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READING TONI MORRISON: RETHINKING RACE AND SUBJECTIVITY WITH
GIORGIO AGAMBEN AND JOAN COPJEC

A Thesis Presented

By

Gabriela Salazar

To

The Faculty of the Graduate College

Of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

May, 2017

Defense Date: March 23, 2017
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ABSTRACT

The school of thought articulated by critical theorists Giorgio Agamben and Joan Copjec differ from each other in methodology, approach, and language. Yet, both Agamben and Copjec each write to reject positivist notions of ethics, which each theorist identifies as rooted in the same ideological apparatuses that propagate exclusionary and violent actions. By turning away from pre-given ethics and ideology, these writers attempt to delineate why these philosophies have been the vehicle of violence and racial oppression, and reiterate the importance of turning away from such thought in order for the subject to conceptualize a new way of being and relating to others that combats dominant ideology. Agamben's theoretical concept of *homo sacer* that lies at the center of his philosophical project, and Copjec's Lacanian understanding of the subject as inherently ruptured, both delineate subjectivity, as well as the concepts of race and racism in novel ways. Using these theorists to read Morrison's novels illustrates the critical concepts outlined by these two thinkers.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I plan to outline Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, and Copjec's theorizing of the subject as inherently ruptured. I employ Morrison's piece of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, to demonstrate how Morrison's literary and intellectual project as a writer also aims to refigure subjectivity, illustrating and expanding upon Agamben and Copjec's work. In the second chapter, I will move on to discuss Agamben's political philosophy and concept of *homo sacer*, analyzing Morrison's novels, *A Mercy*, and *Home* to demonstrate how her work illustrates and expands upon Agamben's analysis of biopolitics. Lastly, in the third chapter of this thesis, I place Morrison in dialogue with Copjec, demonstrating how Morrison's characters illustrate the notion of a ruptured subject, and why it is important to read her work through this lens. I aim to demonstrate how Morrison's characters expand upon the notions of race, femininity, and subjectivity as conceived by Copjec. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to delineate why it is beneficial to place these three writers in dialogue with one another to analyze notions of racial identity, subjectivity, violence, and trauma.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this time to thank those who have been instrumental in the completion of this thesis. This project would not have been possible without the support of many, but I would like to express my deepest gratitude for Dr. Hyon Joo Yoo, my phenomenal thesis advisor. Thank you for being encouraging, patient, and kind. I would not have been confident enough to engage with such challenging theory, were it not for your expertise and guidance. I would also like to thank the second reader of this thesis, Dr. Emily Bernard, and the chairperson, Dr. Dona Brown, for serving on this thesis committee, and giving insightful feedback.

I would also like to thank my spectacular parents, Maria Elena Salazar and Rafael Salazar, for their support and reassurance, and for fostering my love of learning and reading. Lastly, I am grateful for the encouragement and support of my academic peers, many of whom have become my close friends.

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INTRODUCTION

The school of thought articulated by critical theorists Giorgio Agamben and Joan Copjec differ from each other in methodology, approach, and language. Yet, both Agamben and Copjec each write to reject positivist notions of ethics, which each theorist identifies as rooted in the same ideological apparatuses that propagate exclusionary and violent actions. They each argue in different ways that ideology produces or perpetuates an oppressive social structure that induces subjects into identifying their interests within that system. Instead, both Agamben and Copjec propose a new way of conceiving subjectivity, ethics, and collectivity. By turning away from pre-given ethics and ideology, these writers attempt to delineate why such philosophies have been the vehicle of violence and racial oppression, and reiterate the importance of turning away from such thought in order for the subject to conceptualize a new way of being and relating to others that combats dominant ideology. Agamben's theoretical concept of *homo sacer* that lies at the center of his philosophical project, and Copjec's Lacanian understanding of the subject as inherently ruptured, both delineate subjectivity, as well as the concepts of race and racism in novel ways.

Using these theorists to read Morrison's novels illustrates the critical concepts outlined by these two thinkers, and may also function to expand upon them, as her work depicts a new way of being, or a black subjectivity. Scholars have analyzed Toni Morrison's work through a number of theoretical lenses, including feminism, psychoanalysis, and critical race theory. The central concepts of history, slavery, trauma, and racism in Morrison's novels have been explicated in each of these theoretical

frameworks. My aim for this thesis, is to demonstrate how Morrison's literary project portrays black femininity and subjectivity in a novel way, and why the study of her work benefits from the theoretical concepts of subjectivity laid out by Agamben and Copjec. I also plan to demonstrate how Agamben and Copjec's particular concepts of subjectivity become illuminated and enhanced through Morrison's novels and characters.

Central to Agamben's work is the concept of *homo sacer*, a figure within the state structure that is stripped of political status and represents what Agamben defines as "bare life," life that can be killed with impunity. For Agamben, the production of bare life as such is necessitated by the state. Morrison's novels reflect this figure, as the African American characters are portrayed as what Agamben defines as *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* is a figure that is submitted to the law, but is not protected by it. For Agamben, *homo sacer* represents an individual who is made to be reduced to "bare life" or biological life alone, a figure denied political and symbolic signification. Agamben writes that *homo sacer* is the "originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed."¹ In Morrison's novels, she often represents black characters as *homo sacer* figures. They are included in the social sphere, are submitted to following the law, yet receive no protection from it. They are always at the risk of violence, and when it is committed against them, these characters are often aware that they cannot seek justice or help from the political or social institutions that perpetuate this sort of violence, and that do not value them as complete, human subjects. In *A Mercy*, Morrison explores the colonial beginnings of America, and the slave trade. One of the story's narrators, a slave girl named Florens, is depicted as a *homo sacer*

¹ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Heller-Roazen, Daniel, (Stanford UP, 1998), 85.

figure. In this novel, Morrison illuminates the formation of the slave laws in colonial America as laws that reduce the slaves to what Agamben defines as “bare life”. Morrison writes throughout the novel that the white colonists were in the business of “authorizing chaos in defense of order,” and “separated and protected all whites from all others forever,” as black slaves can be killed, raped, or punished without reason, however their owners see fit.² The omniscient narrator continues explaining that the slave laws were thought to be for the good of the white colonists, “laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue.”³ This represents Agamben’s notion that the production of homo sacer, or bare life as such, is necessitated by the state to protect and support the individuals that hold political or social status—the chosen population that must be separated and protected. And it is this separation that defines the subjectivity of those within the protection of law and society. Agamben writes that “exteriority—the law of nature and the principle of the preservation of one’s own life—is truly the innermost center of the political system.”⁴ Morrison’s novels depict this concept, as the construction of black characters as homo sacer or bare life, directly correlates to the subjectivity of the white characters and communities in each work.

Copjec’s concept of subjectivity focuses on the inherent rupture at the core of the subject, working within the Lacanian notions of fantasy, desire, and drive. While many scholars have applied Lacanian psychoanalysis to Morrison’s work, Copjec’s focus on the subject’s rupturing, in terms of conceiving racial and feminine identity, are particularly useful to exploring how Morrison constructs the notion of subjectivity in her

² Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, (NYC: Vintage Books, Inc., 2008), 11-12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 36.

work. Copjec relates that at the heart of the subject's formation is a traumatic rupturing and inherent sense of lack, and the ethical act as well is defined as a self-rupturing choice. For Lacan, the subject's entire construction of reality, built upon layers of fantasy, is inherently linked to this sense of lack, and what he defines as the Law of Desire that calls one to search and obtain the missing kernel of the self, which is a futile mission. This kernel refers to the sense of loss or lack that predicates our being, and is inherent and indissoluble in us. We as subjects must "wake up" from this fantasy of reality to understand the forces that cause each of us to act in accordance of our desire, and rationalizes the anti-ethical acts we perform in this pursuit. In *Imagine There is No Woman*, Joan Copjec explicates Lacan's reading of the character Antigone, whom through the act of breaking the law and burying the body of her dead brother, becomes an ethical subject. Copjec explains that it is Antigone's act of love for her brother that allows her to rise above the level of her function, and to proclaim her own decision and law separate from any other law, ideology, or notion of personal interest. Copjec explains that Antigone proves herself to be "autonomous," as she "gives herself her own law and does not seek validation from any other authority."⁵ Through this act of love for her brother, Antigone is able to break away from the fantasmatic realm of subjectivity and reality, rising above her own historical contingency, and risks everything—her biological life, but most importantly, her symbolic death and loss of signification in the societal realm. During this act, not only does Antigone separate herself from her own historical and social identity and position, she also exposes the void of the real that predicates the symbolic structure. In Morrison's *Beloved*, the protagonist, Sethe, undergoes a similar

⁵ *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 41.

process, when in the moment of an unexpected event, she makes a decision that is self-rupturing, and establishes her own law, and becomes autonomous in that moment. When presented with the possibility of having her children taken back to a life of slavery that she escaped, Sethe kills her baby, acting out of love as a mother, protecting her child from the traumatic life of slavery that would have reduced her to a farm tool or animal for the plantation owner's use. Like Antigone, Sethe also follows Lacan's ethical imperative by not giving way on her desire, and making a decision where there is no apparent decision to be made, acting out of love instead of self-interest or preservation. Morrison's characters illustrate Copjec's notion of the Lacanian subject while also demonstrating new ways of subjectivity, depicting a specifically black subjectivity and struggle.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I plan to outline Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, and Copjec's Lacanian subject of lack. I will draw out these two concepts, showing the connections and contrasts between the two, and how they each conceptualize the notion of subjectivity in startling ways. I also plan to employ Morrison's piece of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, to demonstrate how Morrison's literary and intellectual project as a writer also aims to refigure subjectivity. This chapter will delineate how Agamben and Copjec's theories deepen our understanding of Morrison's work, and how Morrison's novels help to expand upon these theories. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues that the construction of white subjectivity in classics of American literature and in the construction of American history as such, is inherently tied to the unfree, black, slave, or Africanist presence in these works. Morrison conceptualizes how white subjectivity, and notions of freedom and "Americanness," as seen in the tradition of American literature, depends

upon having a contrasting image of a people who are not free. By the end of this chapter, I plan on introducing how Morrison's work reimagines black subjectivity, and why staging a dialogue between Morrison, Agamben, and Copjec is beneficial both to the scholarship of Morrison's work, and the work of these two theorists.

In the second chapter, I will move on to discuss Agamben's political philosophy and concept of *homo sacer*, selecting two of Morrison's novels to demonstrate how her work illustrates and expands upon Agamben's theoretical project. The focus of this chapter will be to put Morrison and Agamben's work in dialogue with each other. I will analyze Morrison's novels, *A Mercy*, and *Home* to accomplish this, outlining the connection between the black characters of these novels and Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, racism, and violence. The subjectivities of the oppressed and oppressors themselves in Morrison's work reflects the concept of *homo sacer*, and provide an alternate illustration of this concept, apart from Agamben's use of *homo sacer* to outline the construction of the modern nation state. Using the concept of *homo sacer* to analyze the construction of black subjectivity and white subjectivity in both *A Mercy* and *Home*, I plan to demonstrate how Morrison's black characters represent "bare life," and how the historical oppression of African Americans illustrated in these novels provide another way to understand the biopolitical concept central to Agamben's intellectual project.

Lastly, in the third chapter of this thesis, I will place Morrison in dialogue with Copjec, demonstrating how Morrison's characters illustrate the notion of a ruptured subject, and why it is important to read her work through this lens. I plan to show how Morrison's characters expand upon the notions of race, femininity, and subjectivity outlined by Copjec. To accomplish this, chapter 3 will focus on an analysis of Morrison's

novels, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved*, to establish how Morrison's work explores the way that subjects either adhere to, or "wake up" from the fantasy reality that is founded upon racial, gender, and sexual oppressions that are the source of trauma for each protagonist. Illustrating how the traumatic history of slavery persists as a facet of black consciousness and reality, and by writing the internal dialogues of each character, Morrison explores the desires, conscious and unconscious, of the oppressed and the oppressors in each narrative. At the center of both novels is a concern with personal and collective healing that must begin with the subject's reconstitution.

While many scholars have analyzed the themes of race, violence, and subjectivity in Morrison's work, Agamben and Copjec's theoretical frameworks provide a new avenue of intervention in the current scholarship. The concepts outlined by each philosopher is reflected and illustrated through Morrison's literary project, and I argue that the work of each of these theorists can be better understood or expanded when read in conjunction with Morrison's novels. Morrison's construction of black subjectivity, black femininity, and her potent illustrations of the rupture or void at the center of race and racism, challenges the reader's understanding of these concepts. Her work also challenges the reader to rethink the history of race and racism in the United States, and how each individual participates and maintains such oppressive social and political structures. By reading Morrison, Agamben, and Copjec together, and placing Morrison in dialogue with these theorists, the novelty and value of how Morrison's work rethinks subjectivity and race can be better understood.

CHAPTER 1: PLAYING IN THE DARK WITH AGAMBEN AND COPJEC

Introduction

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison argues that the construction of (white) American identity as illustrated in American literary classics, and in American cultural history as such, is tied to an unfree, black, slave, or Africanist presence. Morrison conceptualizes how white subjectivity, with its notions of freedom and “Americanness,” as seen in the tradition of American literature, depends upon a contrasting image of a people who are not free. Morrison writes that the Africanism present in the American literary canon reveals the necessity of such an unfree presence to the construction of American identity and history, and “provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom”.⁶ Throughout this study, one can recognize the concern with race, trauma, language, and history at the center of Morrison’s literary project. The history of Black America is the history of the United States—not a separate, independent history---while ideas of freedom and oppression, justice and violence, white identity and black identity, are inextricably imbedded within one another, woven into the fabric of American history and society itself. Morrison contemplates these connections as evident in her analysis of the American literary tradition in “an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and the imaginers; from the serving to the served”.⁷ This effort is manifest in not only Morrison’s scholarly work, but also in her literary work. Morrison’s literary and

⁶ *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Harvard University Press, 1992), 7

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

intellectual projects often function to not only refigure black subjectivity, but notions of subjectivity itself, and she often explores the conscious and unconscious desires and perspectives of the oppressors in her fiction. Placing Morrison in dialogue with these two theorists, looking at Agamben's concept of homo sacer and Copjec's psychoanalytic subject of lack, introduces a new way of linking history, race and violence.

Biopolitics and *Playing in the Dark*

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison questions the notion that the presence of African Americans and African American history has not impacted canonical American literature. Morrison draws attention to the Africanist presence in these works, arguing that American literature, culture, and history is inherently informed by this presence—an acknowledgement she finds missing from American literary and historical scholarship. These observations have caused her to question whether revered qualities of American literature, such as “individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence”.⁸ This Africanist presence is not only explicitly represented by the figures of slaves and African Americans within a narrative, but also the symbolic expression of the color black or “darkness” representing fear, death, or evil, in contrast to symbolic expressions of the color white or “lightness” designating innocence, purity, or goodness. She argues that any mention of a “darkness” or “blackness” is not merely a symbolic use of color or aesthetic literary ploy, but that these expressions of color, and “darkness”—and of white or “lightness”—are inherently

⁸ *Playing in the Dark*, 5.

racialized expressions, or racially coded. An explicit example of such metaphorical and symbolic uses of dark and light color representing good and evil, purity and sin, can be seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Young Goodman Brown," when the protagonist for which the story is named wanders into the woods at night and happens upon dark bodies and presences, and what appears to be some sort of ceremony of witchcraft. Notions of "Americanness", as expressed in American literature and its scholarship are Eurocentric and often defined by whiteness. Morrison aims to demonstrate how such notions are self-perpetuating, and depend upon the Africanist or dark presence found in canonical works of American literature. Morrison states that during her interrogation of American literary classics, "What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence".⁹ Dark or Africanist illustrations in American literature then, function to express American fears and anxieties, and questions of American identity itself, in that American-ness is the effect of a chain of significations in which the trope of binarism—white and black—reifies identities. In other words, one cannot tangibly represent white without its binary other, black. This means that there is no substance in the category white and subjectivity built on it. Morrison's own works of fiction draw attention to the questions she raises in *Playing in the Dark*, questions that Clemens Spahr and Phillip Loffler identify in recent works of American literature by women of color, which they identify as an effort to critically interrogate the very concept of cultural

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Americanness and its machineries of self-perpetuation.¹⁰ Morrison's work explores and questions the ways that race and the presence of African Americans are imbedded in the cultural technologies that produce and sustain Eurocentric notions of American identity and subjectivity.

The contrasting image of an unfree Africanist presence necessary to the construction of American identity that Morrison recognizes throughout the tradition of American literature parallels Agamben's concept of the figure of *homo sacer* central to his philosophical work. Agamben situates the production of subjectivity within the biopolitical structure of the modern nation state. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben's analysis begins with Foucault's notion of biopolitics, defined as the intervention of politics into the production and care of the biological life of individuals within the state, or what Agamben designates as the "bare life" of individuals. Agamben expands upon Foucault's theory of biopolitics to illustrate how totalitarian states, in particular the Nazi regime and the concentration camp, were conceived and operated. For Agamben, totalitarian regimes such as that of Nazi Germany illustrate the apexes of biopolitics operating in political structures that facilitate the total domination of civilization. Agamben's notion of bare life is not merely biological life, it is life that can be killed with impunity, such as the Jews who were represented as bare life in Nazi Germany. Foucault states that "Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem".¹¹ The life or health of the citizen, and therefore of the social body as a whole, is the basis for which

¹⁰ "Introduction: Conceptions of Collectivity in Contemporary American Literature," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 57, no. 2 (2012), 166.

¹¹ *"Society must be defended": lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76.* (New York: Picador, 2003), 245.

the state intercedes into citizens' bodies, making decisions regarding whether certain lives are of value or not, and subjecting the body to regulatory processes in an effort to construct and maintain the life and health of the population, therefore ensuring that citizens' bodies function to produce and reproduce for the state. Agamben states that this process involving "the entry of *zoe* into the sphere of the *polis*—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought".¹² The biological lives of citizens, as they begin to represent the central political concern of the state, marks the beginning of the political structure of modern democratic nations, and the construction of the subject within this system. For Agamben, this shift in political structure in which life is subordinate to it leads to the consideration of the "biopolitical as the threshold of 'bare life,'" demarcating this shift as "catastrophic".¹³ The property of sovereign power over the lives of citizens is the power to produce bare life, complicating the man/citizen dichotomy in the biopolitical apparatus of the modern nation state.

The man/citizen dichotomy that begins to break down in a biopolitical system defines the modern nation state and subjectivity for Agamben, and is why the figure of *homo sacer* becomes central to his argument. Through tracing the history of the figure of *homo sacer* from antiquity, Agamben defines this figure as one that can be killed without it being considered a crime or homicide, and whose death may not serve as a sacrifice¹⁴. This figure is at once abandoned by the law, yet is subjected to the law's punishment,

¹² *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Heller-Roazen, Daniel, (Stanford UP, 1998), 3.

¹³ Charles T. Lee, "Bare Life, Interstices, and the Third Space of Citizenship," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 38.1/2 (2010), 102.

¹⁴ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 83.

representing a situation where the man/citizen distinction becomes difficult to perceive. Bare life is what represents this threshold between man and citizen. For Agamben, sovereign power lies in the production of bare life, using the figure of *homo sacer* to theorize the political justification of violence, and to demonstrate how modern biopolitical states necessitate the production of bare life. *Homo sacer* is a figure that has been forcibly reduced to bare life. He delineates methodologies of democratic states that politicize each subject from birth, describing the subject as a virtually passive entity constructed by and inscribed within the political system. What is most striking about Agamben's philosophical inquiry into modern subjectivity is the notion that within a biopolitical system, a nation state is defined by its *population*—the people that live within it, rather than the land it occupies. This radical shift in how the state conceives of its property, so to speak, is what most concerns Agamben.

Important to Agamben's delineation of the figure of *homo sacer*, is the notion that the production of bare life is not only necessitated by the modern nation state, but the subjectivity and identity of the population of recognized citizens is defined by the exclusion of those who are not recognized citizens. Without a population that is stripped of political status and reduced to a state of bare life, there would be no way to define the protected and valued citizen. The protected population of the modern nation state is only able to be defined through the existence of another group that is not "free," as it were, and not included in the recognized population of citizens. Exclusion from the political sphere, this exception to the rule, is what justifies the rule and validates the power of the state, and the rights of the individuals included within the system. Agamben explains that the "exception does not subtract itself from the rule," but rather "the rule, suspending

itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as the rule”.¹⁵ The state is founded upon excluding certain groups or individuals, and validates its own power through this necessary facet of its structure. This represents a view of collective identification and subjective identification as being inherently rooted in the separation and restraint, or destruction, of the other.¹⁶ Agamben relates this political understanding to the historical phenomena of the Third Reich and the concentration camps meant to separate the Jews from the rest of the population.

Agamben references the foundation for this line of political thinking as “Exteriority—the law of nature and the principle of the preservation of one’s own life,” as being “truly the innermost center of the political system”¹⁷. Protecting the social body from an outside threat is seen to be a central motivation of the Nazi regime and their extreme efforts to exterminate the Jews, as they considered Jews a threat to the wellbeing of European civilization. The identification of the people relies on separation from a foreign or threatening other. Agamben reiterates that the “The separation of the Jewish body is the immediate production of the specifically German body, just as its production is the application of the rule”.¹⁸ The social body is then produced through the process of separation from and the destruction of a threatening other, and relies on this process to define and protect the identity of the nation state and its citizens.

Similarly, the separation of the black body from the white population through enslavement in early America functioned to produce the (white) American body. In much

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Pamela M. Lee, "My Enemy/My Friend." *Grey Room*, no. 24 (2006), 104.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., 174.

the same manner that Agamben identifies the process of separation and exclusion at the heart of state violence and the mission of the Third Reich and concentration camps, the enslaved Africanist presence Morrison recounts in the American literary canon illustrates this same process of separation and exclusion at the root of American history and identity. Morrison is clear that this process of exclusion was foundational to the formation of the young United States in an era when the country forged its character and established its power. She is, however, critical of the notion that such political motives and the racism employed in its pursuit is an intrinsic or inevitable occurrence—it is a consciously motivated and self-preserving project to be sure—but it is not organic. She clarifies that “Among Europeans and the Europeanized, this shared process of exclusion—of assigning designation and value—has led to the popular and academic notion that racism is a ‘natural,’ if irritating phenomenon”.¹⁹ Morrison’s definition of the Africanist, unfree figures present in American literature, and the formation of (white) American identity against this presence, reflects Agamben’s political understanding that the collective effort to define an identity against another separated group is inherently linked to the political establishment of liberal and free subjects.²⁰ Morrison notes how white writers in the American literary canon seem to write the enslaved Africanist presence into their stories without racial consciousness, and it is this lack of racial consciousness in American literary criticism that Morrison takes to task in *Playing in the Dark*. Just as Agamben claims that it is *homo sacer* and the production of bare life that democratic state structures necessitate, Morrison claims that the enslaved black body was

¹⁹ *Playing in the Dark*, 7.

²⁰ Pamela M. Lee, “My Enemy/My Friend,” *Grey Room* 24 (2006), 105.

essential for the formation of the democratic American state and its “free” citizens. The enslaved Africanist presence in American literature is representative of bare life, or a *homo sacer* figure through which American identity has been constructed.

Agamben employs the figure of *homo sacer* throughout his philosophical project as a manner of analyzing notions of state power and the value or nonvalue of human individuals within the modern nation state, in order to better define or understand notions of modern subjectivity. The figure of *homo sacer* provides a contrasting image for politically recognized and protected individuals to be defined against, and an avenue to express concepts of oppression and enslavement, inclusion and exclusion. Morrison argues that within American literature and history, the black body represents the conduit through which such notions are explored and questioned. She writes that “The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness”.²¹ The black body was visually marked by difference by white men in the New World, which provided an avenue for whites to assign and contain their own anxieties of freedom and oppression, civility and primal desire confronted in the untamed space of the young United States. Morrison argues “It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity”.²² In essence, Morrison recognizes the excluded, yet ever present Africanist presence in American literature as the very expression of American consciousness. This concept reflects Agamben’s claim that “The *outside* is not another space that resides

²¹ *Playing in the Dark*, 37.

²² *Ibid.*, 44.

beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access—in a word, it is its face, its *eidōs*”.²³ The black body and Africanism expressed in the American literary canon is then not a contrasting image against which (white) American identity is formed, but Morrison rather arrives at the notion that this Africanism presence is itself an expression of American identity and consciousness. Morrison emphasizes that this slave population “is convenient in every way, not the least of which is self-definition,” as in the early United States, the “new white male can now persuade himself that savagery is ‘out there’”.²⁴ White men exorcized their own anxieties, fears, and internal struggles for freedom to the enslaved black body as *homo sacer*, to validate their dominance at the expense of others’ oppression. The ego-reinforcing project of exclusion and separation enacted by white men through slavery is a concept explicated by both Morrison and Agamben.

Morrison identifies white men’s effort to define, separate, and contain the black body as the foundation of American identity and democratic state structure. In parallel to this notion, Agamben claims that it is the power to forcibly reduce life to bare life as such, or *homo sacer*, that defines state power or sovereign power. Agamben states that *homo sacer* represents the “originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted,” defining the “production of bare life” as the “originary activity of sovereignty”.²⁵ It is the ability, or the power to enslave, to define the value or nonvalue of life, to reduce an individual or a group of people to a state of bare life without political status, that is the foundation of sovereign power. Morrison also identifies the power to

²³ *The Coming Community*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 67.

²⁴ *Playing in the Dark*, 45.

²⁵ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 83.

exclude and enslave as the founding force that built the liberal, independent US American state. The slave-master relationship is at the root of not only the American literary tradition, but American history. The need to establish difference in order to establish an American identity is reflected in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar," in which he outlines the deliberate project of the construction of a free, American man that stands above others.²⁶ At the end of this speech, he claims, "A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men," at once acknowledging the conscious construction of this land of men, and claiming the right to dominance above others through the "Divine Soul" that grants it.²⁷ In a biopolitical apparatus in which the state itself is defined by its population, by the people instead of the land it occupies, the relationship of the enslaved to the slave owner is at the root of such a system. Agamben emphasizes that "what seems so scandalous to us moderns—namely, property rights over persons, could in fact be the originary form of property, the capture (the *ex-ceptio*) of the use of bodies in the juridical order".²⁸ Just as Agamben defines the ownership of bodies as perhaps the original form of property ownership, to capture and produce bare life, so too does Morrison demonstrate how the slave/master relationship is not only symbolic, but foundational to the concept of the United States and to its construction.

Playing in the Dark and the Lacanian Subject of Lack

²⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 39.

²⁷ "The American Scholar," (1837), *The American Tradition in Literature, Vol. 1, 12 ed.*, George Perkins and Barbara Perkins, eds., (NYC: McGraw Hill Inc., 2009), 1309-1322

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford UP: 2016), 36.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison is not only explicating systems of exploitation and racial oppression at the center of United States history, she is also exploring the underlying psychological constructions of (white) American identity as illustrated in American literature. It is due to Morrison's critical exploration of white and black subjectivity throughout her writing, both fiction and nonfiction, that much of her work has been critiqued from a Lacanian lens. She herself recognizes the usefulness of psychoanalysis to interrogate notions of national and racial identity. In the preface to *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison states that "The narrative into which life seems to cast itself surfaces most forcefully in certain kinds of psychoanalysis".²⁹ Morrison's concern with language and how it is racially encoded, along with the kinds of "unconscious" desires and perceptions that the use of language reveals, does lend her work to a Lacanian lens of analysis. It is for this reason that Joan Copjec's specific Lacanian lens may be most useful in exploring Morrison's writing, and Morrison's writing may also be a useful companion to Copjec's theoretical work, providing potent illustrations for Copjec's analyses of the ruptured subject, racial identity, and Lacanian ethics. Copjec's work operates from "the belief that psychoanalysis is the mother tongue of our modernity and that the important issues of our time are scarcely articulable outside the concepts it has forged," a belief that parallels Morrison's own claims of the relevance of psychoanalysis quoted above.³⁰ Employing a Lacanian lens to explore the psychological underpinnings of American (white) identity and racial oppression at the center of US history that Morrison delineates in *Playing in the Dark*, will function to illuminate these concepts.

²⁹ *Playing in the Dark*, v.

³⁰ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, 10.

Copjec's concept of subjectivity focuses on the inherent rupture at the core of the subject, working within the Lacanian notions of fantasy, desire, and drive. The Lacanian subject comes into being through the traumatic event of entering the world of language in the symbolic order, which leaves the subject with an inherent sense of lack. Copjec's intellectual project deals with Lacanian ethics, outlining why it is that we perform anti-ethical acts in an attempt to fulfill desires to gain a sense of wholeness. For Lacan, the subject's entire construction of reality, built upon layers of fantasy, is inherently linked to this sense of lack, and what he defines as the Law of Desire that calls one to search and obtain the missing kernel of the self, which is a futile mission. This kernel refers to the sense of loss or lack that predicates our being, and is inherent and indissoluble in us. We as subjects must "wake up" from this fantasy of reality to understand the forces that cause each of us to act in accordance of our desire, and rationalizes the anti-ethical acts we perform in this pursuit. Copjec explains that the rupture or cut that predicates being "carves *up* the body image and thus drives the subject to seek its being beyond that which its image presents to it; it causes the subject to always find in its image something lacking".³¹ This sense of lack causes the subject to search for something external to it as an attempt to return to a primordial sense of wholeness experienced before entering the symbolic order. Copjec reiterates that "The subject constructed by language finds itself detached from a part of itself. And it is this primary detachment that renders fruitless all the subject's efforts for a reunion with its complete being".³² This perception of the subject parallels Morrison's explanation of the construction of white subjectivity and

³¹ *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), 50-51.

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

American identity in *Playing in the Dark*, as white subjectivity itself is founded on this sense of lack. To ameliorate the sense of this lack, white subjects need its other, blackness.

Copjec's explanation of the Lacanian subject also functions to delineate what the concept of race provides for the subject, granting an avenue for a perceived sense of wholeness and collectivity, though race itself is predicated by an essential rupture or void. Morrison explains that any study of race and racism should also focus on "the impact of racism on those who perpetrate it," continuing to note that "It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject".³³ Morrison's argument for the construction of white subjectivity and American identity as evidenced by her critique of American literary classics, is an attempt to begin to explore this important question that is necessary to understand why race and racism are avenues through which the subject strives to achieve a sense of completeness, though Lacan tells us that this can never be achieved. Race is a fantasy reality of identity that a subject can cling to as an attempt to alleviate this sense of lack, and racism as well stems from this fantasy. Following Lacan's lead, Copjec explains what it is, exactly, that the subject stands to "gain" from the concept of race, and racism: an "escape" from mortality. She writes that "modern man, refusing to accept the finitude that modern thought thrust upon him, doubles himself through a notion of race that allows him to survive his own death".³⁴ The concept of race in early America granted white men an attempt to satisfy desires for wholeness, to cling to fantasy and not face the real of their existence as

³³ *Playing in the Dark*, 11.

³⁴ *Imagine There's No Woman*, 105.

incomplete, mortal beings. Working with the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*—a traumatic experience of excess pleasure—Sheldon George explains that the history of American slavery “has produced both race and racism as modes of *jouissance*, as methods of accessing being”.³⁵ This understanding of race and why one partakes in acts of racism provides a point of reference for Morrison’s study of (white) American identity and how she sees this illustrated in American literature.

Morrison reiterates the notion that the enslavement of African Americans served as the basis for the construction of (white) American identity, interrogating the underlying motives or psychic reasoning of the oppressor. Morrison explains that the Africanism she sees in works of American literature, which emerged “under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation,” is “thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego-reinforcing, and pervasive”.³⁶ Owning slaves, or at least having the image of an unfree people against which a white man can forge his own identity is “ego-reinforcing,” sustaining what Lacan would claim is the subject’s fantastical sense of wholeness, freedom, and in this case, superiority in racial hierarchy. In this sense, the ego-reinforcing practice of slavery and distanced Africanism illustrated in American literature, is inherent to and indicative of the construction of a collective (white) American identity, and to the notion of American exceptionalism. This parallels Copjec’s claim that “Singularity itself, that which appears most to disperse society, is here posited as essential rather than antagonistic to a certain modern social bond”.³⁷ In this way, we

³⁵ “Race and Slavery, Theorizing Agencies Beyond the Symbolic”, *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian study of African American Racial Identity*, (Baylor UP: 2016), 13.

³⁶ *Playing in the Dark*, 8.

³⁷ *Imagine There is no Woman*, 23.

can begin to understand the concept of race as a method of subjective validation and a sense of collective belonging, both invented and sustained by white men in need of an avenue of subjective and collective identification. Analyzing the formation of (white) American identity through a psychoanalytic lens reflects Agamben's notion of citizenship, *homo sacer*, and the exclusionary principle that is the foundation of a biopolitical state structure. The separation of valued citizens from bare life, the demarcation of those two categories, resonates with Copjec's Lacanian subject of lack and notions of race, in which race becomes a threshold of division in a biopolitical structure. It also functions to illustrate the difference between Agamben's intellectual project and that of Copjec who works from a Lacanian framework---rather than focus on the structure of a biopolitical system, psychoanalysis provides the tools necessary to delineate the psychic processes that are the reason for the subject's participation and identification within such a system, in which the lacking subject adheres to this system in an attempt to gain a sense of wholeness and identity.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison relates that the reasons why immigrants fled to the "New World" is often understood to be due to a strong compulsion to search for a new existence, or a clean slate. This is important to understanding why it is that racial hierarchy and slavery flourished in a space where many sought independence, liberation, and opportunity. It is also important to understanding the Africanism that Morrison finds in American literature. For most of these immigrants, the "Old World" meant "poverty, prison, social ostracism, and, not infrequently, death."³⁸ Fleeing to the "New World" meant a chance to recreate oneself and one's circumstance, in a place free from the Old

³⁸ *Playing in the Dark*, 34.

World's oppressive history. Morrison explains that "One could be released from a useless binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed".³⁹ Copjec defines the attempt to begin with a blank page, so to speak, as an effort to escape what Lacan defines as the traumatic Real that cannot be defined through language, and represents that rupture or void at the center of the subject's being. Using modernism as an example, Copjec explains this attempt to escape the real and history as such as a "negative gesture" or "erasure."⁴⁰ Though as both Copjec via Lacan and Morrison remind us, history is not escapable, and often repeats itself or returns in startling, or unsettling ways. Copjec reiterates that "There is no arguing with the real, no negating it, since history itself depends on it. It is precisely because it cannot be negated that we say it eternally returns or repeats".⁴¹ The sense of anxiety, oppression, and lack of freedom that was the impetus for fleeing to the New World could not have merely vanished, but persisted. The practice of slavery and roots of America racism, as well as the Africanism that Morrison identifies in American fiction, can be understood as a repetition of the history that those who fled to the New World tried to escape. Morrison's own works of fiction explore this notion of history, trauma, and repetition. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy relates that it is these "questions about desire and despair, about subject and object, about the possibility for self-knowledge, about, finally, memory and being that Toni Morrison's novels ask".⁴² These questions Morrison explores in *Playing in the*

³⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁰ *Imagine there is No Woman*, 92.

⁴¹ *Imagine There is No Woman*, 96.

⁴² Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," *Contemporary Literature* 31, no. 3 (1990), 302.

Dark, and in her fiction benefit from and reflect the very questions with which psychoanalysis is invested in.

By exploring the ways that expressions of (white) American identity are indicative of a sense of white subjectivity in a racist nation, Morrison arrives at the conclusion that the dark Africanism found in American literature is an expression of the white writers themselves, and of white subjectivity. Morrison explains that “As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer”.⁴³ In other words, dark Africanist expressions are also representative of a repressed and externalized facet of (white) American consciousness—a repressed sense of lack within the self, not outside of it. Morrison reiterates that what she aims to study is “how the image of a reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona”.⁴⁴ Africanism can be understood as an expression of anxiety, one that is cast off and relegated to an image external to the self in an effort to banish or repress it. When faced with the real of one’s existence, with the incompleteness and mortality of being, this action allows the subject to sustain his/her fantasy of reality in which the subject is a whole, complete, being, allowing the subject to avoid contact with the real, traumatic rupture or void that predicates being. Copjec explains that “Anxiety signals that the threat cannot be exteriorized, objectified, that it is instead internal, brought on by an encounter with that limit which prevents one’s coincidence with oneself”.⁴⁵ Rather than face what Lacan terms the traumatic real of being, these Africanist expressions represent a repressed and externalized fear of the subject’s own

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵ *Imagine There is no Woman*, 103.

lack of freedom, what follows here is fantasized into that which can allow the subject to overcome the lack. This notion of Africanism reflects the Lacanian notion of the “monstrosity of the neighbor,” or what Lacan labeled as *das Ding* (the Thing), that Freud designates as the “ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability”.⁴⁶ In other words, the subject represses within itself that which it fears the most, one’s deepest anxieties, desires, and emptiness, and casts it onto others to negate confronting the traumatic void of the real.

For Morrison, this self-reflexive relationship of the white American writer to the Africanist presence in American literature is inextricably tied to race and the color of the slave body in contrast to the free white body. The concept of race and color intertwined with freedom and oppression is central to “Americanness”. Morrison reiterates that “Race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed racisms whose dynamics we are more used to deciphering”.⁴⁷ American identity and the American state are founded upon notions of race, to the point that Americanness cannot be defined without it. Morrison explains that “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen”.⁴⁸ If one is white and a citizen of the United States, he/she is simply labeled as “American,” while every other group is defined by another term before American—African American, Latin American, Asian American, Native American—and the list of groups designated as “other” before “American” continues. Whiteness can be understood

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *How to read Lacan*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 43.

⁴⁷ *Playing in the Dark*, 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

as what Lacan defines as the “master signifier,” upon which an entire discourse is constructed.⁴⁹ Sheldon George claims that “Racial whiteness is just such a signifier, establishing slavery as a nodal point for the myths of race that still retain levels of structural control over American society and its social Symbolic”.⁵⁰ Race is what organizes and defines American society today, and this is due to the history of slavery that built and defined the birth of the American state. The concepts of “Americanness” or American identity are in-articulate or impossible to understand apart from the discourse and concept of race, as designated by the “master signifier” of whiteness. Morrison clarifies that the color of the slave body was not just a color, but had been imbedded with meaning, one defined and employed by scholars at the very least beginning in the 18th century, the same historical moment when scholars began to explore concepts of “natural history” and the “inalienable rights of man,” or “human freedom”.⁵¹ Ideas of liberty, independence, and the rights of man upon which the US is understood to be founded were conceived in tandem with definitions and ideas of race, and worked to further bolster and define the free white man in early America.

Copjec explores why it is that race is such a persistent, violent, and organizing concept in the social symbolic. She explains the onset of modernity expelled the notion of an afterlife as real or guaranteed, and the notion of race allowed one to escape mortality, and to somehow continue to live on after death by being part of a lineage that continues

⁴⁹ “Race and Slavery, Theorizing Agencies Beyond the Symbolic”, *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian study of African American Racial Identity*, (Baylor UP: 2016), 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Playing in the Dark*, 49.

to exist.⁵² Copjec states that “This idea is a negative one... Yet it is what survives of eternity in the modern world, and it lends to a certain notion of ideality that is the source of its profound violence and its disdain for every historical obstacle, every contingency that opposes it”.⁵³ The need to transcend historical contingency that Morrison reiterates as the reason immigrants traveled to the New World, necessitating a subjective and collective identity of Americanness, constructed with notions of freedom and independence, illustrates Copjec’s Lacanian understanding of the appeal and endurance of race. Copjec’s delineation of race and its appeal is rooted in Lacan’s concept of the “super-ego”. The super-ego exerts pressure on the subject to enjoy the *jouissance*, or excess pleasure, of race to an obscene degree. The fantasy that sustains the subject’s reality is inherently linked to a sense of lack, and what Lacan defines as the Law of Desire, imbedded in the super-ego, that calls one to search and obtain the missing kernel of the self. The Law of Desire is the “agency that tells you to act in accord with your desire,” while the super-ego “exerts its unbearable pressure upon us on behalf of our betrayal of the ‘law of desire’”.⁵⁴ The concept of race taps into these psychological components, providing the subject with the false perception that race will negate the feeling of lack, while also providing an avenue to not only perceive oneself as complete, but as limitlessness by being part of a lineage that will continue. The super-ego exerts pressure on the subject to satisfy his/her inherent sense of lack by identifying oneself through the concept of race.

⁵² *Imagine there is No Woman*, 105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *How to read Lacan*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 81.

Just as Africanism is a conduit for the expression of (white) American anxiety, fears, and desires, it also functions to define and validate white men's sense of freedom. Much in the same way that Agamben's *homo sacer* figure functions to define the group of recognized citizens, the presence of slaves, and the Africanism expressed in American literature highlights the freedom of white men. Copjec via Lacan provides a psychoanalytic understanding of this subjective and collective identification, rather the sort of structural exploration of biopolitics that Agamben is invested in. The construction of Africanism as such, is arises from the Law of Desire and the super-ego, providing an avenue through which the "American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny". Race and the expression of Africanism not only betray the (white) American subject's anxiety, it also grants a certain pleasure and enjoyment to the subject that it validates. Working from Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Copjec presents the case for why psychoanalysis provides a method for interrogating notions of race and the pleasure a subject can experience from investing his/herself within such a matrix. Copjec explains that in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud stripped ideality away from race and revealed an "anonymous root of racial identity, in a useless, exorbitant pleasure," or what Lacan defines as *jouissance*.⁵⁵ An excess of pleasure, or racial *jouissance* the subject experiences accounts for the close proximity of the white, free body to the enslaved, black body. This excess of pleasure can also account for Agamben's biopolitical explanation of the slave-master relationship as the "striking and despondent intimacy

⁵⁵ *Imagine there is No Woman*, 106.

between master and slave”.⁵⁶ Morrison cites Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an example of an expression of this relationship in American literature. She writes that it is only through Huck and the slave Jim’s close relationship that Huck is able to articulate his sense of independence and freedom, and why Jim could not be freed at the end of the story. Morrison explains that “freedom has no meaning for Huck or to the text without the specter of enslavement, the anodyne to individualism; the yardstick of absolute power over the life of another; the signed, marked, informing and mutating presence of a black slave.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

Questions of race, history, trauma, and subjective identification that Morrison explores in *Playing in the Dark* and in her fiction, benefit from and enhance the concept of biopolitics, as conceived by Agamben, and Copjec’s conception of the Lacanian subject and race as predicated by a traumatic void, or inherent rupture. Placing these three writers in dialogue with one another is valuable in interrogating notions of American exceptionalism, race, racial violence, and the construction of (white) American identity. It will also be useful in understanding how Morrison explores black subjectivity, as a result of white subjectivity and dominance, within her works of fiction. Morrison’s critique of American identity and subjectivity in *Playing in the Dark* is an innovative and necessary approach to understanding why the American state is constructed through racism and oppression, why it persists so today, and lays the groundwork to study how race and racism impact those who perpetrate and sustain such systems of oppression in

⁵⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 36.

⁵⁷ *Playing in the Dark*, 56.

tandem with further study of the impact of racism on the oppressed. The intellectual projects of each of these writers aims to explore notions of subjectivity, and why it is that individuals adhere to and support oppressive structures in an attempt to claim a sense of wholeness or autonomy. The concepts and discourses that each writer provides is of value in exploring some of the most difficult questions about race, violence, and oppression.

CHAPTER 2: BIOPOLITICS AND THE RACIALIZATION OF LAW AND
CITIZENSHIP IN *A MERCY AND HOME*

Introduction

Morrison's novels often explore and question the ways race, oppression, and violence are imbedded within the cultural technologies that produce and sustain Eurocentric-oriented notions of American identity and subjectivity. To accomplish this, her novels are each purposefully set in a specific moment in American history, moments whose historiographies are mythologized as indicative of American "progress". Morrison's novels illustrate the gender, class, and racial violence that proliferates in these mythologized historical periods, and in doing so, demonstrates the violence at the core of the American state. Her stories demonstrate that the law is not a guarantor of justice, but instead functions to perpetuate injustices against its citizens, particularly its marginalized populations, in the name of prosperity and protection for recognized and valued citizens. In a 1974 review of *The Black Book* published in *The New York Times Magazine*, a project Morrison undertook as an editor for Random House, Inc. before publishing her first novel, she takes these historiographies to task, stating that "There are very few examinations of U.S. economics as the growth of a country that had generations of free labor to assure that growth. Or of the legal history of this country as primarily the efforts of the courts to contain blacks."⁵⁸ Morrison writes that in the process of editing *The Black Book*, she was "overwhelmed with the connecting tissue between black and white

⁵⁸ Toni Morrison and Carolyn C. Denard, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 48.

history,” a connection that “was not a simple one of white oppressor and black victim.”⁵⁹ This connection is multifaceted, and Morrison aims to demonstrate that white and black history in the United States are not separate phenomena, but rather a collective and intertwined history, and should be understood and studied as such.

Morrison’s novels *A Mercy* and *Home* each illustrate and explore this collective history by dispelling mythologized accounts of their historical settings. *A Mercy* is set in the 1680’s in the north during colonization, when the slave trade in America is just beginning to prosper. This time is often perceived as the “birth” of America, defined by the excitement and liberty the New World provided for those leaving Europe in search of a new life and opportunity. *A Mercy* narrates the foundations of American racism and the racialization of slavery and oppression during colonization, combatting the dominant narrative of prosperity, independence, and adventure attributed to this era, for one defined by division and forceful dominance. *Home* is set during the 1950’s in the South, a historical moment often characterized by the growth of the American middle class and the promise and fulfillment of the American dream. This novel reminds the reader that this era is also characterized by the Jim Crow black codes in the South, and the Korean War that is often overlooked as part of the “post-war” decades following World War II. As Morrison details in *Playing in the Dark*, the formation of American identity, along with notions of independence and liberty, were not formulated apart from slavery, but are inherently connected to it, much in the same way that the growth of the middle class during the 1950’s and notions of the actualization of the American Dream during this time, are also inherently linked to the black codes and Jim Crow. Just as Agamben claims

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

in *Homo Sacer* that it is the production of bare life necessitated in a biopolitical structure through which democratic states operate, these novels demonstrate how slavery and the continuance of racial oppression is foundational to the American state. These systems of oppression and the laws under which they operate are “interpreted and twisted by those in dominant positions and manipulated to conceal the interest of racial or gendered power in the mendacious language of universality,” and it is this history that Morrison’s fiction draws our attention to.⁶⁰ Agamben’s analysis of *homo sacer* and biopolitics is useful in interrogating these oppressive structures, and Morrison’s explorations of subjective identification and formation within a racialized American system both expands upon and provides further illustration to Agamben’s conception of biopolitics. Analyzing these novels through the lens of biopolitics demonstrates the collective and interconnected histories of white and black America, and accounts for the state’s validation of racial violence and oppression.

Biopolitics, and the Construction of Racial Hierarchy in *A Mercy*

Agamben’s biopolitical analysis of violence and the modern democratic nation state hinges on the classical concept of *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* represents what he designates as “bare life” that can be killed with impunity, but cannot be sacrificed—a human animal, or an individual who is included in the social/political realm through his/her exclusion, holds no political status, and is therefore left without protection from the state.⁶¹ *Homo sacer* is a figure that is submitted to the law, but is not protected by it. For Agamben, *homo sacer* represents an individual who is denied political and symbolic

⁶⁰ Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 78-79.

⁶¹ *Homo Sacer*, 9.

signification. Agamben writes that homo sacer is the “originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed”.⁶² In Morrison’s novels, she often represents black characters as *homo sacer* figures. They are included in the social sphere, are submitted to a rule of law that discriminates against them, yet receive no protection from it. Homo sacer represents the dangerous binary biopolitics operates through, one defined by the separation of chosen, recognized citizens from excluded others. In *A Mercy*, Morrison draws attention to the construction of such a binary in the New World, invoking a “deeply ironic look at American origins”.⁶³ What is unique about Morrison’s depiction of the New World and colonization in *A Mercy* is that each of the characters is represented as *homo sacer*, particularly the female characters. Any sense of solidarity that exists between them, however, fractures as notions of racial hierarchy become widely accepted, and formalized through law. Susan Strehle claims that American exceptionalism, the notion of a “redeemer nation” and its “chosen people” central to American cultural identity, also accounts for the reasoning behind white colonists’ enslavement of people of color, explaining that “*A Mercy* emphasizes divisions, distinctions, and distances, as it portrays in the colonies a potential community stifled at its inception by the assumption of an exceptionalist destiny”.⁶⁴ The characters Jacob Vaark and Rebekka Vaark perhaps most fully portray this sense of American exceptionalism, as they each forgo their sense of

⁶² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶³ “‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism,” *Critique* 54, no. 2 (April 2013), 109.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

morality and “liberal” thinking to participate in a system of hierarchy and oppression, practices they both pointedly stand against at the novel’s beginning.

A Mercy is set at a time before the racialization of slavery, when the slave codes were first being implemented. Morrison refers to Bacon’s Rebellion (1676) in the beginning of the novel when the reader is first introduced to Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch settler and trader, as he is riding through the territory where this rebellion took place. The omniscient narrator tells the reader that Jacob has his guard up, as “In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe”.⁶⁵ This is due to the fact that there is no visual marker, such as race or class, yet available to designate someone as trustworthy or otherwise to Jacob. The narrator explains that the rebellion was fought by “an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves, and indentured [servants]” that had “waged war against the local gentry led by members of that very class”.⁶⁶ Men from every race and class had banded together in an attempt to overthrow the ruling class. This rebellion illustrates the current, yet changing landscape of the colonies at this time. Being a slave was not yet synonymous with being black—there were a number of indentured servants and slaves of a variety of races and ethnicities, including Native Americans, who labored together.⁶⁷ This rebellion instigated the formation of the slave laws, so that the lower classes would be divided by race, preventing their joining in a form of resistance together against the gentry. The narrator explains the reasoning behind the black codes, that by “eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people

⁶⁵ Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Jessica Wells Cantiello, "From Pre-Racial to Post-Racial? Reading and Reviewing "A Mercy" in the Age of Obama," *MELUS* 36, no. 2 (2011), 167.

only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever".⁶⁸ A hierarchy was established to divide the laboring classes, and race became the mark of this division, fueled by the growth of the slave trade in the Americas. Jessica W. Cantiello reiterates that the novel's setting "approaches the era when race began to be codified in the United States; most of the characters were born into a relatively pre-racial era but would die in a racial period".⁶⁹ "Pre-racial" does not mean that the characters in *A Mercy* are not raced, but that their racial identities are understood differently than they would be in later periods in American history.

Jacob views himself as morally above such hierarchical forms of oppression and violence. He understands laws such as the slave codes to be "lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue".⁷⁰ His perceived sense of compassion is emphasized when the narrator tells us that he dismounted his horse twice during his journey, the second time in order to rescue a baby raccoon whose leg was trapped in a tree break.⁷¹ Jacob is traveling to Maryland, at that time owned by the king, in order to collect a debt owed him, the narrator tells of his "disdain" for the Catholics in Maryland and how they have amassed wealth through the slave and tobacco businesses, which are dependent to each other.⁷² However, this is not enough to stop him from doing business with these people. Once he arrives at his destination, his debtor, D'Ortega, offers Jacob slaves to repay his debt, to which Jacob "winced" in response, as "Flesh was

⁶⁸ *A Mercy*, 12.

⁶⁹ "From Pre-Racial to Post-Racial? Reading and Reviewing "A Mercy" in the Age of Obama," 169.

⁷⁰ *A Mercy*, 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 15.

not his commodity”.⁷³ In order to “silence” D’Ortega, Jacob points to a slave woman with a baby and says he will take her.⁷⁴ The slave woman instead offers her daughter, Florens, in her place, and a deal is struck. Despite Jacob’s sense of moral superiority and disdain for the slave trade, he accepts a slave and does make “flesh his commodity.” Directly following this business exchange, the narrator states that Jacob “was determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D’Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin.”⁷⁵ Though Jacob did not literally “trade his conscience for coin,” he did trade his conscience for a human being, Florens, whom he and D’Ortega valued at “twenty pieces of eight.”⁷⁶ Jacob is completely unaware of his moral hypocrisy, and throughout the novel, he is able to reason with himself for each immoral act he commits in his quest for prosperity. Strehle states that “Jacob reflects the best traits and intentions of the American pioneer, particularly the commitment to finding his own way in the new land without falling into the corrupt practices that he associates with Europe”.⁷⁷ Jacob embodies the paradox Morrison illustrates in Early America, rooted in notions of American exceptionalism, in which he is able to understand his actions, however hypocritical and corrupt, as validated by his compassionate nature and work ethic. Though as Jacob demonstrates, embodying distaste for cruelty and corruption is not paradoxical to his actions, but indeed becomes the reason he is able to forgive himself for them.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁷ “‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, A Mercy, and American Exceptionalism,” 113.

The reason that Jacob Vaark is able to make an exception to his moral stance against slavery and trading “flesh as a commodity,” is representative of what Agamben designates as the “state of exception,” through which sovereign power operates, and the power of the law acts outside of the law. Agamben writes that “the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law.”⁷⁸ In other words, sovereign power, or state power, is able to transgress the law, to make an “exception” that it is able to validate. An example of this sort of power is represented in our nation’s current moment through the death penalty, the killing of civilians by the police, or going to war---though killing another individual is unlawful, the state is able to transgress this law and kill under certain circumstances—a state of exception. Susan Strehle connects Agamben’s notion of the state of exception to the American exceptionalism illustrated in *A Mercy*, claiming that the state of exception operates when “a nation justifies suspending its laws in the interest of security,” and that “faith in the nation’s exceptional moral stance blinds U.S. citizens to the corruption of national ideals when the state makes exceptions to the rule.”⁷⁹ This notion is reflected in *A Mercy* when the narrator explains how the slave codes were meant to “separate and protect all whites from all others forever.”⁸⁰ The slave codes were understood to be for the protection of the colonists, and were therefore not acknowledged as immoral or corrupt.

The exception to the rule becomes the rule in biopolitics. Agamben reiterates that “all law is ‘situational law,’” and that the decision that is made under these situations or

⁷⁸ *Homo Sacer*, 15.

⁷⁹ “‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism,” 110.

⁸⁰ *A Mercy*, 12.

“exceptions” illuminates state or sovereign authority.⁸¹ Jacob reveals this most acutely when he reasons with himself for accepting Florens, the slave girl, by recalling a similar situation a decade prior, in which “he found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child”.⁸² This child is a girl named Sorrow, whom Jacob reasoned would provide much needed help for his wife, Rebekka on their property. Their sons died as young children, and she needed assistance with upkeep and labor. He accepted Sorrow from a sawyer who found her “half dead” on the shore, and “Jacob agreed to do it, provided the sawyer forgive the cost of the lumber he was buying.”⁸³ Though Jacob claims that “flesh” is not his “commodity,” in validating his decision to accept Florens for the repayment of a debt, the reader learns that he has already engaged in such practices before when accepting Sorrow. Jacob believes that the “acquisition of both [Florens and Sorrow] could be seen as a rescue”.⁸⁴ Jacob also has another woman laboring on his farm named Lina, a Native American who was the “only” one that he had “purchased outright and deliberately,” implying her situation was different because “she was a woman, not a child”.⁸⁵ Jacob does not realize that he is dealing in flesh, something he claims he has no respect for and would not become involved in, yet his sense of moral superiority blinds him from the fact that he deliberately participates in a business that he criticizes. Jacob’s story illustrates how in colonial America, “ideological dominance and hegemony were forming,” in what has been defined as a “contact zone,” or space before the “acceleration of the Atlantic slave trade” in which “competing imperialisms,

⁸¹ *Homo Sacer*, 16.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

economic migrants, slaves, indentured European laborers, indigenous people, and religious exiles were vying to make the landscape of the new world legible in terms that claimed continuity with their prior *Weltanschauung* [world view].”⁸⁶ Jacob is unable to notice his own participation within an inhumane system of corruption and oppression that he has attempted to avoid. He has merely made an “exception” by accepting these women for labor, so he does not see his own hypocrisy. Though Jacob understands his actions as merciful towards the women laboring on his property, he never considers them as whole, autonomous beings, nor does he consider repaying them for their labor.⁸⁷

In *A Mercy*, Morrison represents the enslaved, black characters as *homo sacer*, as well as the Native Americans that have also been submitted to this form of oppression, but must follow the law of the colonists in the “new world”. Florens was offered by her mother to take her place, so that she would not be taken away from the young baby boy (Floren’s little brother) that she was still nursing. Florens’s mother also offers her up to take her place in the deal struck by D’Ortego and Jacob because she feels that Jacob is not as violent as her own master. Morrison writes during this scene, and repeats throughout the novel, that the white colonists were in the business of “authorizing chaos in defense of order,” as black slaves can be killed, raped, or punished without reason, however their owners see fit.⁸⁸ This represents Agamben’s notion that the production of bare life is necessitated by the state to protect and support the individuals that hold political or social status—the chosen population that must be separated and protected. It is this separation that defines the subjectivity of those within the protection of the law and

⁸⁶ Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*, 158.

⁸⁷ Susan Strehle, “‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism,” 114.

⁸⁸ *A Mercy*, 11.

society. Agamben writes that “exteriority—the law of nature and the principle of the preservation of one’s own life—is truly the innermost center of the political system.”⁸⁹ Florens’s mother understands the colonists’ reasoned violence and the slave’s status within the colonies, which is why she asks Jacob Vaark to take her daughter instead of herself, hoping that this man will provide a refuge for Florens, knowing that she and her daughter are merely “bare life” for the colonists. In this scene, Florens is described as a “raccoon baby stuck in a trap,” further emphasizing her dehumanized and captured state, while also referencing the moment Jacob dismounts his horse on his journey to D’ortega in order to rescue a raccoon stuck in a tree.⁹⁰ The repeated image of the trapped raccoon draws attention to how Jacob’s own sense of moral superiority and compassion blinds him to his involvement in the slave business by accepting Florens to settle a debt. He believes himself to be a kind and compassionate individual, the kind who stops to help free a trapped animal, though he traps Florens, participating in the slave businesses, a fact that he is willfully ignorant of.

A Mercy illustrates the racialization of slavery and citizenship in the new world, while also demonstrating how all women are homo sacer figures, included in the state through their exclusion. It is for this reason that the separation and distancing of the women on the Vaark farm is particularly tragic: though at the beginning of the story, Rebekka, Lina, Florens, and Sorrow all share a sense of vulnerability and solidarity as women, by the end of the story, Rebekka asserts a sense of dominance and superiority, and the women become divided. Rebekka’s changing relationship with Lina, the Native

⁸⁹ *Homo Sacer*, 36.

⁹⁰ *A Mercy*, 12.

American woman Jacob purchased to help her, is perhaps most telling of her transformation and the division of this community of women. Rebekka explains that her parents' religious beliefs were "fueled by a wondrous hatred," claiming that "Shallow believers preferred a shallow god," understanding herself to be different and separate from this set of beliefs, much in the same way that Jacob understands himself to be morally superior to the colonists thriving in the growing slave business.⁹¹ At first, Rebekka is distrustful of Lina, clinging to racialized notions of "savage" Natives encouraged by her religious upbringing. Rebekka remembers that she "bolted the door at night and would not let the raven-haired girl with impossible skin sleep anywhere near."⁹² Rebekka explains that over time, "perhaps because they were both alone without family, or because both had to please one man [Jacob], or because both were ignorant of how to run a farm, they became what was for each a companion."⁹³ It is when Rebekka gives birth to her first baby boy that dies, that she comes to trust Lina fully. Rebekka reminisces that "when the first infant was born, Lina handled it so tenderly, with such knowing," that she was "ashamed of her early fears and pretended she never had them."⁹⁴ Rebekka forms a bond with Lina and is able to assuage herself of any guilt. However, for a time, both women, as well as all of the women on the farm, are able to be companions to each other.

Rebekka recounts her life before coming to the New World, and the women she met and bonded with on her passage to explain her sense of compassion and solidarity

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

with other women, regardless of class or racial differences. Rebekka's father in essence sold her to Jacob to be his wife, as Jacob was in search of a "healthy, chaste wife willing to travel abroad," and was willing to "reimburse" the family for traveling and clothing expenses.⁹⁵ Rebekka relates a lack of choice in the matter, though came to terms with it as "her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest."⁹⁶ Rebekka, like Jacob, views the new world as an opportunity for a different life than she would have had in England, while being fully aware of her status as a homo sacer type figure, due to her gender. Strehle explains that "Like her husband, Rebekka has no nostalgia for London, which she recalls as a place of hatred, discomfort, and narrow-mindedness; while he [Jacob] is literally an orphan, she has been figuratively sold by her parents to the first man who would pay her passage."⁹⁷ Rebekka can experience a sense of compassion and solidarity with Lina and the other women on the farm, as women are similar in many ways. This is emphasized by the fact that Rebekka was also "sold" to Jacob. During her passage to the states, Rebekka was a young girl all alone, taken in by the prostitutes and lower class women on the ship. They provided her with a safe space and a feeling of community, and it is this experience that forms her sensitivity to the specific oppressions that all women have in common. Rebekka looks back fondly on her memories with the women on the ship, understanding them, and herself included, as "Women of and for men," though in their moments of fellowship, "they were neither."⁹⁸ Rebekka carries this sense of

⁹⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁷ "I Am a Thing Apart': Toni Morrison, A Mercy, and American Exceptionalism," 114.

⁹⁸ *A Mercy*, 100.

solidarity she experiences with the prostitutes on the ship to her relationship with the women laboring on her farm. Rebekka relates that “although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men.”⁹⁹ Agamben explains that all beings in a biopolitical system are homo sacer, regardless of class standing or race, because all “human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed.”¹⁰⁰ While all individuals in the new world can be seen as homo sacer, Rebekka and the other women are made acutely aware of this status as women who exist at the expense of men.

After her husband Jacob dies and Rebekka herself falls dangerously ill, she joins a religious sect she once criticized, and begins treating the other women, and especially Lina, as beneath her. Rebekka overlooks her solidarity and similar status with these women, and commits herself to an ideology of racial superiority; validated by a belief that she is part of god’s chosen people. Scully, an indentured servant on the Vaark’s farm, notices this shift in Rebekka’s worldview, explaining that “She was a penitent, pure and simple. Which to him meant that underneath her piety was something cold, if not cruel.”¹⁰¹ Like Jacob, Rebekka’s sense of piety and moral superiority blind her to her own acts of cruelty and oppression. Though Lina is devoted to her throughout her illness, practicing her own medicinal techniques to help heal her, once Rebekka recovers, she credits God for her healing, and prohibits Lina from her cultural practices, makes her cut her hair, and forces her to accompany Rebekka to church services, though she is not allowed to enter the building. Rebekka also plans to sell Florens and Sorrow. These

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰⁰ *Homo Sacer*, 85.

¹⁰¹ *A Mercy* 179.

changes in Rebekkah's beliefs and actions "are significant because, although she has expressed a feminist understanding of the plight of women under patriarchal oppression...she now betrays all of the women who have formed her community," and in doing so, sells her integrity and plans to sell her female companions in order to fit in with the racist Anabaptists.¹⁰² Rebekka's change of heart and treatment of the other women on her farm represents the roots of white feminism: she forgoes her compassion and solidarity for all women, participating in racial hierarchy for her own benefit, viewing lower class women and women of color as beneath her and her own concerns as a woman. Not only does she treat Lina with contempt, but she begins to beat Sorrow as well. Morrison writes that "the family they imagined they had become was false."¹⁰³

The narratives of Jacob and Rebekka Vaark illustrate the formation of division that a biopolitical system necessitates. The organization of racial hierarchy forms in the New World due to such systematic necessities, while the white colonists are able to validate the inhumane acts they commit to satisfy their own needs. Rebekka and Jacob partake in the very type of hierarchical system they each claim to condemn, but are not able to see how they have constructed their subjectivities and way of being in support of such systems. They fail to "understand that their presence and the settlements to which they belong are forged in violence," nor that their presence and new life means the end of an existence that Lina, and other Native Americans once knew.¹⁰⁴ Their willing participation in the business of slavery and the belief in their own moral superiority

¹⁰² Susuan Strehle, "'I Am a Thing Apart': Toni Morrison, A Mercy, and American Exceptionalism," 114-115.

¹⁰³ *A Mercy*, 183.

¹⁰⁴ Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*, 198.

illustrate how they become fully imbedded in such systems of violence and oppression. Rebekka in particular comes to focus on the differences between herself and the other women rather than their similarities, as she once did. She participates in a system that organizes functions to organize these women hierarchically, rather than continue to notice their similar status as women who embody homo sacer, and can be reduced to bare life under patriarchy.

Bare Life and the Law in *Home*

In *Home*, Morrison explores racism and violence in the United States in the late 1950's, a time that is often portrayed with nostalgia in cultural productions and by right-wing politicians. By doing so, she demonstrates how, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, "Race and racism have not been exceptions; instead, they have been the glue that hold the United States together."¹⁰⁵ The racialization of crime, the black codes, and class and race targeted laws such as "vagrancy" laws that Taylor outlines in her sociological and historical survey of race, inequality, and mass incarceration, are historical truths illustrated in *Home*. In Morrison's 1994 article, "On the Backs of Blacks," she writes that "There is virtually no movement up—for blacks or whites, established classes or arrivistes—that is not accompanied by race talk. Refusing, negotiating, or fulfilling this demand is the real stuff, the organizing principle of becoming an American. Star-spangled. Race-Strangled."¹⁰⁶ This concept is represented by the novel's protagonist, Frank, and his sister, Cee. Frank and Cee both portray how black Americans are reduced to "bare life," or represent homo sacer figures,

¹⁰⁵ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, (Chicago, IL: Harkmarket Books, 2016), 29.

¹⁰⁶ Toni Morrison and Carolyn C. Denard, *What Moves at the Margin*, 148.

explicitly so during the Jim Crow era preceding the civil rights movement. This is a time often defined by the growth of the middle-class in the United States, after slavery had ended and African Americans could begin to move up in socioeconomic status. Frank and Cee's stories illustrate how this mythologized past is not accurate to the struggles that those of color faced then, and still face now. In the 25th Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities given by Morrison in 1996 entitled, "The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations," she speaks of the American political practice of glorifying the past, noting that "The fifties, the current favorite, has acquired a gloss of voluntary orderliness, of ethnic harmony, although it was a decade of outrageous political and ethnic persecution. And here one realizes that the dexterity of political language is stunning, stunning and shameless."¹⁰⁷ The stories of Frank and his sister Cee in *Home* function to portray the "outrageous political and ethnic persecution" Morrison relates above, while also illustrating the way black Americans during this time are included in the American state through their exclusion—representing the law of exteriority that Agamben outlines in his analysis of *homo sacer* and biopolitics.

Frank Money's narrative demonstrates how black men, specifically during the 1950's, constitute what Agamben designates as *homo sacer*, or life that can be killed with impunity. Agamben claims that the "fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity" centers on the "decision on the value (or nonvalue) of life as such," while sovereign power, wielded by the state, holds charge over this decision.¹⁰⁸ From the beginning of the novel, Frank is made to confront the notion that his life as a black man is not valued, and

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰⁸ *Homo Sacer*, 137.

can in fact be killed without consequence. The opening scene of *Home* is a childhood flashback memory written in italics, depicting Frank and Cee as children hiding in a field, watching white men ride up on horses to bury the body of a black man after a lynching. Frank narrates, “*we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting.*”¹⁰⁹ One of the first memories Frank can recall from his childhood is this scene of a black body being discarded carelessly. Frank relates to the reader in recounting this memory, “*I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men.*”¹¹⁰ The horses “stood like men,” while a black body was being dumped into a make-shift grave dug in a farm field. Candice L. Pipes writes that “The burial demonstrates the reality of the Jim Crow governed South...the horses were more like men than black men were like men.”¹¹¹ The juxtaposition of these two images demonstrates that the horses are treated with more dignity and respect than black men. Frank’s narration of this flashback depicts that he understands this, yet he does not want to acknowledge it outright, detailing the power and stature of the horses rather than the dehumanized state of the discarded black body. This scene represents how black men in the Jim Crow South could be reduced to bare life, demonstrating a political state in which subjective identification is realized through the exclusion and destruction of the Other.¹¹² This opening scene illustrates the value, or rather the nonvalue of black men’s lives while reflecting the violent biopolitical binary Agamben outlines.

¹⁰⁹ Toni Morrison, *Home*, (New York: Random House Inc., 2010), 4.

¹¹⁰ *Home*, 5.

¹¹¹ "The Impossibility of *Home*," *War, Literature & The Arts: An International Journal Of The Humanities* 26 (2014), 5.

¹¹² Pamela M. Lee, "My Enemy/My Friend," *Grey Room* no. 24 (2006), 104.

Frank's story begins in the northern United States while he is traveling back to his home in Lotus, GA after fighting in the Korean War. He is arrested because he had "swerved his head wildly to see where he was going," and institutionalized in the mental health ward of a hospital, where he has been sedated.¹¹³ Frank awakes in the hospital, plotting his escape, but cannot find a pair of shoes, the omniscient narrator telling the reader that "Walking anywhere in winter without shoes would guarantee his being arrested and back in the ward until he could be sentenced for vagrancy."¹¹⁴ Frank's arrest for moving his head quickly and the mention of vagrancy laws references how black men are separated from the rest of the population, and heavily policed. It also demonstrates a northern United States that is not that much better for black Americans than the Jim Crow South. Morrison writes, "Interesting law, vagrancy, meaning standing outside or walking without clear purpose, anywhere."¹¹⁵ Frank is arrested for making a sudden movement, and he understands that he would likely be arrested again for walking outside without shoes. He has already been medically sedated because the innocent action that prompted his arrest was seen as threatening. This scene stands in sharp contrast to the opening scene of the burial flashback, in which a black man was lynched and the police were nowhere to be seen. Taylor explains that during this time, in the North as well as the South, there were state regulations known as the "black codes," a series "laws, rules, and restrictions imposed only on African Americans" which "criminalized poverty, movement, and even leisure. Blacks could be arrested for vaguely worded or innocuous

¹¹³ *Home*, 9.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

‘crimes’ such as ‘vagrancy’.”¹¹⁶ Frank’s run-in with the law at the beginning of his story, illustrating the black codes Taylor outlines, demonstrates how the state functions to protect white citizens, while African Americans receive no such protection, and are in fact terrorized by the police in the interest of protecting whites. The narrator states that “better than most, he [Frank] knew that being outside wasn’t necessary for legal or illegal disruption,” as “men with or without badges, but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack and move.”¹¹⁷ This claustrophobic scene of Frank plotting his escape from the hospital seems to parallel the notion of being trapped or suffocated by the state anywhere he goes.

Once Frank escapes the hospital and finds shelter for the night from Reverend John Locke, he learns that being arrested is not the worst thing that could have happened had he not escaped. When Reverend Locke learns that Frank has escaped the hospital, he tells him, “You lucky, Mr. Money. They sell a lot of bodies out there.”¹¹⁸ Frank is shocked by this suggestion, to which Reverend Locke responds, “Well, you know, doctors need to work on the dead poor so they can help the rich live.”¹¹⁹ This shocking insight demonstrates how black bodies and poor bodies can be reduced to bare life for the benefit of privileged citizens, while also foreshadowing what happens to Frank’s sister Cee. Agamben explains that in a biopolitical system, the biological health of citizens becomes the state’s concern, and the institution of medicine becomes intertwined with economics and the needs of the state, “Hence the radical transformation of the meaning

¹¹⁶ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 108-109.

¹¹⁷ *Home*, 9.

¹¹⁸ *Home*, 12.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

and duties of medicine, which is increasingly integrated into the functions and the organs of the state...”¹²⁰ Doctors and the state are able to make decisions about bare life based on the needs of the state, which is why Reverend Locke tells Frank that the bodies of the poor are used as bare life for the benefit of more privileged citizens. Agamben’s analysis uses the Third Reich and concentration camp as the basis of his interrogation, claiming that it is only through understanding the biopolitical structure that works to benefit the health of the chosen population of citizens that one can grasp the Third Reich’s project, in which the harvesting and extinguishing of the Jewish body was for the benefit of the German, or European body.¹²¹ Though Agamben’s analysis focuses on a different historical phenomenon, applying his concepts to the depictions of the treatment of people of color and poor people in *Home* demonstrates a similar relationship between bodies and the state that Agamben examines occurring in the novel. This brings about some cogent questions and insights into certain state structures and historical phenomenon in the United States that Morrison’s novel gestures to.

Frank stops next in Chicago on his journey back home to Georgia, and what he learns from the family he stays with while there further disproves the notion that Northern states were much better or safer for African Americans than the South. He notices that the family’s small boy has a crooked arm and the father, Billy, tells him that a policeman shot his son while he was driving by. He tells Frank that the boy was eight years old and had been playing outside with a toy gun when “Some redneck rookie

¹²⁰ *Homo Sacer*: 145.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

thought his dick was underappreciated by his brother cops.”¹²² When Frank responds, “You can’t just shoot a kid,” the boy’s father, Billy, tells him that “Cops shoot anything they want. This here’s a mob city.”¹²³ This is an example of how the black characters in home are depicted as what Agamben defines as figures reduced to a state of bare life. Using the Third Reich as a primary example, Agamben explains how in such a biopolitical system, “the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life.”¹²⁴ Heavy policing and police brutality are an example of the state’s attempt to “control” bare life for the benefit and protection of valued and privileged citizens. Taylor explains why relations between the police and the poor, and people of color have always been fraught with injustice and violence. She writes that “The police function to enforce the rule of the politically powerful and economic elite,” which is why “poor and working class communities are so heavily police,” leading her to point out that “if the task of the police is to maintain law and order, then that role takes on a specific meaning in a fundamentally racist society.”¹²⁵ The fact that a child is seen as threatening enough for a policeman to shoot abruptly illustrates the extent to which racism is imbedded in the biopolitical state apparatus of the 1950’s America depicted in *Home*. Later when Frank is mugged in Atlanta during his journey home, a man asks if he wants to call the police, and Frank responds, “Hell no,” understanding that he cannot rely on them for protection, and

¹²² *Home*, 31.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁵ *From #BLACKLIVESMATTER to Black Liberation*, 108.

in fact, may be found suspicious himself.¹²⁶ The man who asks if he needs help tells Frank to “Stay in the light” in order to keep safe.¹²⁷ This illustrates the binary between bare life that is excluded from the body of the state, and the politically invested life of citizens that Agamben delineates in *Homo Sacer*.

The metaphor of war extends throughout the novel. Frank is a returned soldier who is illustrated fighting another war back in the United States as a black man in a racist nation. The war flashbacks, which could in this day and age be labeled as PTSD, emphasize the constant state of war in which Frank finds himself. It is notable that Frank has returned from the Korean War, and Morrison’s “allusions make clear that the period after the World Wars can hardly be regarded as having healed the old fissures in a postwar peace.”¹²⁸ Frank is a veteran who fought for a state power that does not recognize his humanity. Candice L. Pipes notes that the reality for black soldiers returning from the World Wars and the Korean War was a “Jim Crow, segregated society, which still allowed public lynchings of black people,” and Frank’s experiences in the North detail that the region does not have much more to offer, and though the North is not defined by lynchings during this era, police brutality and killings can be seen as another form of lynching.¹²⁹ Pipes continues to note that “The untold story is that even as black soldiers were fighting for the United States of America, for democracy, for their own respect and dignity, for their humanity, the roots of institutionalized racism were

¹²⁶ *Home*, 107.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*.

¹²⁸ Erin Penner, "For Those "Who Could Not Bear to Look Directly at the Slaughter": Morrison's *Home* and the Novels of Faulkner and Woolf," *African American Review* 49, no. 4 (2016),: 344.

¹²⁹ Candice L. Pipes, "The Impossibility of Home," 1.

being dug even deeper.”¹³⁰ Frank returns to a United States in which racism is thriving, and the fact that he is a veteran does not ease the danger or conflict that surrounds him.

Frank expresses a hope in the notion that fighting in the war might provide opportunity or help him gain acknowledgment and respect, or an avenue towards a different life entirely. He finds his hometown of Lotus, GA unbearable due to “It’s unforgiving population, its isolation, and its indifference to the future...”¹³¹ Frank goes to war to escape his home, along with his two best friends. Morrison writes that when Frank tried to explain to Cee why he chose to go to war, “He tried to tell her the army was the only solution. Lotus was suffocating, killing him and his two best friends. They all agreed.”¹³² Even after Frank returns home from the awful things he witnesses in battle, a section of Frank’s internal dialogue, written in italics, reiterates, “*Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. At least on the field there is a goal, excitement, daring, some chance of winning along with many chances of losing.*”¹³³ Frank intentionally places himself in a war, in a situation where he is merely bare life, because at least in battle, he feels he can fight, where as in Lotus, he feels stagnant in an environment where he is made to be bare life—it is not a choice he can make. War can be viewed as a sort of “state of exception” that Agamben describes, in which violence is prohibited. He describes this kind of biopolitical structure as one where “Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being,” implying that this is also true in modern democratic state

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³¹ *Home*, 16.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

structures—the state of exception and bare life are not confined to the space of the concentration camp, or in this case, a war.¹³⁴ Franks experiences at war and at home are compared to each other, illustrating Agamben’s conception of biopolitics and bare life.

Frank was exposed to what Agamben defines as bare life while at war, and he constantly battles the memories of the atrocities he witnessed. The violence and racial policing he witnessed after returning from war trigger memories of fighting in Korea, implying connection or comparison between the two spaces. He remembers witnessing a starving young Korean girl being killed by a soldier. It is only later in the story that he realizes that he was the soldier that shot this girl, a memory that he had repressed. The girl was searching through trash looking for food, eventually grabbing the soldier’s crotch saying “Yum Yum,” and the soldier, whom later is revealed to be Frank himself, “blows her away.”¹³⁵ Frank recalls that “*Thinking back on it now, I think the guard felt more than disgust. I think he felt tempted and that is what he had to kill.*”¹³⁶ Frank cannot handle the truth that he killed this girl, and his memory of how his friend died in battle, in which he had to locate his friend’s blown-off limb, parallels when he had “blown away” the young Korean girl. When Frank travels through Atlanta he has a flashback of watching his two best friends die in battle, stating that “Now they were meat.”¹³⁷ Frank partakes of this act of violence, treating an individual as bare life while he is in battle. He partakes in the same form of violence that he witnesses in back home in America. Penner claims that Frank “acknowledges being plagued not only by social ills he cannot control but also by

¹³⁴ *Homo Sacer*, 140.

¹³⁵ *Home*, 95.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

his participation in them,” his inability to recognize that he is the soldier that killed the Korean girl is an attempt to obscure the reality that “he, too, uses familiar cultural tropes to ease his own acts of brutality during the war.”¹³⁸ He partakes in the system of biopolitics by killing soldiers in battle and killing the Korean girl, in a space that can be defined as a state of exception- war. Agamben reiterates that it is “this topological zone of indistinction, which had to remain hidden from the eyes of justice, that we must try to fix under our gaze.”¹³⁹ The state in which Frank finds Cee after returning home forces him to confront such acts of violence against bare life, since Cee herself has been reduced to bare life.

Frank travels home after receiving word from a stranger that Cee is ill and in danger. He is traveling through suburbs outside of Atlanta to locate Cee at the address provided on the letter he received. Morrison writes that “finding transportation in these parts was rougher than confronting a battlefield,” which again references the war metaphor, implicating that Frank is entering into another such space.¹⁴⁰ Frank’s sister Cee goes to work as a housekeeper for a doctor, and ends up being essentially used as a lab rat so he could conduct experiments on her reproductive organs. Cee is treated as bare life, being harvested for the service of the designated collection of valued citizens, which mirrors Reverend Locke’s comments about doctor’s needing to “work on the dead poor to help the rich live.”¹⁴¹ Cee’s status as “bare life” is what keeps Frank from reporting the doctor to the police, knowing that black men and women are killed for whatever reason,

¹³⁸ "For Those "Who Could Not Bear to Look Directly at the Slaughter": Morrison's *Home* and the Novels of Faulkner and Woolf," 348.

¹³⁹ *Homo Sacer*, 37.

¹⁴⁰ *Home*, 109.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

and that the law will not help them in any way, as it exists for and by the white community. When Frank arrives to take his sister from Dr. Beau, the doctor does not care to stop him. Morrison writes that for Dr. Beau, Frank taking back his sister was “Just the kidnapping of an employee he could easily replace,” reinforcing Cee’s status as a poor black woman in the American South at the time, viewed as bare life for the use of the designated population of citizens.¹⁴²Cee’s status is reflective of the harvesting of the bodies of Jews in the concentration camps that Agamben references in his analysis of biopolitics. He states that it is “Only from this perspective is it possible to grasp the full sense of the extermination of the Jews, in which the police and politics, eugenic motives and ideological motives, the care of the health and fight against the enemy become absolutely indistinguishable.”¹⁴³The state of exception becomes the rule in a biopolitical state structure, and Cee’s status as bare life, being used as a lab rat for the “care of the health” of the valued population of citizens, exposes binary of bare life and citizen illustrated throughout the novel.

Frank delivers Cee to a group of elderly black women that had helped to raise them as children. These women take it upon themselves to bring Cee back to health, not trusting the medical institution or any other—she must be healed by a group of women away from such spaces. Much in the same way that Frank did involve the authorities with Dr. Beau, these women do not trust such institutions, learning to work outside of them. Morrison writes that “The women handled sickness as though it were an affront, an

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴³ *Homo Sacer*, 147.

illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping.”¹⁴⁴ When he takes her to Miss Ethel’s house, the women are not surprised to hear of what happened when learning that Cee was working for a doctor. They berate her for working for a doctor in the first place and not knowing better, saying, “Men know a slop jar when they see one,” “You ain’t a mule to be pulling some evil doctor’s wagon,” and “Who told you you was trash?”.¹⁴⁵ This environment is a sharp contrast to the experiences Frank has after returning from war, in which he is isolated and always on his guard. Cee has a community apart from any state structure to be healed and taken care of. These women have had to find develop their own methods of healing and care, establishing their own way of being, while Frank did the opposite by going away to war and imbedding himself in the very state system that is the source of his trauma and oppression. Frank must confront the “Realities of race, of traumatic stress, of guilt and shame, of segregation and disreception, of invisibility...”¹⁴⁶ Frank’s experiences at war and at home, and Cee’s experience “working” for Dr. Beau, both delineate the extent to which violence is predicated and validated in a biopolitical system, that makes exceptions in order to care for the life of valued citizens.

Conclusion

Both *A Mercy* and *Home* revisit periods of American history that are often mythologized. Morrison is able to illustrate systems of divisions, violence, and oppression at the root of the American state system, and explores how the subjectivities of those living with such a system are impacted. Agamben’s analysis of biopolitics is helpful in delineating the structures of power and citizenship depicted in each novel, and

¹⁴⁴ *Home*, 121.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴⁶ Candice L. Pipes, "The Impossibility of Home," 13.

the novels function to provide an expanded illustration of Agamben's interrogation of biopolitics. These novels illustrate what Agamben recognizes as the "fundamental biopolitical fracture within itself [the division or separation within the system itself, that which cannot be included]," which is "what always *is* and yet must, nevertheless, be realized; it is the pure source of every identity but must, however, continually be redefined and purified through exclusion, language, blood, land."¹⁴⁷ Biopolitical structures function on a binary of bare life and citizen, and although biopolitics aims at all body politics (because even the citizens are to be subject to the norm of the body, like the healthy body), it is in regards to bare life that the sovereign state's structural or foundational violence becomes visible. In each novel, the characters struggle to construct their subjectivities in reaction to, or as a part of such a system. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes, the "Black experience unravels what we are supposed to know to be true about America itself—the land of milk and honey—the land where hard work makes dreams come true," while this mythology serves the United States in validating its decisions for intervention and violent action in the interest of caring for its valued citizens.¹⁴⁸ *A Mercy* illustrates a space where such divisions begin to take place during the formation of the American state, while *Home* demonstrates the impact of such divisions and the logics of the state of exception that validates them, after such ideologies have thrived.

¹⁴⁷ *Homo Sacer*, 178.

¹⁴⁸ *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 25.

CHAPTER 3: RACE AND THE RUPTURED SUBJECT IN *THE BLUEST EYE* AND
BELOVED

Introduction

Toni Morrison's work challenges the reader to rethink the history of race and racism in the United States, and how each individual participates in and maintains such oppressive social and political structures. Her work explores the ways that subjects either adhere to, or "wake up" from what Lacan defines as the fantasy reality that is founded upon racial, gender, and sexual oppressions that signify the source of trauma for each character in her novels. Illustrating how the traumatic history of slavery persists as a facet of black consciousness and reality, and by writing the internal dialogues of each character, Morrison explores the desires, conscious and unconscious, of the oppressed and the oppressors in each narrative. Morrison maintains the belief that "Literature, sensitive as a tuning fork, is an unblinking witness to the light and shade of the world we live in," and her work can be understood as an "unblinking witness" to racial violence, history, and trauma—phenomenon that have often been silenced, or barely acknowledged within the dominant narrative of the United States.¹⁴⁹ Many of Morrison's novels detail the treacherous and violent impacts of racism on the lives of women color. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber explains that Morrison's work delineates notions of the self and home, telling stories of African American trauma, illustrating how subjects struggle to construct identities and a sense of self in a racist, patriarchal society.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹Toni Morrison and Carolyn C. Denard, *What Moves at the Margin*, 185.

¹⁵⁰ Evelyn J. Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 1.

The characters in Morrison's novels illustrate Lacan's notion of the ruptured subject or subject of lack, a concept upon which Lacanian theorist Joan Copjec foregrounds her work. Copjec identifies a void at the center of racial identity, and this theoretical understanding provides a necessary framework for interpreting Morrison's fiction.¹⁵¹ The characters in Morrison's novels also provide potent illustrations of Copjec's Lacanian understanding of racial and feminine identity as founded on an inherent rupture, and may even expand upon Copjec's intellectual work. Copjec's focus on the subject's rupturing, in terms of conceiving racial and feminine identity, are particularly useful to exploring how Morrison foregrounds the construction of subjectivity in her novels. *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* provide particularly impactful depictions of racial trauma and subjectivity. In *The Bluest Eye*, all of the black characters, especially the character of focus, Pecola Breedlove, are constantly aware of their race and racial history. Pecola falls apart under the weight of her traumatic experience as the ugly, dark black girl, rejected by everyone around her and raped by her own father, Cholly Breedlove. Every character in *The Bluest Eye*, not just Pecola, illustrates the Lacanian notion of a ruptured subject. Pecola lacks the community or support to conceive of herself as an individual worthy of love and care, which is ultimately the reason for her undoing. In *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe also faces personal violence and trauma, though she can be interpreted as a character that is able to make a decision outside of the fantasmatic realm of subjectivity and reality when she kills her baby to protect her from a life of slavery. Such an autonomous and self-defining action is a notion that Copjec analyzes through Lacan's reading of the story of Antigone. Sethe also has Paul D., an old

¹⁵¹ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman*, 98.

friend who was also enslaved at the plantation she escaped, and they each serve as a witness to the other's trauma. At the center of both novels is a concern with personal and collective healing that must begin with the subject's restoration.

The Ruptured Subject and the Cycle of Violence in *The Bluest Eye*

In *Imagine There's No Woman*, Copjec begins her analysis of feminine subjectivity, sublimation, and ethics, by noting why it is that human beings are inherently ruptured, and why achieving a complete state of being is not possible. She claims, "*it is thought that makes an all of being impossible*," clarifying that what she means is "not that we cannot *think* the all of being, but that there *is* none."¹⁵² It is our capacity for conscious thought that divides up our being, and the reason why we are predicated by a sense of lack, causing us to search elsewhere to gain a sense of completeness, which is a futile mission. This traumatic rupture and sense of lack occurs when the subject enters the world of language in the Symbolic Order. Our capacity to recognize our individual status and difference from others and the world around us causes us to compare ourselves to the external world, and seek outside the self for what seems to be missing. Copjec is criticizing the duality suggested by Descartes's statement, "I think therefore I am," to demonstrate that it is actually because we think that we are not complete. Copjec explains that Lacan's reading of the story of Antigone, in which he determines Antigone to be autonomous and ethical by defying Creon in breaking the law to bury her brother, provides a "glimpse of the difference between psychoanalysis and philosophy or psychology," as Lacan "does not read the *behavior* of each of the protagonists, he defines

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

the *structure* through which their acts must be read.”¹⁵³ It is this sort of psychoanalytic lens that provides an avenue of inquiry into the structures that predicate the actions and responses of Pecola, Cholly, and the other characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

The beginning of the novel, written in italics as the inner dialogue of Claudia, a child who befriends Pecola, immediately references the sense of impotence that these young girls, and the whole community feels. Claudia relates, that “*there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941,*” and she and her sister Frieda “*thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow,*” then explaining that “*A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody’s did.*”¹⁵⁴ Morrison incites the whole community into Pecola’s hardship, while also demonstrating how these characters feel powerless, yet are focused on their own individual lack of autonomy or impotence, failing to recognize that the entire community is disenfranchised. Morrison closes this opening section of Claudia’s internal dialogue with her assessment that “*There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.*”¹⁵⁵ This statement of inquiry incites the framework or lens of analysis that Copjec defines as psychoanalysis, as the structure in which actions occur, not merely the actions themselves, are interpreted. Morrison asks the reader to inquire into “how,” not “why,” Pecola’s tragic story unfolds as it does. Again, Morrison incites community responsibility and an interrogation of the oppressive systems in place that foreground what happens to Pecola. Stephanie Li claims that although it is easy to determine the

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁴ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1978), (NYC: Vintage International, 2007), 6.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

effects of societal inequality, violence, and oppression as resulting in the “psychological bondage” of an individual or group of people, this simplistic narrative disregards enduring structures of social inequality.¹⁵⁶ Rather than analyze why Pecola succumbs to trauma and rejection, or why the community rejects her to begin with, and why her father Cholly abuses her, it is more fruitful to look at how such events occurred, and interrogate the environment that fosters this violence.

From the moment the reader is first introduced to Pecola, her status as an outcast is obvious. This is only emphasized by the structure of the novel, as much of it is narrated by a young girl named Claudia, who, along with her older sister, Frieda, befriends Pecola when their family takes her in for a short time. Pecola’s father Cholly, an alcoholic known for his outbursts of temper, had set fire to the Breedloves home, leaving his family “outdoors”.¹⁵⁷ Claudia explains that the “real terror of life” was the “outdoors,” noting that “If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition.”¹⁵⁸ While Claudia tells the reader that Pecola is “outdoors,” she then continues to explain that the outdoors is “*our* metaphysical condition,” implicating herself and Frieda, and perhaps the whole community, as being cast out or rejected. Claudia says that she and Frieda enjoyed having Pecola over for that short time, making an effort to “keep her from feeling outdoors,” particularly after they “discovered that she clearly did not want to

¹⁵⁶ Stephanie Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 120.

¹⁵⁷ *The Bluest Eye*, 17.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

dominate us.”¹⁵⁹ The ego-boost of being the more dominant girls around Pecola made them accepting of her. Žizek explains that the Freudian concept of the “ideal ego,” represents “the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, the way I would like others to see me).”¹⁶⁰ It is Claudia and Frieda’s “ideal ego” that is bolstered by being around Pecola, and though they do become friends with her, it is made clear from the beginning that they ultimately do so for the boost in self-esteem.

The Breedloves are very dark, very poor, and have a dysfunctional family. As such, they are the pariahs of their community in Lorain, Ohio. The family lives in an old abandoned storefront, isolated from residential areas of town. Morrison writes that “they lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly,” though their poverty was “traditional and stultifying,” their ugliness was distinctive, and the community paid them no mind.¹⁶¹ They seem to have accepted the position designated for them by the community as unlovable outcasts and unworthy individuals, ignored by the world around them. Morrison writes that besides Cholly Breedlove “whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed towards petty things and weak people) was behavior,” the rest of the family: the mother Pauline, and two children, Pecola and Sammy their ugliness “came from conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question.”¹⁶² They play the role that the oppressive white culture has placed upon them. Copjec explains that “In

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 80.

¹⁶¹ *The Bluest Eye*, 38.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 38, 39.

shame, unlike guilt, one experience's one's visibility, but there is no external Other who sees, since shame is proof that the Other does not exist."¹⁶³ When the subject feels shame, she no longer experiences herself as the "fulfillment of the Other's desire," which causes a "distance to open up within the subject herself."¹⁶⁴ The Breedloves seem to accept their ugliness as an act of shame, as they are not fulfilling the big Other's desire—they do not see themselves as serving a purpose in the master narrative, which throws this narrative and any notions of a big Other or some "greater" purpose into question. Schreiber explains that the "black trauma" of being rendered invisible or lacking value as people in (white) dominant culture creates a "psychic struggle" to rise above this casted position and become a self that is worthy of respect and acknowledgement.¹⁶⁵ The Breedloves are depicted as a group that feels shame, and has accepted their status as lesser than that is place upon them by the community that ignores their struggles. Copjec reiterates that the "subject is the product of history without being the fulfillment of a historical demand."¹⁶⁶ The Breedloves poignantly illustrate this facet of subjectivity.

Pecola understands that her color is what is keeping her from being loved and accepted, and longs for the blue eyes of Shirley Temple, believing this will solve all of her problems and the rejection she experiences. Morrison writes that Pecola prayed for blue eyes every night and was "Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would only see what

¹⁶³ *Imagine There's No Woman*, 128.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Evelyn J. Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, 73.

¹⁶⁶ *Read My Desire*, 56.

there was to see: the eyes of other people.”¹⁶⁷ Pecola is consumed by the belief that a change in her external appearance will grant her a sense of wholeness and self-hood. While it is true that much of her rejection and struggle comes from her status as a poor, black girl, applying a Lacanian lens to this belief reveals that a change in symbolic appearance will not grant one a sense of wholeness, as this is not possible. Sheldon George argues that race is a “fantasy difference,” and that the plight of people of color, and cycles of trauma in communities of color will not go away by focusing on changing signification, one must “move beyond signification,” rather than cling to it.¹⁶⁸ Of course, this is nearly impossible to imagine in a world and society predicated on signification and the Symbolic Order. Morrison writes that for Pecola, “All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.”¹⁶⁹ Pecola berates herself for not being white, as if this is why she is lacking as a subject. She pities herself for not being enough (light). Copjec explains that the subject’s superego berates her with guilt for not living up to impossible, imaginary ideals that are imposed upon her.¹⁷⁰ Pecola is a character who illustrates the cruel force of the superego upon the subject, longing for blue eyes and whiteness that she cannot possess.

Pecola wishes to embody white characteristics so badly, that she undergoes what Lacan defines as a self-rupturing experience of excess pleasure, or *jouissance* when she purchases Mary Jane candies. She notes the character of Mary Jane on the wrapper,

¹⁶⁷ *The Bluest Eye*, 46-47.

¹⁶⁸ *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian study of African American Racial Identity*, 36.

¹⁶⁹ *The Bluest Eye*, 49.

¹⁷⁰ *Imagine There’s No Woman*, 9.

with her white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, “blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.”¹⁷¹ To Pecola, this Mary Jane, like Shirley Temple, illustrates the epitome of a happy, pretty, loveable girl. She treasures these candies, savoring each bite as if “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.”¹⁷² Copjec delineates how the experience of *jouissance* or excess pleasure, much like the subject’s entering into the symbolic order, is predicated by the subject’s being internally split. She explains the Freudian notion of narcissism that is involved in any experience of loving another or an object, stating that when we love something external to ourselves, “*what we love in the object is ourselves,*” and that “in the *jouissance* of loving it affords a corporeal experience of the self.”¹⁷³ The Mary Jane candies allow Pecola to access this *jouissance* and experience an embodied selfhood through a self-rupturing excess or pleasure. Morrison writes that “Three little pennies had purchased her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane,” emphasizing the excessive pleasure Pecola experiences by consuming Mary Jane.¹⁷⁴ It also demonstrates that Pecola does see herself in this character of Mary Jane to a degree. Sheldon George claims that “race and racism are modes of *jouissance,*” and the reader can see Pecola tapping into this notion by the *jouissance* she experiences while consuming the character of Mary Jane through the candies.¹⁷⁵ She is consuming Mary Jane’s whiteness that she so desperately desires.

The rejection of the Breedloves and specifically, Pecola by the other members of the black community is rooted in the notion of colorism that exists in communities of

¹⁷¹ *The Bluest Eye*, 50.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Imagine There’s No Woman*, 78.

¹⁷⁴ *The Bluest Eye*, 50.

¹⁷⁵ *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian study of African American Racial Identity*, 13.

color, in which lightness of shade is equated with higher status and beauty. Colorism is a repetition, or internalization of an oppressive white culture. Much like *Playing in the Dark*, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison is interrogating notions of race and the sort of ego-boost it grants to a certain few that depend on it for a sense of self, and colorism is another example of this phenomenon. Sheldon George writes that “race grounds fantasies that give access to identity.”¹⁷⁶ Colorism can be understood as another expression of the fantasy notion of race instigated and maintained by the white community, as it is internalized by communities of color. This is demonstrated by the character Maureen Peal who represents a “high yellow” black girl. Everyone loves Maureen and believes her to be good and sweet, which makes Claudia despise her and Pecola look up to her. Claudia yells at Maureen, “you think you so cute!” to which Maureen replies to her, Pecola, and Frieda, “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly...”¹⁷⁷ The notion of colorism is also illustrated when a mother of a child that bullies Pecola calls her a “little black bitch.”¹⁷⁸ This woman teaches her son, Junior, that is a “difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable.”¹⁷⁹ This demonstrates how colorism is a replication of a racist white culture that gives certain individuals of color a way to feel more superior to the greater black community. However, one can see how this is again, not so much a simple relationship of victim and oppression, as those that cling to this notion seem to need it to establish a sense of self and identity. Copjec explains that “modern man, refusing to accept the finitude that modern thought thrusts upon him,

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷⁷ *The Bluest Eye*, 73.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

doubles himself through a notion of race that allows him to survive his own death,” and it is the avenue to immortality or eternity that race provides, this “element of ideality that is the source of its profound violence and its disdain for every historical obstacle, every contingency that opposes it.”¹⁸⁰

Rejection from both the white and black community is also the source of Cholly Breedloves own inner struggles: his self-loathing, his drinking, and his violent temper. One cannot help but feel a sense of pity and empathy for this character, despite the fact that he sexually abuses Pecola, his own daughter. Morrison creates a complexity in his character that calls the reader to question “how” this inhuman abuse occurs—the cycle of violence and series of violent events that precede and follow the abuse—and not necessarily “why” it does, as she suggests in the novel’s beginning. It is stated throughout the novel that Cholly’s abusive treatment of his family and his anger are forms of self-protection so that he does not have to face the extent of his own trauma. This is why Morrison writes that despite the fact that Cholly hates his wife and that the two of them get into physical altercations frequently, he still needs her. Morrison writes that Mrs. Breedlove was “one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desire. Hating her, he could leave himself intact.”¹⁸¹ Cholly cannot do hurt the society that hurts him, but he can hurt his wife, and therefore directs his fury toward someone that is within his reach. Copjec clarifies that the subject’s fantasmatic sense of reality, his or her “Psychical reality can indefinitely defer, and thus replace, the reality of brute fact,” concluding that

¹⁸⁰ *Imagine There’s No Woman*, 105,106.

¹⁸¹ *The Bluest Eye*, 42.

this means that “it would be impossible to assume from the objective facts alone, how, or even that, the victims suffered as a consequence of their situations,” as there are a variety of psychic processes that function to protect the subject from pain.¹⁸² Cholly acts out in an attempt to protect himself from his own trauma, though like every other character in the novel, it would be too simplistic to label him as a merely a victim of trauma.

Just before the scene where Cholly rapes Pecola, Morrison tells the reader of a past traumatizing event that has shaped Cholly into the person he becomes, an event defined by racial and sexual violence. Morrison tells the story of Cholly’s first sexual experience when he was young that involved a consensual act that becomes one was he forced to do. This scene has been noted by scholars to be a rape scene, both foreshadowing and paralleling his rape of Pecola. During this scene, Cholly and his partner, Darlene, are outside engaging in intercourse when two white men with weapons, a spirit lamp, and a flashlight happen upon them. The men point their lights Cholly and Darlene’s direction and laugh, telling Cholly, “Get on wid it nigger,” Cholly replies, “Sir?,” and the one with the flashlight repeats, “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good.”¹⁸³ Darlene covers her face in horror, while Cholly “began to simulate what had gone on before,” while the men cajoled him, “Come on, coon. Faster. You ain’t doing nothing for her,” and snicker.¹⁸⁴ Morrison writes that in moment, Cholly hated Darlene and wanted to hurt her. The omniscient narrator explains that Cholly’s “subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them [the white men] would have consumed him... For now, he hated the one who had created the

¹⁸² *Read My Desire*, 39.

¹⁸³ *The Bluest Eye*, 148.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence.”¹⁸⁵ Cholly feels powerless to these white men and the greater racist culture, and instead, directs his hate at someone within his reach. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy explains that many of Morrison’s novels are constructed through traumatic scenes such as this, defining them as “primal scenes,” that are of “such significance that an individual would recollect that episode, and not another, at the crucial moment driven to reevaluate her or his life.”¹⁸⁶ This traumatic scene must be recalled by Cholly, must be registered, and dealt with, but he pushes this memory away, just before he rapes Pecola. Rushdy relates that “Morrison has artfully delineated the pain and necessity of remembering primal scenes in each of her novels.”¹⁸⁷

Rather than deal with his own trauma as it resurfaces, Cholly sexually abuses his daughter. Morrison writes that Cholly was “alone with his perceptions and appetites, and only they interested him.”¹⁸⁸ The omniscient narrator continues to explain that Cholly did not have stable model of a family while he was young, and did not know how feel fatherly towards his children, “As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment.”¹⁸⁹ When Cholly came upon Pecola alone in the kitchen washing dishes, “The sequence of his emotions were revulsion, guilt, pity, then love,” feeling disgusted and angry with how weak and defeated she looked.¹⁹⁰ Pecola then scratched her calf with her other foot, which reminded him of when her mother, Pauline used to do that when we first met her. Morrison writes that in that moment, “The

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

¹⁸⁶ ““Rememory”: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," 303.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁸⁸ *The Bluest Eye*, 160.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him.”¹⁹¹ This scene is written rather graphically, going into detail with the bodily pleasure that Cholly experienced. Morrison writes that “His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her...”¹⁹² Cholly acts impulsively to satisfy his own desires rather than confront the sexual and racial trauma he himself has experienced. Copjec explains the futility of desire that consumes the subject who is “finite,” and will never be satisfied, “One thing comes to be substituted for another in an endless chain only because the subject is cut off from that essential thing that would complete it.”¹⁹³ Schreiber explains that Cholly’s “rape of Pecola reenacts his own ‘rape,’ in his first sexual experience. Pecola literally absorbs his sexual trauma.”¹⁹⁴ In pursuit of his own desire, Cholly continues the cycle of trauma and violence.

What is almost more heartbreaking and difficult to read than the rape scene itself is the reaction of the town when everyone finds out that Cholly impregnated Pecola and has taken off. A group of women gossiping discuss the event, saying, “None of them Breedloves are right anyhow,” that Pecola carries some of the blame for what happened to her, and she would be lucky if the child did not live, saying it’s “Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.”¹⁹⁵ Even Claudia and Frieda abandon Pecola, though they felt very sad for her, Claudia noting that nobody else seemed to share their sorrow for Pecola, instead, people were “amused” or “shocked”.¹⁹⁶ Pecola descends into madness, talks to

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Read My Desire*, 61.

¹⁹⁴ *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, 76.

¹⁹⁵ *The Bluest Eye*, 189.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

herself in a schizophrenic manner, believing she now has a “friend,” hallucinates, seeing herself with the blue eyes she has prayed for, and her baby dies. J.E. Riley et al. relates that “Morrison’s novel chooses not to place blame on any one individual; instead, the novel, in telling each character’s experiences and struggles with racism, encourages readers to empathize with their plights,” while also calling on to communities to “take care of their own, to protect one another against the ravages of cultural illnesses such as racism.”¹⁹⁷ Rather than protect their own, this community seems to use the Breedloves as a pedestal to raise themselves up, and to make them feel better about their own lives and circumstances. Claudia recounts her and Frieda’s relationship with Pecola saying, “We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health...”¹⁹⁸ Pecola becomes the vessel for the community’s own sense of lack and trauma.

Cathy Caruth explains that “it is the experience of *waking into consciousness* that, peculiarly, is identified with relieving trauma,” though waking up out of one’s fantasy reality is also a traumatic experience.¹⁹⁹ Rather than individually face the rupture at the heart of being, and share their own experiences of trauma, the community depicted in *The Bluest Eye* chooses to instead cling to their own fantasy of reality for selfhood, and uses Pecola and the Breedloves to unload their own experiences of racial trauma and sense of lack. Claudia explains that she and Frieda, and the whole community, failed Pecola by

¹⁹⁷ Riley, J, Torrens, K, & Krumholz, S, 'Contemporary Feminist Writers: Envisioning a Just World', *Contemporary Justice Review* (2005), 96.

¹⁹⁸ *The Bluest Eye*, 205.

¹⁹⁹ *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 64.

using her to feel more valuable or whole, instead of caring for her as their own.²⁰⁰

Claudia also reflects on their barren flower bed as she did at the story's opening. Copjec explains that love is a self-rupturing experience in which the subject shatters the ego, and gains access to a sense of selfhood. She explains that the object or individual itself is made lovable by the very act of loving it, stating that "love is that which renders what the other is loveable."²⁰¹ It is this sort of act that is needed to relieve trauma, as Caruth claims. This is not to say that the problems in this community could have been solved by overcoming psychological obstacles—the greater society that propagates the racism this community endures and reproduces will still exist regardless of such self-reflection. However, the oppressive white culture around them is also predicated on the sense of lack and ruptured sense of self that Copjec delineates, which provides a glimpse into how such social structures exist. Claudia explains that looking back on her childhood and the story of Pecola, "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year."²⁰² As Morrison tells the reader at the beginning of the novel, it is more productive to think critically about *how* such violence, oppression, and trauma occurs, rather than ponder *why*, if a community is to foster an environment in which marigolds can grow.

The Ruptured Subject, Lacanian Ethics, and the Story of Antigone: An Analysis of Sethe
in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe also faces personal violence and trauma, though she can be interpreted as a character that is able to make a decision outside of the

²⁰⁰ *The Bluest Eye*, 204.

²⁰¹ *Imagine There's No Woman*, 43.

²⁰² *The Bluest Eye*, 206.

fantasmatic realm of subjectivity and reality when she kills her baby to protect her from a life of slavery. In completing research for *The Black Book* in the early 1970's, Morrison happened upon a newspaper clipping from 1865 that detailed a slave mother who killed her children, without remorse, to spare them the suffering she had experienced under slavery, and it is this historical narrative that serves as the basis for Sethe in *Beloved*.²⁰³ Such an autonomous and self-defining action is a notion that Copjec analyzes through Lacan's reading of the story of Antigone. Much of the critical scholarship of this novel, perhaps Morrison's most widely read and studied work of fiction, does employ a Lacanian lens to analyze the character of Sethe in terms of her subjectivity and the fierce love she has for her children. However, much of this scholarship focuses on Sethe's shortcomings as a subject, due to the trauma she experiences as a slave that she actively represses. Rather than analyze this aspect of Sethe's character and the other protagonists, which has already been done thoroughly in scholarship about this novel, I will analyze Sethe's singular act of killing her baby as a form of protection. I propose an alternative reading of Sethe with a different focus, one rooted in Copjec's specific Lacanian analysis of subjectivity, sublimation, and ethics in *Imagine There's No Woman*. Specifically, I would like to analyze Sethe's act of killing her child as a way to protect her. By first exploring Copjec's interrogation of Lacanian ethics based on the psychoanalytic concepts of desire and the death-drive, and detailing her analysis of Lacan's reading of Antigone as an ethical subject, it will be possible to also understand Sethe's act as at once self-rupturing and ethical.

²⁰³ Toni Morrison and Carolyn C. Denard, *What Moves at the Margin*, 45.

Copjec grounds her work on Lacan's notions ethics, in which he opposes traditional philosophical understandings of ethics and being. For Lacan, the ability to ethically position oneself in relation to another is only possible through acknowledging the Law of Desire as the motivational force that causes every individual to act in order to fulfill desires that are impossible to satisfy. The "lack" that is felt by every individual can never be contented, as it is a psychically constructed feeling of a loss of self that one experiences upon entering the Symbolic Order, thought, and language. For Lacan, one must realize the limit of desire and learn to make choices in light of the realization that what is desired can never be obtained. Slavoj Žižek states that the "ultimate ethical task of the subject is that of the true awakening: not only from sleep, but from the spell of fantasy that controls us even more when we are awake."²⁰⁴ Copjec explains that "the ethics of psychoanalysis is concerned not with the other, as is the case with so much of the contemporary work on ethics, but rather with the subject, who metamorphoses herself at the moment of encounter with the real of an unexpected event."²⁰⁵ The ethical act, free of ideology and personal interest, is a traumatic, self-rupturing choice in which the subject ceases to be a subject of desire and becomes a subject of the drive. Schreiber connects this notion to that of "Lacan's subject of knowledge who can move past culture's gaze to create a life based on personal, rather than cultural, desire."²⁰⁶ The ethical act takes place outside of ideology or any cultural or societal script.

Copjec explains the concept of the death drive to demonstrate how an ethical act from personal interest or ideology, is rooted in the drive, not desire—which is really the

²⁰⁴ *How to read Lacan*, 60.

²⁰⁵ *Imagine There's No Woman*, 44.

²⁰⁶ Evelyn J. Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, 30.

Other's desire, or desire that is dictated to the subject from her particular historical moment and the greater society in which she lives. Unlike desire, the drive's goal is not satisfaction, and is not looking for the next outward thing so much as it is reverting back to the primordial state of satisfaction the subject experiences before entering the Symbolic Order. Copjec clarifies that "Directed not outward toward the constituted world, but away from it, the death drive aims at the past, at a time *before* the subject found itself where it is now, imbedded in time and moving toward death."²⁰⁷ This primordial state is "mythical," and re-written in psychoanalysis as the "primordial mother-child dyad which supposedly contained all things and every happiness to which the subject strives throughout his life to return."²⁰⁸ This primordial state can never be achieved, though in reverting back to this state before the subject enters the symbolic order and the world of language, which cuts the subject from herself and the real, the drive is associated with the real, while desire is rooted in the symbolic order. This is the key difference between the desire and the drive: while one is predicated on the external world that dictates one's desires, in which the subject moves from one object to the next, the drive is predicated by the real, and grants the subject access to a self-rupturing experience of *jouissance*, raising the subject out of her historical contingency. Žižek explains that "the consistency to which Lacan's position hinges is thus the difference between reality and the Real."²⁰⁹ Ethics must be rooted in the real, not in the subject's fantasy of reality, or the symbolic order, thus, the ethical subject is a subject of drive, not desire.

²⁰⁷ *Imagine There's No Woman*, 33.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies.*, (London: Verso, 2008), 274.

Sublimation is a process that operates in conjunction with the drive, and Copjec argues that this process is the key to understanding Antigone's ability to love her brother above all else, and perform an ethical act. Copjec explains that "the death drive achieves its satisfaction by *not* achieving its aim," as the "*proper and positive activity* of the drive is to inhibit the attainment of its aim, or in other words, it is "sublimated."²¹⁰ When the subject desires an object, in actuality, she desires the satisfaction the object is perceived to provide, not the object itself—any object will do, and the subject moves from one to the next, never fully satisfied. However, sublimation is a different process entirely that is rooted in the drive, in the real, not in the symbolic order. Copjec explains that "The point is that the drive does not aim beyond the ordinary object at the satisfaction to be attained on the other or thither side of it."²¹¹ She continues to explain that the object the subject selects through the act of sublimation as part of the drive "is not a means to something other than itself, but is itself other than itself."²¹² The subject invests the object with some surplus value that is not articulable through the language of the symbolic. It is the drive that chooses the object and divides it so that it is not what it actually is. Copjec writes that "There could not be a better description of drive/sublimation: *it so wills what occurs that the object it finds is indistinguishable from the one it chooses.*"²¹³ The act of sublimation is the act of elevating an object to the status of a loved thing. The drive and the objects it selects are particular to each person, and are not rooted in ideology or the external world—it is a process invoking the real, not fantasy reality. This is why the drive and

²¹⁰ *Imagine There's No Woman*, 30.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

sublimation are the key in providing an avenue for the subject to act free of historical contingency, ideology, or some cultural or societal script—to complete a truly autonomous act.

Lacan identifies an ethical act as a matter of personal self-rupturing, in which one makes a choice in a particular situation where there is no apparent choice to be made. It is for this reason that Lacan's reading of the story of Antigone functions to represent her act of breaking the law of the state to bury her dead brother as an ethical act. As the story goes, Antigone tries to attain an honorable burial for her brother Polyneices, though Creon, the ruler, of Thebes, forbids this burial, as Polyneices is a traitor to Thebes. The punishment for providing a proper burial for her brother would result in her being locked in a tomb to die. Copjec writes that "the deed Antigone undertakes traces the path of the criminal drive, away from the possibilities the community prescribes and toward the impossible real."²¹⁴ Through Antigone's love for her brother, she is able to perform a transgressive act that separates herself from the conditional characteristics of her identity and place in history, as well as her social community, while also exposing the void of the real from which the symbolic structure is predicated. Copjec explains that Antigone's act is ethical in that she removes herself from the economy of desire and becomes a subject of the drive, due to how she "gives herself her own law and does not seek validation from any other authority."²¹⁵ In separating herself from the conditional basis of her identity, defying the ruler Creon, and asserting her love for her brother above all other considerations, Antigone becomes autonomous in making a decision that is not given to

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

her, constructing a different outcome for herself, and also forcing Creon to question his own desire and make a decision as well.

This is when the process of sublimation and its connection to ethics becomes apparent: though Antigone's "love for her brother does not depend on any of his qualities, Antigone is not indifferent to them; she accepts them lovingly," as "love is that which renders what the other is loveable."²¹⁶ Antigone elevates her brother to the status of a loved thing through the process of sublimation, is able to make a decision in which she sacrifices everything in order to declare her love for her brother, and guarantee his honorable burial. Antigone follows Lacan's ethical command: "Do not give way to your desire," by pushing beyond the limit of her desire, by risking her life to bury the brother she loves.²¹⁷ Copjec reiterates that though the ethical act is never selfless, there is a clear difference between the perseverance of the ethical imperative and acting for personal gain. The contrast between Antigone in clinging to her desire, and Creon who holds fast to the laws of the state demonstrates the "difference between 'acting in conformity with the real of desire' and acting in a self-interested way, or acting to preserve one's own continuity with oneself."²¹⁸ While Creon could receive validation or praise from others for following the law, and therefore has something to gain from doing so, Antigone does not have anything to gain from her decision, and in fact, stands to lose everything. Through the act of burying her brother, Antigone can no longer continue as she was before and sacrifices her symbolic life or identity, and place in her community, along with her biological death. Copjec claims that when "she covers the exposed body of her

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

brother, Antigone raises herself out of the conditions of naked existence to which Creon remains bound.”²¹⁹ Antigone carries out an autonomous act, free of ideological basis, while Creon cannot break from the law and is bound to it.

In the same way that Antigone follows Lacan’s ethical command, “Do not give way on your desire,” so too can Sethe’s choice be seen to follow this subjective understanding. Copjec explains that “the ethics of psychoanalysis is not concerned with the other,” but is instead “a matter of personal conversion, of the subjective necessity of going beyond oneself.”²²⁰ This is why the ethical act is never a selfless act, as in the case of Antigone, where she did not seek validation for her action from anyone beside herself. Sethe explains to Paul D, an old friend of hers from “Sweet Home,” the plantation in which they were both enslaved, how she made the independent decision to take her children and run away alone. She reiterates, “It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right.”²²¹ Sethe knew that the only way she would be free to love her children would be to leave the life of slavery that prohibited slave women from caring for and bonding with their children. Morrison writes that Paul D “knew exactly what she [Sethe] meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you choose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom.”²²² Sethe’s decision to risk her life and those of her children to run away, and the act of killing her baby when she was confronted with the possibility of their return to the plantation,

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²²¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987), (NYC: Vintage Books, 2004), 190.

²²² *Ibid.*, 191.

demonstrates the kind of autonomous perseverance of following her own desire against all other imperatives that Lacan defines as fundamental to the ethical act.

Copjec reiterates that though the ethical act is never selfless, there is a clear difference between the perseverance of the ethical imperative and acting for personal gain. The contrast between Antigone in clinging to her desire, and Creon who holds fast to the laws of the state demonstrates the “difference between ‘acting in conformity with the real of desire’ and acting in a self-interested way, or acting to preserve one’s own continuity with oneself.”²²³ While Creon could receive validation or praise from others for following the law, and therefore has something to gain from doing so, Antigone does not have anything to gain from her decision, and in fact, stands to lose everything. Through the act of burying her brother, Antigone can no longer continue as she was before and sacrifices her symbolic life or identity, and place in her community, along with her biological death. This is an example of the sort of self-rupturing that occurs in the ethical act, one that Sethe’s actions also demonstrate. Morrison states that when faced with the possibility of her children’s return to slavery, Sethe took “every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them.”²²⁴ If Sethe had acted in a self-interested manner, as Copjec defines as acting to “preserve one’s continuity with oneself,” she would not have chosen to kill her children to spare them a lifetime of slavery, as in doing so, she is sacrificing her symbolic identity as a mother. George explains that “slavery is a blow to the slave’s fantasy of being,”

²²³ *Imagine There’s No Woman*, 45.

²²⁴ *Beloved*, 192.

therefore, Sethe's past experiences in slavery have obliterated any fantastical sense of complete being or identity, leading her to be able to make such a self-rupturing decision in sacrificing her child, reaching the limit of her desire and becoming a subject of drive.²²⁵ In this way, Sethe stands to lose everything through her decision, to lose "all of the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful," namely, her children and her identity as a mother. Morrison writes that "more than what Sethe did was what she claimed," which scared Paul D who responded to Sethe's story by telling her, "Your love is too thick."²²⁶ Sethe responds, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all."²²⁷ Sethe's insistence on reaching the limit of her desire and sacrificing all she has in this pursuit, demonstrates the autonomous ethical imperative that Lacan uses the story of Antigone to illustrate.

Conclusion

The Bluest Eye and *Beloved* both engage with the psychoanalytic notion of a subject of lack that Copjec outlines. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, as well as the other characters, struggle with establishing a sense of self outside of the oppressive greater white culture, or master narrative. Pecola clings to the notion that if she appeared more "white," the sense of lack and rejection she feels will be absolved. By the same token, Cholly mistreats others to repress his own sense of lack, and trauma he has yet to confront. Praying for blue eyes, and believing she has gained them by the story's end, Pecola demonstrates how she strives for recognition in the symbolic, unable to perceive a different way of being. Claudia Leeb explains that "a politics of recognition, rather than

²²⁵ Sheldon George, *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian study of African American Racial Identity*, 19.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

establishing more equal societies, makes it more difficult to understand and combat injustice in social and political relations.”²²⁸ However, it is not fair to delineate Pecola and Cholly as characters that carry grave psychological issues without first inciting the greater culture that is to blame for the violence, trauma, and oppression illustrated in the novel that they each suffer through. In *Beloved*, Sethe is able to reach the limit of her desire, rise above her historical contingency and fantasy sense of self and identity in transgressing all law, killing her child to save her from the life of slavery she has endured. Reading Sethe in light of Lacan’s reading of Antigone that Copjec employs for her analyses of sublimation and ethics, it is possible to offer a new reading of Sethe, as a character that is able to become a subject of drive, and make a completely autonomous decision. Copjec’s specific Lacanian lens and theorizing of the subject of lack is most beneficial to a reading of these two novels, while the novels themselves are able to provide potent illustrations for such complex theories of subjectivity and being.

²²⁸ "The Politics of 'Misrecognition': A Feminist Critique," *Good Society Journal* 18, no. 1 (April 2009), 70.

CONCLUSION

The definitive goal of this thesis is to explicate how the work of Agamben and Copjec provide potent frameworks of analyses in which to interrogate Morrison's work, and demonstrate how Morrison's work expands upon or provides explicit illustrations of Agamben's theories of biopolitics and Copjec's psychoanalytic subject of lack. Placing these three writers in dialogue with each other offers an avenue to rethink certain concepts of race, racism, and subjectivity. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have formed other questions that concern the similarities, or points of reference that philosophy and literature share. While it has often been written that Morrison's work offers complex and powerful material for analyses using a number of critical and theoretical frameworks, I am now convinced that Morrison's work offers material with which to better understand and perceive complex theoretical concepts, and the questions that are most often explored in the field of critical theory. Her work asks many of the same questions, and attempts to delineate them in much the same way as critical theorists such as Agamben and Copjec do, but as a novelist and artist, she simply uses different tools to conduct these quests into some of the most difficult questions concerning violence, oppression, and self-hood. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," an article written by Morrison in 1984, she states her belief that literature "should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also *work*. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way."²²⁹ Her novels are an attempt to work through difficult questions of injustice and subjectivity, race and racism,

²²⁹ Toni Morrison and Carolyn C. Denard, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 58.

using art rather than abstract theoretical language in the manner of philosophers and critical theorists.

Morrison reiterates, however, that literature should have “Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.”²³⁰ Morrison’s novels reflect this belief, as her work attempts to analyze the “how” of violence and subjectivity in oppressive societal structures, though she does not attempt to provide instruction as to what the exact method of solving such issues are. She does, however, hint at notions of love, community, and collective healing that she views as detrimental to overcoming such conflict. Writers such as Agamben and Copjec demonstrate a similar practice, as they each delineate systems of injustice and division, though in abstract, theoretical terminology. Though they conceptualize different ways of being, they do not provide a script for solving the complex issues they interrogate so much as they offer hints or “point the way,” as Morrison claims all literature should do. The similar projects and intellectual practice of writing novels and writing philosophy should be more deeply studied, rather than posing critical theory as merely a framework to analyze literature in literary studies, or using literature as an illustration of certain philosophies and theories. Morrison’s fiction provides convincing impetus to study the two disciplines of philosophy or critical theory and literature in conjunction, to further explore their similarities and intellectual projects as writings with related purpose.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

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