awkward convincingly argues that, through this narrative Interruption of Milkman's quest by Hagar's death, Song of Solomon exposes the "phallocentric myth's failure to inscribe usefully transcendental possibilities for the female": "Hagar's journey to reification and, ultimately, physical death, has its source in her adoption of a patriarchal society's almost timeless figuration of woman as object, in her futile attempt to achieve the bourgeois society's notions of female beauty" (492). Also see Susan Willis, who writes, "Hagar is the sublime manifestation of the contradiction between the ideology of consumer society that would have everyone believe we all trade equally in commodities, and the reality of all marginalized people for whom translation into the dominant white model is impossible" (179). Like Shadrack, Hagar also gestures toward the Old Testament. The Egyptian maidservant of Sarah and Abraham, the biblical Hagar is treated as a sexual commodity and then abandoned to the wilderness (Genesis 16-21).

31. The self-willed deaths in Song of Solomon might be read as confirmation of an assumed gender difference in suicidal acts: Men kill themselves in the midst of social or political crises; women kill themselves for emotional reasons, usually after a failed love affair or to avoid an intolerable reduction in their economic status (Kushner 98-99). Mrs. Butler, a white woman whose family is responsible for the murder of Macon and Pilate's father, kills herself after her family's money has run out. Circe interprets this death as a commentary on her own life. She explains to Milkman, "She saw the work I did all her days and died, you hear me, died rather than live like me!" (249). Circe takes revenge on the Butler estate, reveling in its decay and destruction. Alston and Anderson, whose suicide research focuses on African American women, dispute the theory that women kill themselves over love. They stress the importance of employment and social networks in women's lives, speculating that hopelessness rather than depression prompts black women to kill themselves.

32. Lubiano suggests that the end could signify "suicide; 'real' flight and then a wheeling attack on his 'brother'; or 'real' flight and then some kind of encounter with the (possibly) 'killing arms of his brother'" (111).


Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Toni Morrison’s *Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text."


WOMEN'S STUDIES DIRECTORSHIP

The Women's Studies Program at the University of California, Irvine invites applications for the position of Director, effective July 1, 2001. The director will hold a full-time appointment in the program up to and including the rank of Professor. Requirements: substantial scholarly visibility in women's studies and teaching experience in graduate and undergraduate interdisciplinary women's studies courses. Candidates must also share the program's priorities, which include a commitment to national leadership in the field of women's studies; to the intellectual articulation of gender with race, class, sexuality and nationality; to postcolonial and international feminist studies; and to interdisciplinarity at all levels of the curriculum.

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