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The Liminality of the Black Female “Freed” Slave in the Novels of Morrison, Hurston, and Williams

Karen Ingram

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The Liminality of the Black Female "Freed" Slave in the Novels of Morrison, Hurston, and Williams

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts in English

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ABSTRACT

Arnold Van Gennep, a French ethnographer, explored the concept of ceremonies for ritual events in his text, *The Rites of Passage*. He examined societal processes whereby an individual moves from one socially constructed place to another – for example, a boy to a man with a Bar Mitzvah, or a girl to woman on her wedding night. This “passage” involves three phases: separation, transition, and reincorporation. Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, takes van Gennep’s theory one step further and discusses the transition phase and how an individual can become stuck in the transitional stage: the liminal space. In his examination of the rites of passage, Turner claims the passage is an unstable state between two somewhat “fixed or stable conditions” (*Forest* 93). Subsequently, the exploration, and the multitude of roles attempted or forced upon certain black female characters in American literature, reveals how they inhabit liminal space.

This thesis first explores the liminal passage and its application to Sethe, from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, and Dessa, from Sherley Williams’s novel *Dessa Rose* – two black women who ultimately escape from slavery but are unable to embrace their sense of freedom. Later, the anthropological theory is used to demonstrate the problematic existence of Sula, from Morrison’s novel of the same name, and Janie from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The conflicts these four women endure, and initially appear to overcome, are fascinating; however, they inevitably fail in their given societies because they are trapped between two very different worlds.

Enslavement, in its various forms, was indeed tumultuous, bringing physical and emotional discomfort. And yet these black women rejected the type of freedom that
presented itself. This paper establishes how four outlaw women cannot progress to the next phase of their transitions because it entails leaving their pasts behind, erasing memory, conforming to society’s rules, and remaining subservient. They make decisions that keep them liminal and cause them pain. However, their liminality provides a sense of security and more experience and humanity than either of the stable positions has to offer. Consequently, they remain stuck: “betwixt and between” but nevertheless alive.
THE LIMINALITY OF THE BLACK FEMALE "FREED" SLAVE IN THE
NOVELS OF MORRISON, HURSTON, AND WILLIAMS

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in English

by
KAREN INGRAM
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I wish to express my sincere gratitude to three individuals who have not only had an impact on this product but have positively contributed to my educational process. Naomi Liebler introduced me to the anthropological studies of van Gennep and Victor Turner. With her guidance I was able to connect literary characters to their concepts. And, in doing so, we can better understand the complexity of human beings across subjectivities and cast aside the labels that society thrusts upon us. Laura Nicosia, as excited for me as I imagine she was when she incorporated liminality into her studies, has been a tremendous help in deciphering the technical jargon and the application of it for this thesis.

It is Sharon Lewis who introduced me to the works of black female writers, and for that I will be forever in her debt. She taught me how to sit uncomfortably with the problems presented in these works, how to dig into the deep multifaceted complexities that are wound so tightly around issues of race and gender, and how thinking and writing greatly contribute to the discourse. It is because of her wisdom, her knowledge, and her questioning that I fought to discover what it means to be a black female outlaw and, more importantly, what these women symbolize in the literary tradition. Her passion for the subject matter has greatly influenced how I now view the world in that perhaps all women occupy a liminal space after all.
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The Transition from Slavery to Freedom: Liminality for the Female Slave in Sherley Williams’s *Dessa Rose* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

It is a great time to be a woman. A wonderful time to be a black woman, for the world, I have found, is not simply rich because from day to day our lives are touched with new possibilities, but because the past is studded with sisters who, in their time, shone like gold. They give us hope, they have proved the splendor of the past, which should free us to lay claim to the fullness of the future.

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*

The message in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, is loud and clear: “Remembering seemed unwise” (324). For the escaped female slave, freedom became a dream that could never be realized unless there was a willingness to forget the past and to erase one’s history in order to move forward. Unfortunately, traumatic situations embedded into her past cause the transition to be incredibly difficult but still necessary. As represented in literature, there is a type of oppressed woman who reaches a point where she will no longer be confined to the position placed upon her by society; she shakes her chains loose and resorts to passionate, rebellious, and sacrificial action, which ultimately sets her apart from her peers and thrusts her into a liminal space.

In the two novels examined in this chapter – Sherley Williams’s *Dessa Rose* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* – we witness the breaking point for both Dessa and Sethe, respectively. In a reading of Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*, and Victor Turner’s application of van Gennep’s theory of various societal groups, we are presented with a fascinating way in which to explore the complicated motives behind, and consequences of, the two women’s actions. In doing so, I will argue that while it is generally understood that slaves wrestled with a transition from slavery to freedom, those black female slaves who had been violated, suffered tremendous losses, and made
dangerous sacrifices in order to survive are unable to fully aggregate and make it to the other side of their transition.

The theory, which allows us to fully understand the process Dessa and Sethe experience in their pursuit for freedom, emerges from anthropological studies. In 1908, Arnold van Gennep, a French ethnographer, explored the concept of ceremonies for ritual events in his text, *The Rites of Passage*. He examined societal processes whereby an individual moves from one socially constructed place to another: for example, from a boy to man with a Bar Mitzvah, and from girl to woman through marriage. These cultural traditions, or ceremonies, accompany “life crises,” or a “passage,” and involve three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation (or aggregation) (vii). In 1967, Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, took van Gennep’s theory a step further. In three of his texts *The Ritual Process*, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors*, and *The Forest of Symbols* (the latter including a chapter entitled, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*”), Turner discusses the transition phase in particular – one we will examine closely – and how an individual can become stuck in the transitional stage: a liminal space.

While Turner’s studies mostly focus on tribal life, van Gennep believed the patterns and behaviors within these phases were universal, and it is the specific rituals that set cultures apart. Furthermore, Turner claims the transition is an unstable state between two somewhat “fixed or stable conditions” (*Forest* 93). While slavery was indeed turbulent and vicious, and brought physical pain and agony, Sethe and Dessa, the two female slaves in this discussion, knew of no other world, which makes their transitions from one state to the next notably difficult. As we know, slavery was a
recognized norm in the South, an organized hegemonic sociological structure. Turner also determines that a state “refers to any type of ... recurrent condition that is culturally recognized” (94), allowing us to use this model for the passage of slavery to freedom.

In order to fully comprehend liminal space, it is imperative to explore the conditions that cause Sethe and Dessa to desire separation from slavery. Both novels are based on historical events. Williams places the actual incident of a female slave, who led a violent uprising, at the center of her novel. The woman’s sentence to death was delayed only because of her unborn child. Dessa Rose, however, survives her punishment by escaping the jail in which she is confined, and we, in turn, learn of the fictitious, but believable story of why one woman would make such sacrifices—accounts that are so often omitted from official historical documents. Seemingly with simplistic intention, Dessa embarked on her murderous rampage – where “five white men had been killed [and] thirty-one slaves had been killed or executed; nineteen branded or flogged; some thirty-eight thousand dollars in property destroyed or damaged” (22) – to avenge her husband’s murder. She boldly declares: “I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can” (20). On closer inspection, though, individuals, especially women, who retaliate and violently attack their oppressors, do so under immense duress (not just a desire for freedom or revenge). Furthermore, Dessa’s actions cause her return to captivity where she awaits her punitive execution. Van Gennep explains: “[A] group charged with revenge is first separated from society and acquires its own individuality” (39). Consequently, she is plunged into liminality where she is the only remaining survivor of the rebels.
Beloved’s Sethe, on the other hand, has spent twenty-eight days of freedom having survived her arduous escape from Sweet Home. However, her freedom is short-lived too. When schoolteacher and his nephews discover her in the barn of 124, Sethe has murdered one child and fully anticipates completing other sacrifices:

> [T]wo boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child at her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other...she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time. (175)

Sethe later asserts, “I wasn’t going back there...Any life but not that one” (50).

Representing white men, in that he is bewildered by what he finds in the barn, “schoolteacher swallow[s] hard, over and over again. ‘What she want to go and do that for?’” (177). Deborah Gray White presents numerous cases of slave mothers killing their children in this transitory phase. As a result of these measures, slave mothers were inaccurately perceived by white people as lacking “maternal feeling” (88), although they claimed to be protective in their actions. In actuality, Gray claims, this was “atypical behavior” (88) but, all the same, not understood. After discovering a newspaper article about Margaret Garner, a woman who actually made such a sacrifice, Toni Morrison stated in an interview: “It was not uncommon for slave women to do that, but I thought, suppose she was rational and there was a reason” (Bollen 124).

The woman that schoolteacher witnesses “look[s] blind” (177), and he attributes this “to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (177). He essentially defends the institution of slavery, believing it is needed to control such savage beings, and, by doing so, validates claims that slave mothers were not maternal. While
Sethe’s behavior is an extreme example, the pressures in the transition for escaped slaves could be insurmountable. We can juxtapose these situations with Turner’s point that in order for “an individual to go higher on the status ladder [and be a free person], he must go lower than the status ladder [a captive criminal]” (*Ritual* 170). Dessa, herself, “cursed freedom; it took everyone [she] loved in girlhood from [her]. It taken Kaine” (171). Freedom, for Sethe, results in her own community ostracizing her and in Baby Suggs’s dying. And while her actions do indeed prevent her family’s return to Sweet Home, as she had intended, the price is that Sethe is imprisoned for two years and endures eighteen years of unbearable liminality.

It should be noted that this would be an entirely different discussion had Dessa and Sethe been freed by their masters. Given that the two escape slavery – thus separating themselves from their enslavement – the transition is tumultuous, and consequently, makes their endeavors to aggregate seemingly impossible. In his studies, van Gennep examines many cultures where a door provides “the boundary between the [two] worlds” (20); we can certainly interpret the passage of western marriage as a metaphor: the groom carries the bride over the threshold symbolic of entering a new doorway wherein they become incorporated into the next phase. The escaped slave knew of no such procedure to “cross the threshold [and] unite oneself with a new world” (20), and such rituals or ceremonies were lacking. While many slave narratives reveal the implementation of escape plans, there are countless slaves who opted to remain within their confines even when escape was an option or freedom was granted them. This was, in part, because the structure of slavery was safer than the detachment from it – which is
exemplified through these novels – and the passage to freedom was unceremonious in nature.

In her text *Ar’nt I a Woman?*, Deborah Gray White examines how female slaves adapted to challenging situations—from life on a plantation to the passage of freedom. In speaking of escape, White determines: “some of the reasons why women were underrepresented in the fugitive population had to do with childbearing” (70). In spite of this, “for many women it was the children, or more properly, the fear of losing them, that provided the incentive to flee” (73). In Stephanie Li’s text, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women*, Li examines various perspectives of freedom for enslaved people. She writes: “Freedom means more than just the absence of physical or legal restriction. It demands recognition of the breadth of individual conscience, the depth of personal desire” (5). Due to the extenuating circumstances, Dessa and Sethe must escape for their children. Freedom for these mothers, Morrison argues, “was having children and being able to control them in some way—that they weren’t cubs that somebody could just buy” (Bollen 124). Once the decision is made to cross “the dangerous thresholds of their known worlds” (McClintock 24), not individually but collectively, a group breaks Dessa free from Wilson’s coffle, the chained line of slaves, and Sethe complies with Halle’s plan to part from Sweet Home.

Before we determine what the dangerous threshold actually entails, another interesting point to ponder is what is on the other side of the transitional stage? What beckons them in their husbands’ plans? What is “the aggregation phase” for an escaped slave? Turner’s examples of an appointment – a designated position in a given group, club or society for the passenger to move toward – can hardly be applied here, although
he concurs that *rites of passage* are not confined to “culturally defined life-crisis but may accompany any change from one state to another” (Turner, *Forest* 94-5). These narratives, like others, explore individual struggles to control one’s losses, make new connections, and to feel a sense of purpose once again—in essence, to *aggregate*. Turner finds, “A further structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they have nothing. They have no status, property, insignia...rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (99), and, for an escaped slave, there are limited options. Because Sethe acts twice on the visual association of schoolteacher’s hat, and Dessa initially rejects any association with white people—both radical choices—we can safely assume their idea of aggregation is an unrestricted society that does not include the presence of white men, a reality that did not exist in the United States. Furthermore, with this false sense of reality, and their fragmented state, Dessa and Sethe fail to acclimate to life beyond slavery, somewhat solidifying their permanence in liminality.

The underlying reason behind these violent events is for the women to separate further from white men. In each case this severance comes about because of the passionate, protective love of another person—although Dessa’s actions are less instinctual than Sethe’s. Dessa orchestrated her rampage to avenge Kaine’s death—the man she was chosen by and calls her husband: “They had had only one winter of love” (48), and during that time, Kaine fed her with stories of the North: a place where they would be free to have children, just as Halle had spoken of to Sethe. It is when Dessa becomes pregnant that Kaine determines they must escape, slavery being no place to raise a child. Kaine had spoken of a free world, and Dessa “had understood... if there was rest
for the body, there must be peace for the heart. And [she later claims] it was her heart, *his heart*, that Kaine had asked her to kill* (Williams, *Dessa Rose* 47). Although Dessa is born and raised in slavery, she is aware that there's "no place a nigga could just be" (50). It can be argued then that the love and encouragement of a black man - a husband of sorts in each case - is what separates Dessa and Sethe from the institution of slavery, and the absence of the husband, and the presence of children, amplifies their refusal to return to it.

Not all threatened mothers will go to such extreme measures, and not all women suffering such grief will avenge the death of a loved one. So, what ultimately propels certain women to violent action? In her foreword to *Sula*, Toni Morrison writes: "Outlaw women are fascinating—not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status is an illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men" (xvii). As noted, Dessa and Sethe will not consider remaining submissive and subservient in slavery without their husbands around, which is their original "state." Instead, they *separate*, with no evidence that they can *aggregate*, or *incorporate*, with what awaits them. Van Gennep identifies "the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") [as] ambiguous" (94). The theory here can be applied to Sethe and Dessa; they attempt to pass "through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (94). White argues: "Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum Americans" (15). Their "freedom" was basically another form of captivity. It was lonely, frightening, and threatening.
When these women are stripped of dignity and suffer tragic losses of their loved ones, they reach their breaking point. In Sethe’s case, “a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children” (186). The sight of schoolteacher triggered a powerful memory, which led to action. She claims, as resolutely as Dessa when asked about her actions, “I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out” (192). White writes extensively on this transition and how mothers feared her “young daughters would fall prey to the licentious ... white men on the plantation” (95). She writes, “Such desperate decisions inevitably induced emotional trauma and psychological torment” (74), which caused the rest of the passage, beyond slavery, to be that much more harrowing and, indeed, uncertain.

They submerge unknowingly into liminality: the unfamiliar or “ambiguous” transition. It is because of the transition that Sethe kills her own child in a merciful, yet seemingly barbaric, act. She is unwilling to expose her child to the hands of her oppressor. Similarly, Dessa Rose goes on a murderous rampage after Kaine is killed. Ironically, in the women’s determination to establish a sense of freedom, their oppressors see Dessa’s and Sethe’s behavior as savage. And the rampages symbolize “assigned characteristics of both sexes, irrespective of their biological sexes” (Turner, Forest 98). This further demonstrates their liminality—one Turner compares to a “naked unaccommodated man” (99). The transition is volatile and causes the women to feel a lack of identification. As a result, their lives, and that of their children, are sacrificed in their efforts to cope, and Dessa and Sethe are utterly vulnerable when incarcerated: Dessa has “manacled hands” and “leg-irons that hobbled her feet” (35); Sethe nurses her child behind bars. These positions, however, are at least familiar, but their actions immerse
them in an ambiguous passage that proves impossible for them to move beyond.

To further illustrate this liminality, in her text *Purity and Danger*, Dr. Mary Douglas writes: “Danger lies in transitional states... The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others” (78). So, why do Dessa and Sethe pass into this dangerous transition? White informs us on how “Recent work has traced black female migration, dissemblance, institution and community building back to abuse of the black female body” (10). Douglas sheds some light for us on unfathomable form of abuses in her analogy: dirt as a matter out of place. Visiting a bathroom that had been installed in an old home, Douglas notes, “The décor remained unchanged:...the books, the gardening boots, the row of gumboots. It all made sense as the scene of a back corridor, but as a bathroom – the impression destroyed repose” (2). Dirt is appropriate in one place, and in this assigned place, it is acceptable, valued, and even needed. When dirt is found elsewhere it causes chaos because it doesn’t belong (2). Turner further explores Douglas’s point, adding, “What is unclear and contradictory...tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean.” (*Forest* 97). Female slaves were often subjected to rape, molestation, and other forms of sexual assault. Susanna Ashton and Robyn E. Adams, in their introduction to slave narratives, determine that “Sexual abuse of women was often represented in traditional slave narratives as a predictable, if horrendous, outcome of a system in which absolute power was accorded one person over another” (Ashton and Adams 40). The exercise of this power kept most slaves in line.

In their captivity, this unclean state appeared to have its place. After all, masters treated slaves as lacking human rights and values, including cleanliness. Turner claims
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this is a social reality, but “a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there”

(Turner, *Forest* 98). The scandal is applicable to Sethe:

I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn’t stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar...All I knew was I had to get milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it...Those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had a lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree. (19-20)

The incongruity, whereby the greed and desire of Sethe’s oppressors cause her own child to be denied her milk, and her subsequent whipping for attempting to address this matter, further propels Sethe to flee. Adding insult to injury, Sethe is deeply hurt when she later learns Halle watched on as she was molested: “two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, [and Halle] not stopping them – looking and letting it happen” (83). White concludes from her research that “slave women could not depend on their husbands for protection against whipping or sexual exploitation” (153). In their transitions to aggregation, both Dessa and Sethe fail to distinguish that others – their husbands – are also trapped in very different liminal spaces.

In African cultures, “a marriage was not considered consummated until after the birth of the first child [and, for] women, having a child was the most important rite of passage in their life” (White 107). In Turner’s examination of tribal rituals, he explores symbolic meaning of milk and its parallels to the milk tree: “[T]he milk tree is said to stand for ‘the woman’ and for ‘womanhood.’ It also has the situational sense of ‘married womanhood’” (*Forest* 53). He adds how powerfully the tree symbolizes breasts and breast milk (52). It proves too much to bear that Sethe cannot provide her child with the
milk the baby needs—another one of the rites of womanhood. Li confirms these disadvantages: “Slaves in the antebellum South had no legal rights, had no claim to their labor, their children or their bodies” (5). After the nephews’ desecration of her, the notion that Sethe will be unable to provide such freedom for her children, spurs her to respond when she sees schoolteacher again.

Van Gennep adds, “The rites performed when a slave [changes] masters also may be explained as rites of passage” (39). Once captured, Wilson viciously whips Dessa between her legs and around her hips (the story is later revealed to Ruth, which ultimately saves her from Nehemiah when he finds her again): “[T]he horror scarred her inner thighs, snaking around her lower abdomen and hips in ropy keloids that gleamed with patent-leather smoothness” (58). White explains, “Some whippings of female slaves were sexually suggestive” (33). The master, in Dessa’s case, initiated his rites: “As a rite of incorporation, one may cite the violent blow” (van Gennep 39). These scars later prove to solidify Dessa’s liminality. They are permanent memory – just as Sethe’s breasts are in her case – representing white man’s power: “Scar tissue plowed through [Dessa’s] pubic region so no hair would ever grow their again” (154). Of Morrison’s novels, Andrew Levy argues that “the scar [of slavery] intrudes on the story…if history hurts too much— then self-understanding and self-definition are damaged products” (116). While the violations drive the women to cross the threshold from slave to “free” woman, they are maimed, broken, and unclean.

The theory, according to van Gennep, presents motherhood as a transitory passage, which should present numerous ceremonious rites. “[P]regnancy itself…is a transitional period” (van Gennep 41), and the moment Dessa finds herself with child, she

\[2\] The term “free” in this paper is used as a desired concept not an actual realized state
is in her liminal space. Her ambiguous condition does not stop her from “tr[ying] to kill as many [white men] as she could” (62) and physically fighting her capturers, “hoping by the strength of her resistance to provoke them into killing her” (63). Sethe believes, “Unless carefree, motherlove [is] a killer” (155). Dessa will sacrifice the life of her child rather than subject him to slavery. She even plans to “take the cord and loop it around the baby’s neck” (63). However, her memory of Kaine, and her subsequent escape, leads to the survival of her baby, where crawling-already is not so fortunate. Furthermore, the reason Dessa is not lynched for her actions (another power exercised by a master) – and does not reach the other side in a “life to death passage” – is because of her pregnancy, hence the paradox Turner speaks of. In addition to her fierce commitment to Kaine’s memory, when Dessa wakes to find Ruth, a white woman who agrees to hide the fleeing slaves, the white woman is providing the baby with the care he needs, thrusting Dessa into the threshold once more.

On the outside of the fixed state of slavery, in order for Dessa and Sethe to claim their given roles as mothers, they must accept the assistance of “free” white women. Dessa, while “free,” is bound to Ruth’s plantation until funds can be procured and arrangements can be made for her group to travel west. She does not acquiesce without a fight and smashes her fist into the white woman’s face (82), still finding violence a means of survival. Bound again to a place because she is a mother, it is essential for Dessa to adjust to her new role in the most unconventional manner. As she recuperates after her difficult escape and childbirth, she slips in and out of her feverish state to witness the white woman breastfeeding her own child. Turner claims initiation rites, such as breastfeeding one’s own child, “best exemplify [a healthy] transition” (Forest 95) through the
liminal phase. This practice often solidifies the bond between mother and child. However, in her study of slave life, White concludes: “white women also played a role in slave child care” (53). This infringement on Dessa’s rites is perceived to be necessary in the care of both mother and child. Ironically, the very people Dessa wishes to be free from sustain hers and Mony’s lives and, at the same time, reinforce Dessa’s liminality.

In “‘To Be Loved and Cry Shame’: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” Lynda Koolish explores Sethe’s damaged psyche and her desperation to repair her fragmented self. Koolish writes: “Sethe, pregnant with Denver, and carrying Beloved on her already brutally latticed back, defines her experience of maternity as one of a splitting self” (182). In her escape, Sethe collapses in the bushes from exhaustion when Amy Denver – “the raggediest-looking trash you ever saw” (38) – discovers her. Sethe succumbs to the strengths the white girl offers. She cannot give birth to her child in this “free” world alone. Morrison’s plethora of references to body parts reveals the disconnect between Sethe’s mind and body, one that years’ worth of brutal dehumanization has caused, demonstrating the struggle for her to reach the final phase.

The most compelling passages involve the use of Amy’s healing hands that essentially pull Sethe through this part of her transition. Amy massages Sethe’s feet back to life (just as Ruth nurses Dessa back to life while providing Mony with her milk).

Amy represents another type of oppressed woman. She too is defiant. She has an air of confidence, and her hands exemplify what her speech portrays. Sethe actually reflects on Amy in the following way, saying, “She had good hands...thin little arms but good hands...I guess the hands made her think she could do it; get us both across the river. But her mouth is what kept her from being scared” (90). In her essay about white
women reading black women’s texts, Minrose C. Gwin claims, “[T]he message is clear: white woman is motivated by her relationship to the white man, rather than by any sense of morality which disallows cruelty to another woman” (25). In these novels, Gwin’s argument is debatable. The relationships between Sethe and Amy, and Dessa and Ruth, eventually prove to be powerful and genuine: the bond of women who face different obstacles having escaped their immediate oppressors and being quite alone in the process. The relationship speaks to the hierarchy that existed outside of slavery and presents the realization that Dessa’s and Sethe’s incorporation to the new group could not be fulfilled without their surrender to white women who, incidentally, were wrestling with their own transitions.

Williams explores similar instances of the physical submission to a white woman. Ruth and Dessa more hesitantly develop a physical and emotional bond; however, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy believes Dessa models the notion “that the relation between slaves and masters – in either a system of adoptive kinship or of quasi-filial kinship – is never premised on love, and certainly never love freely given” (377). Dessa “embarrassed and weak as a kitten, bore the woman’s gentle touch” (113). Even though she is not in the physical danger that Sethe is in under these circumstances, Dessa cannot surrender easily. Her tongue is much sharper and her rejection much harsher. In her disappointment at her fellow escaped slaves embracing the immediate kindness of a white woman, she does all she can to avoid capitulation, eventually leaving Ruth’s bed to sleep in the cramped and uncomfortable slave quarters. Douglas confirms such actions: “To behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal condition” (79). Regardless of the oppressive circumstances, Ruth’s hands play a vital role in the psychological liberation of Dessa, and
with the birth of Dessa’s child, a genuine intimacy develops. The problem that presents itself, however, is that for her to welcome a union with Ruth, Dessa feels a sense of betrayal towards her own history. Ruth represents the race that took Kaine from her.

It is applicable when van Gennep writes, a “mother’s transitional period continues beyond the moment of delivery, and its duration varies among different people” (43). Two factors play a role in Sethe’s difficulty with her passage: born on a plantation and raised communally, Sethe does not experience a relationship with her mother. Sweet Home offered no other women in her position, which meant she was permitted to have her children by her side, but unfortunately, there was no one to be a model for her. As a “free” woman, Sethe is unable to fulfill the role of mother. Ironically, “What [Sethe] wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (193). Three of her children who are born into slavery are later subjected to the psychological trauma of their “free” mother. Denver professes: “I spent all of my outside self loving Ma’am so she wouldn’t kill me” (245). In addition, Baby Suggs dies, and when Beloved rises purposefully from Sethe’s suppressed memory, Sethe’s boys flee 124. Furthermore, due to Sethe’s existing liminality, and when Beloved returns, Denver must assume the role of caretaker, but she suffers the inner conflict of desiring more stories of the past that Sethe tells and the possible freedom that awaits her beyond the gates of 124.

It is certainly their own behaviors that contribute to keeping Dessa and Sethe in their liminal state, and it is imperative to determine why. Sethe has twenty-eight days of uncontrolled life, which appears to be “freedom.” During this month, Sethe and her community ponder on the future but dwell little on what they left behind. Sethe’s “free” days are considered “Days of healing, ease, and real-talk” (111). In “Black Matter(s),”
Toni Morrison writes: "the attraction [of freedom] was of the 'clean slate' variety, a once in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again, but to be born again in new clothes..." (260). In order to be "born again," however, the issue for Sethe is that her past must be erased. The novel's narrator says that "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (112), and this proves to be the case with Sethe and Dessa. Li perhaps explains this best: "[F]reedom and bondage are not absolute conditions; instead they represent shifting negotiations of power and control that are mediated by personal desires and connections to others" (5). Unfortunately, the transition period does not allow for Sethe to form connections nor ceremoniously place her memories behind her, thus interfering with her newfound sense of freedom. The death of her daughter is too interwoven with her past experience of molestation, and she is subconsciously unwilling to erase this history.

Conversely, after the death of crawling-already, Sethe assumes, "The future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one" (51). Regardless, her hidden guilt and overwhelming grief causes her memory to gradually return: beginning with noises of crawling-already on the stairs, and then the child's physical body returning in the form of Beloved. Turner explains that "Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection" (Forest 105), which would explain why the presence of Beloved forces Sethe to recall memories she determinedly suppressed for eighteen years. For Sethe "her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (69). On the other hand, Denver and her mother perceive the initial return of Beloved positively. Sethe no longer has to live with
the guilt of her actions: “she even looked straight at the shed, smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember now” (Morrison, *Beloved* 214). A new sense of freedom is contained within the walls of 124: “The women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds” (235). However, it causes her to disconnect further with others. As her memory impregnates, it interferes with Sethe’s ability to function; she recognizes that “there is no world outside [her] door” (217), and she begins to fade away with the magnitude of what she recalls. She is described as “worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled” (300) and, ironically, enslaved to her past.

There is a sense of liberation in Dessa writing her story down when she reaches the West, and in Sethe opening her door for Beloved, and yet these are both agonizing processes. In Anne E. Goldman’s article, "I Made the Ink": (Literary) Production and Reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved,* the writer also explores the “struggle of the freed black woman to achieve self-definition” (313). Goldman mainly speaks of the nature of storytelling in both novels. But what is interesting are her multiple references to the suffering of a slave mother, using Harriet Jacobs’ narrative as an example:

> It is through her capacity to feel a “mother’s agonies,”… that the black woman may be elevated (at least temporarily) to the position of the white mother… [T]he African-American mother’s capacity to experience suffering raises her up from the position of the animal (note the adjectives Jacobs uses to describe her) to occupy the “human condition,” that universalized state which, as we know, typically only whites may maintain. Paradoxically, then, agony is, from this point of view, empowering. (Goldman 316)

We have to wonder then, if Dessa and Sethe keep themselves liminal in order to actually feel – to suffer, to experience – and if incorporation to their assigned social groups requires the ability to forget painful memories, and, thus, detach from one’s history.
Denver claims that “The loss is ungovernable” (144), as she feels Sethe and her newly discovered sister, Beloved, slip from her grasp. This accurately describes what many, if not all, of Morrison’s characters experience in the years beyond slavery. Moreover, in his examination of funeral rites, van Gennep writes: “During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon the living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person” (147). Sethe’s relationship with her dead daughter — the powerful pull of memory — is seemingly unbreakable. In addition, “Sethe had let [Beloved] in” (79), and her embrace greatly contributes to her unwillingness to relinquish her past.

When Amy massages Sethe’s feet, she aptly states, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (42). The physical nurturing that Dessa receives causes her to immerse herself in painful memories of the past also. Her dreams of her childhood are vivid, and she compartmentalizes her thoughts in fear of losing her history (84). She is intent on destroying Ruth’s perception of Dorcas as a way to keep her own memory intact. In “Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” Kristin Boudreau discusses how pain allowed slaves to embody the human condition: “Missy Dehn Kubitschek muses on the possibility that ‘the pain of acknowledging the historical past and its influences on the present may immobilize a heroine rather than energizing her’” (qtd. Boudreau 451). Liminal women who continue to remember are immobilized in this passage. And yet in “Black Matters,” Morrison argues that in freedom, “One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of historylessness — a blank page waiting to be inscribed” (260). It is logical then, when Li contends, “[M]emory can
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be a form of bondage [and] trauma can become a site of desire” (Li 89). Thus, Morrison’s and Li’s statements lead us to believe the females in this argument will always be liminal: They are “free” women bound to memory.

Because rites of passage “are not restricted, sociologically speaking, to movements between ascribed statuses” (Turner, Forest 95), we can examine other moments throughout the stories that cause a prolonging of liminality, such as how Sethe and Dessa exercise their voices, although the act of claiming their voices often accompanies their actions. When jailed, Dessa “become[s] a self she scarcely knew, lost to family, to friends. So she talked” (58), and yet it is through this part of the narrative – what is not spoken or revealed to Nehemiah, the journalist who wishes to know her story – that we learn it: “[the] part of the past lay sealed in the scars between her thighs” (60). Boudreau states, “[T]he experience of vivid pain dismantles language itself, so that pain results in the impossibility of any intelligible utterance” (455). Dessa chooses when to speak and does so with deliberation, proving White’s assertion “that slave women understood the value of silence and secrecy” (24). Nehemiah observes and records Dessa’s condition in confinement as she awaits the birth of her child; however, his “subsequent attempts to get the darky to talk had not been particularly fruitful” (29). The misconception that he will gain information if he mentions Kaine is soon realized (40). On occasion, Dessa “answers questions in a random manner” (23), but she quickly learns how to manipulate language. In fact, “she dared a little with him, playing on words” (60).

Cheryl Wall explores how speech is a privilege, an adult rite, but she claims, “the right to speak is a requisite part of claiming self,” one Sethe does not achieve (Changing
Our Own Words 11). She is punished for revealing the truth to Mrs Garner. Her rounded stomach is placed in a dug-out hole as she is whipped on the back, and she forces herself to silence by literally biting off part of her tongue. bell hooks asserts that “moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible” (qtd. Wall 11). In both cases, the women finally learn when to use their voices but hold themselves back from reaching the other side: Sethe will not surrender the memory of Beloved, who is also liminal, and Dessa, unwilling to differentiate between oppressor and oppressed, sees all those around her as her enemy. Essentially, they are stuck: “betwixt and between” but nevertheless alive.

Sadly, even if both women were capable of, and receptive to, leaving the past behind them and focusing on freedom without memory, The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (part of the Compromise of 1850, which supported only the slaveowner) would have greatly contributed to their liminality. This law required the government to actively assist in the recapturing of runaway slaves. Between 1850 and 1860, 343 African Americans appeared before federal commissioners: 332 were returned to slavery and only eleven kept their freedom (“The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act”). From researching this law, Toni Morrison establishes how her idea for Beloved emerged. In her foreword to the novel, she writes:

Margaret Garner [was] a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner’s plantation. She became a cause célèbre in the fight against Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners. (xvii)
Abolitionists challenged the Fugitive Slave Law’s legality in court, but the United States Supreme Court upheld the law’s constitutionality in 1859 ("The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act"). Once the separation from slavery had occurred, rather than return to this state, and suffer the consequences for their unceremonious separation, Sethe believes there is no other option under these circumstances than to plunge forward, which causes her to endure many years of dangerous liminality.

Having endured years of slavery, there is no doubt that part of the successful transition for a “free” woman is to find an authentic form of identity. Van Gennep writes: "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (3). But what occupation is imposed on female slaves? The proslavery argument, White concurs, categorized black women by labeling, adding to mostly unjustified stereotypes. For example, Southerners, especially, attempted to rationalize their perceptions and juxtapose two images of black women: “one was at heart a slut, the other deeply religious. One was a Jezebel, the other a Mammy” (46). The violent actions of the enslaved, as told in slave narratives, cause our female slaves to be viewed as savages. “Savage” is a label often given to an unruly, ungoverned slave: one lacking civilized qualities, one whose will challenges the master’s authority, one who rebels against the system—not just by escaping slavery but by adopting the same ruthless characteristics of his or her oppressors for protection and in retaliation. These labels imposed upon black women – images Woodard and Mastin believe “box Black women” (272) – are, in a sense, an attempt to understand behaviors that differ from those of “free” women and, ultimately, forestall the transitional phase.
In addition, the exploration of the multitude of roles attempted and forced upon Dessa and Sethe prove to be unsuccessful. Dessa is given numerous labels in an attempt to place her in a category that allows her oppressors to regain control over her, which ultimately separates her more from her group. She is named “fiend,” “devil woman” (21), and the narrative is appropriately divided into sections entitled, “The Darky,” “The Wench,” and “The Negress,” revealing that one title is not enough for such a being. Nehemiah, intent on discovering the source of slave uprisings, regularly questions Dessa’s barbaric acts: “Who would think a female that far along in breeding capable of such savagery?” (21). Mary Kemp Davis, in “Everybody Knows Her Name: The Recovery of the Past in Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose,” summarizes: “Just as the plot of the novel carries Dessa from slavery to freedom and shows what Dessa and others sacrificed to ‘own’ themselves, it shows Dessa tenaciously clinging to her true name” (547). Deeply disturbing (and what Williams and Morrison both explore) is the force behind the rebellious actions. Goldman determines: “[B]oth Dessa and Sethe assert a force of character which, if generated out of the exploitative conditions of maternity under slavery, cannot ultimately be contained by the system” (316-7). Dessa, “biting, scratching, spitting, wildcat – apparently unconcerned about the harm her actions might cause her unborn child” (23) – is perceived in this way by a man who is never able to categorize her and, thus, never capable of writing her story. (Incidentally, he continues to call her by the wrong name.) Dessa’s separation is alien to Nehemiah. He only recognizes her as belonging to the institution of slavery.

The act of compromising one’s self proves to be another agonizing occurrence that stagnates this phase for Dessa and Sethe. Van Gennep speaks of zones and the
passage between two very different territories for the individual: “he wavers between two worlds” (van Gennep 18). In this dangerous state, the “free” slaves staying on Ruth's plantation devise a plan in which to gain funds for their travel west. The group pretends to be slaves belonging to Ruth, and she sells them individually at auction. When monies are procured, the slaves escape from this new master and return to her to complete the process again elsewhere (202). Dessa is spared from this plan due to her scars. If anyone was to inspect her at auction, her branding will send her back to the coffle and jeopardize the freedom of her group. In a moment when this plan is pushed too far, Nehemiah stumbles upon Dessa in the street. In a series of dangerous events, by revealing her genitals, bottom, and hips, Dessa is required to prove she is not the Odessa he remembers. Ruth had previously witnessed Dessa’s “bottom was so scarred [she] had thought she must be wearing some kind of garment” (154), but even the protection of a white woman cannot prevent the warden from checking out Nehemiah’s accusation. Simply, it is the kindness of a black woman who turns her eyes in another direction, claiming Dessa is unmarked, that prevents Dessa from being captured. The dangerous performance of role-playing slaves – a position all parties desired to separate from – almost causes the downfall of their group. Toni Morrison asserts, “Suddenly if you took the gaze of the white male…out of the world, it was freedom! You could think anything, go anywhere, imagine anything…There was no longer the problem of looking through the master’s gaze” (Bollen 40).

Similarly, Sethe also makes sacrifices: in this case a concession so she can ceremoniously place a headstone on her child’s grave. She compromises herself sexually with “Ten minutes for seven letters” (5) on the tombstone. “[S]he thought it would be
enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver…Enough to answer to one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust” (Morrison, *Beloved* 5).

Instead, she can only afford one word: “Beloved”; “dearly” is absent from the stone. These unnecessary actions echo how female slaves were often required to sacrifices their bodies, and, in order to do this, they needed to separate their mind and body. More disturbing still is that each woman still concedes to the ritualistic and violating rites of a white man, which thrusts them further away from her goal of aggregation. This capitulation demonstrates how dangerous a transitional stage can be.

The incorporation phase requires belonging to the new group on the other side of transition, although Turner argues that *communitas*, a Latin word for “community,” is in and of itself temporary until it morphs into the larger social, and permanent, *structure* (discussed fully in chapter 2). Because “liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the cultures in which it occurs” (Turner, *Ritual* 167). In turn, Sethe’s community finds their own freedom in their historylessness, disowning her after she kills her child. The group recognizes that in order to assimilate into a “free” society, they must fall into its hierarchy with white male leadership not rebel against it. Turner delves into the binary oppositions between liminality and the status system. In his elaborate list, appears one pair of contrasting situations that remarkably correspond with these circumstances: acceptance of pain and suffering and avoidance of pain and suffering. We can safely say that Sethe and Dessa wrestle with elements of both.

Consequently, when Denver seeks assistance in saving her mother from the bondage of memory at 124, it collectively takes thirty women to face their own pasts, and
immerse themselves in a dangerously liminal space, in order to retrieve Sethe from hers. The very people who keep Sethe in liminality, with their exclusion of her, now come together: “maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain” (293). Betty Jane Powell writes: “The gathering together of individual voices into a coherent unit expels the past at least to a point that will allow healing and perhaps forgetting” (153). The group connects with past lives in an attempt to save one of their own, and yet it is repeated at the end of the narrative that “It is not a story to pass on” (323), unlike Dessas’s story that is written down for future generations. It could be argued that Beloved will not be remembered again, after all “They forgot her like a bad dream” (323), and that Morrison is presenting historylessness as freedom. However, Paul D returns to Sethe now ready to “put his story next to hers” (324). Besides, Sethe’s body bears all the permanent marks of her hardships; her “wrought-iron back” (322) depicts a tree and suggests this life – this story – will always be present. As Paul D bathes her body, she wonders, “will the parts hold?” (321). Beloved will be forgotten, and the story will not be easily recalled, but Paul D’s and Sethe’s story will lay side by side; thus preserving its place in history.

In the epilogue of Williams’s novel, we learn Dessa makes it to the West. Her group is aware that to move on requires forgetting, but before this voyage, when Dessa discovers Nathan and Ruth are sexually intimate, she is distraught: “something inside me was screaming, Can’t I have nothing? Can’t I have nothing?” (163). She is likely speaking of her preservation of slave history, which does not involve the acceptance of white people in this capacity. She determines, “I don’t think I’m set up to forget – the beatings, the selling, the killings, but I don’t think I ever forgive the ignorance they kept
us in” (Williams, *Dessa Rose* 207-8). Even though she “wouldn’t talk about Kaine, about the loss of [her] peoples” (216) with Ruth, she provides Mony with the story she writes: one, she says, he can say back. Susanna Ashton states, “Certain individuals were intent upon moving this nation forward only with a full awareness of what had gone before” (10). This speaks to Dessa’s journey. Her concept of freedom changes greatly over the course of the novel. She reveals, a sense of freedom “[came] true, but in ways I’d never thought of and with hurts I didn’t know I could bear” (171). Solon T. Kimball, who writes the introduction to van Gennep’s text, deems that “all life is transition, with rhythmic periods of quiescence and heightened activity” (ix). However, the story was quite different for escaped slaves, or even the first generation of freed slaves as we shall see later. Calmness and disorder did not move in cadency. In the act of storytelling, Dessa passes on the difficulties and, in turn, the misconception freedom’s true meaning.

While physically free, Dessa and Sethe will never reach the other side of their thresholds, which makes these novels seemingly tragic. They were determined enough to flee slavery but also desirous enough to preserve their histories, and they do so for the generations of black women who follow—the sisters who Alice Walker speaks of *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Still, they do emerge from the suffocating depths of unfamiliarity and ambiguity and learn to dwell on liminality’s surface. Turner determines there are “certain positive aspects of liminality” (99), and by taking elements that sit on both sides – bondage and freedom, memory and historylessness – “a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (99). We need not root for Sethe and Dessa to truly be free in the sense that their pasts are erased. By understanding and applying Turner’s study with
neophytes to escaped female slaves, we can determine that existing in a liminal space is somewhat safe: “it seems right that widowers and widows should belong to this special world for the longest time” (van Gennep 147). Being the product of “interstructural liminality,” Sethe and Dessa can be themselves, and we can know the truth rather than forcing them into other socially acceptable and constructed stage. There is a place of belonging for them within their liminal space.

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The Transition from Slavery to Freedom: Liminality for the Enslaved Female in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 38

Once upon a time, nestled in patriarchal America, there existed small Black communities who wanted nothing more than to forget the horrors of slavery, and who, by doing so, believed they were separate and free from society’s White infrastructure. In the guise of this so-called freedom is a girl who imagines beyond the boundaries of her neighborhood. She desires to claim her past, to identify with her gender, but refuses to be restrained by an oppressive community because of her subjectivities. She is the fascinating outlaw woman Morrison speaks of—passionate, rebellious, anarchistic, searching for something that she was perhaps never intended to have. She is on the threshold of mere existence and being alive, ignorance and knowledge, enslavement and freedom – all binary oppositions marking the differences of her liminality and the status
structure (Turner, *Ritual* 106). And in their expectations, the communities actually imprison the girl. Needless to say, her passage is dangerous. Reminiscent of a slave woman’s escape, like Sethe and Dessa, Sula, from Toni Morrison’s novel of the same name, and Janie, from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, endeavor to be free. In an attempt to find a type of freedom that is unknown to their communities, they must “give up the old life” (van Gennep 183). And yet after they break free from the town’s grip, they paradoxically return to it, thus causing them to be permanently trapped in their liminal space. Sula and Janie make sacrifices that result in painful experiences, and, consequently, their transition is never fully achieved.

All four women in this argument have, at times, all of the common characteristics for van Gennep’s liminal phase. They “(1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs” (Turner, *Ritual* 125). And by no means are Sula Peace and Janie Crawford the only characters of these two novels to be stuck in a liminal passage. In fact, by applying Victor Turner’s theory to a post-slavery community (the setting here is the 1920’s and 1930’s), both groups can be seen in a transitory state, and their instability hinders its members’ passage. As with Sethe and Dessa, in their struggle to find freedom, Sula and Janie become entrenched in their liminal passage, which is occupied by “an ill-assorted bunch of social phenomena” (Turner, *Ritual* 125). Each individual has his or her own specific case that could be worthy of such an exploration: “the veteran, the orphans, the husband, the laborers” (xiv) of Morrison’s novel and just about anyone who sits on a porch from Hurston’s pages. For a continued discussion of van Gennep’s concept of liminality with regards to the “free” black woman, I will at times address the given situations of other characters.
However, the primary focus here is to examine Sula and Janie: granddaughters of slave women, “[d]aughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers” (Morrison, *Sula* 52), and women who reject the rituals expected of them. In order to determine why they seek to establish a self, free of social constraints, it is necessary to examine their communities, who prove oppositional in the process and are intent on judging the actions of Sula and Janie to justify their own oppression.

As we know, strong women assisted Sethe and Dessa on their journeys but also unintentionally prevented them from moving through their passage. To comprehend what sets Sula and Janie apart from their peers, and even their closest friends Nel and Pheoby, respectively, it is crucial to look at the influences of their nuclear families, who enforce the community’s criteria. Morrison and Hurston include self-sacrificing females who are also “free” slave women. Having coped with a variation of brutal conditions under the rule of white men, these grandmothers are the matriarchs of their homes and fiercely protective of their families. Eva, deserted by Boy Boy and left to raise her three children alone, is motivated and defined by her contempt for her husband: “it was hating him that kept her alive and happy” (37). With a will that is comparable to Sethe’s and Dessa’s, Eva “sought to cope with [her] environment” (Turner, *Ritual* 126). Elaine Tuttle Hansen writes that “trauma is ‘an event that is outside the range of usual human experience’” (110), and Eva will go to any extent to prevent her family from enduring such events. Her merciful actions free her child from the physical discomfort of constipation, but, in addition, she permanently releases him from his adult post-war trauma, which had caused him to retreat into a dangerous place filled with a plethora of vices. Holding her youngest child, she “let her memory spin, loop and fall” (47) before setting fire to her son.
in what is perceived by him as “some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing” (Morrison, *Sula* 47). She later tells Nel, “Fire is warm” (168), but her justification cannot be understood by a younger generation. It is conceivably her explanation to Hannah that provides her reasons:

I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more....I couldn’t birth him twice...[H]e’d be creepin’ to the bed trying to spread my legs trying to get back up in my womb....[B]ut a man can’t be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man....(71-2)

With slavery decades behind her, Eva prevents the rebirth of Plum, whereas Sethe, still reeling from its aftermath, welcomes Beloved to be her child again. Deborah Gray White writes that freedom “demanded as much courage as had slavery....Women as much as men had to make shrewd and difficult choices, and as they did they reinterpreted the meaning of self-respecting womanhood” (177). More likely, however, is that women struggled to move through the transitional phase as mothers, caregivers, and guardians.

It is evident that both Eva and Nanny have expectations for their granddaughters that are derived from their own experiences as black women but also fit into the norms of the society in which they now reside. In his introduction to van Gennep’s text, Solon T. Kimball explains how rites of passage serve to diminish anxiety that originates from roles imposed on an individual by society. Directly after Eva’s explanation to her daughter, Hannah witnesses the deweys playing chain gang, and it is through the juxtaposition of Plum’s suffering and young boys mimicking life in slavery that we can determine the male struggle to become a healthy adult free from slavery’s claws. We also not the rites of passage differ greatly in Black communities. Eva frees Plum from his painful
liminality while acknowledging she had fulfilled her role as a mother: if she was able to bring him into the world, her right as a mother was to remove him from it, thus forcing his passage from one life to the next in what she envisions as freedom.

Similarly, the women exercise the same rites with their granddaughters. Just as Nanny believes Janie is better off married than a vulnerable single girl, Eva is convinced Sula’s free spirit should be contained: “When you gone to get married?....Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man....It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need...I’m a tell you what you need” (92). Nanny, as the only caretaker of Janie, is perhaps more concerned than Eva about the future of her granddaughter. She is frantic to hand over the responsibility, and, in a fashion, while many degrees different from Eva’s release of Plum, replicates a remarkably similar desperation to save her ward from a future of difficulties: “Fact is Ah done been on mah knees to mah Maker many’s de time askin’ please—for Him not to make de burden too heavy for me to bear” (13). Consequently, as a guardian, Nanny has rites and desires Janie’s separation from her home: “[Y]ouse got yo’ womanhood on yuh. So Ah mout ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin’ up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away” (12). Nanny speaks of a union for Janie, one that involves “no trashy nigger” (13), and vows to see her married to Brother Logan Killicks: “a good man” (13). Furthermore, Nanny is able to convey what Eva could not: a decent man is required for protection, to keep Janie safe—a dependency that White describes as an improvement on being subservient to all men or, like Nanny and Eva, “heading households without male support” (184). In the implementation of such rites, the women free themselves of these
burdens but choose an alternate set of chains for their granddaughters in the institution of marriage.

Unlike their peers, the young girls resist the institution of marriage, believing it to be too confining. Sula, a girl filled with curiosity, wishes to gain experience beyond the boundaries of her community. Toni Morrison says about Sula, and this can be applied to Janie too, Sula is “Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing...And dangerously female” (Unspeakable Things Unspoken 153). Knowing of the lengths Eva will go to stifle others’ experiences, Sula is afraid of her, fearful that Eva’s actions will interfere with her own unritualistic transition. Eva and Hannah, Sula’s mother, have found difficulty being grounded in the community without the permanence of a man and Eva believes marriage is a freedom, a choice for Sula, that wasn’t available for them. Sula, however, will not buy into the notion that “Marriage constitutes the most important of the transitions from one social category to another” (van Gennep 116) and refuses to take this transitory passage. She sees her freedom in “extracting choice from choicelessness” (Morrison, Unspeakable Things Unspoken 153).

Janie’s earlier childhood thrusts her into a much more ambiguous stage of liminality that results in her being more compliant to her grandmother’s wishes. Raised by her Nanny and the white people she worked for, there is no doubt how girlhood was confusing for Janie. In recounting her life story to Pheoby, she recalls living with the Washburns: “Ah was wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was round six years old” (8). Not accepted by black children and not considered an equal to white children, Janie cannot proceed through her own passage in a formal manner because she is unable to create self-identity. Years later, Janie reflects that
Nanny stifled her opportunity, suffocated her imagination, and like Sula, she comes to hate “the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love” (89). Despite Nanny being misunderstood by Janie, she passes on a valuable lesson, and a declaration that is repeated by both authors, one Janie eventually realizes is true: “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). With Nanny’s words about Black women later resonating, Janie, like Sula and the mule, cannot be contained.

Turner ascertains that “a rich variety of symbols in [societies] ritualize social and cultural transitions” (Turner, Ritual 95). The symbols Turner references in his exploration of tribal life – woman’s breast and the milk tree (mentioned previously) – are based on women’s subjectivities. Regardless of how both young girls temporarily consent to positions posed upon them by society, their communities cast them as outsiders based on their physical appearance: ironically, symbols based on their subjectivities. As Janie moves through her relationships, initially endeavoring to assimilate into the community, “The men notice her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist...her pugnacious breasts” (2), and her fair skin. Sula is “heavy brown” (52), and according to Morrison, “quintessentially black, metaphysically black” (Unspeakable Things Unspoken 153), which does not elicit the same reaction as it does for mulatto Janie and lighter-skinned Nel. Sula’s proclaimed difference, however, is her birthmark “that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow” (52). As Sula loses her childhood innocence and, as a result, further rejects society’s expectation for her, the birthmark darkens, and is more suggestive of evil—Jude points out its resemblance to a rattlesnake. What Eatonville’s men fail to consider in their objectification of Janie is that her difference is
also associated with evil: she is the product of rape and is, therefore, a symbol of female oppression. Alice Walker claims that Janie is viewed as a prize, “put on display” (305) in a store where items are sold, just as Nel and Sula – impressionable girls at the time – walk “through [the] valley of eyes” (50), believing that the “appraising stares” (50), and words spoken about them as they passed by, were compliments. Even though these moments are initially perceived in a positive light, they have a negative effect: Sula and Janie never find a lasting happiness from man’s objectification of them.

The girls’ internal conflicts, which can be attributed to issues with self-identity and, subsequently, sexuality, emerge from attempting to understand the communities that they must incorporate into after their transition. For Janie, this is her late realization and adjustment to not being white and her confusion over her own name. She tells Pheoby, “Dey all useter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names” (9). Mae Gwendolyn Henderson provides the etymology of Sula’s name, which, incidentally, aligns perfectly with liminality’s binary oppositions:

[Her] name is derived from the designation of a genus of seabird, again an image associated with dual environment—aquatic and aerial. These contrasts suggestively position Sula at the crossroads or intersection of life and death, land and sea, earth and air. Thus both the mark and designation are particularly appropriate for the black woman as one situated within two social domains (black and female) and, as such, implicated in both a racial and gendered discourse. (28)

Besides the fact that both women are wrestling with aggregation and the community’s norms, their physical appearances, which become more noticeable when they are adolescents, further confine them to liminal space—much like the scars branding Sethe and Dessa. Henderson explores the symbolism of Sula’s birthmark “shaped something like a stemmed rose” (52), adding that a rose is “appropriated by black women writers
from Frances Harper, who uses it as a symbol of romantic love, to Alice Walker, who associates it with sexual love" (Henderson 27). Neither girl can be rid of the symbols that mark their identity, and theirs, too, are sexually suggestive.

So what exactly is it that Eva and Nanny want to keep their granddaughters safe from? In her essay “The Erotics of Talk: ‘That Oldest Human Longing’ in Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Carla Kaplan argues that “Janie rejects her grandmother…because Nanny gives up on female desire” (149). Going one step further here, it could actually be that Nanny is terrified of female desire. She moves to action when she sees “Johney Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss” (12), wanting to protect Janie from desire. After all, Nanny’s own “dreams of whut a woman oughta be and do” (16) were suppressed—one of the “hold-backs of slavery” (16). In addition, Nanny and Eva’s daughters – Leafy and Hannah – are clearly not exemplary models of what their mothers dreamt of for the next generation. We are told “Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment” (44). Leafy also wrestled with commitment and, after giving birth, “took to drinkin’ likker and stayin’ out nights” (19). Their desire was for immediate physical satisfaction, which allowed a sense of freedom but lacked any genuine intimacy.

These obtained freedoms cause Hannah and Leafy to fail as nurturing, loving mothers and stable daughters, which has a definite effect: Janie’s desire is to end her “cosmic loneliness” (21), and Sula learns two lessons from her mother that cause her to resist conformity to social constraints. She discovers, “Sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (44) and that Hannah does not like her because she is
different. As a result, when Eva tells Sula, “You need to have some babies. It’ll settle
you” (92), Sula is aware that the “settling” Eva speaks of is submission. It is plausible
then, when Nanny declares “de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able
tuh find out” (14), and goes on to describe how she was repeatedly raped by her master,
that her need is to protect Janie from a certain type of male. Logan Killicks, therefore,
represents the antithesis: hardworking, asexual, safe and subservient to the system.
Claudia Tate writes: “Nanny’s experimental wisdom compels this match because she
fully understands that biological vulnerability threatens her granddaughter’s life” (99).
But Sula and Janie perhaps suffer the most from the absence of their mothers. Being
raised by ex-slaves, they are denied the transitional generation who could perhaps filter
the sacrificial type of love offered by their grandmothers. Tate remarks: “Social
conventions have historically designated mothers as the parent responsible for initially
engendering the child’s personal esteem” (111). Hannah is a poor role model for Sula.
She is physically present but demonstrates restlessness in her confinement. The bond
between mother and daughter is absent, and this lack is responsible for Sula’s and Janie’s
subconscious decision making: the choices in their own relationships and how neither
woman becomes a mother.

Turner was originally drawn to three aspects of culture that are “well-endowed
with ritual symbols and beliefs of non-social-structural type.” He concludes that these are
“liminality, outsiderhood, and structural inferiority” (Turner, Drama 231), and while he
distinguishes between the three, they all demonstrate marginality, which is exhibited by
Sula and Janie. It is likely that Eva and Nanny recognize and fear another difference in
their granddaughters besides their physical appearance: their curiosity, their desire to
experiment, their need to know more than their ancestors could provide, and an interest in what lies beyond the boundaries of their given neighborhoods—essentially their resolution to remain marginal. As Turner goes on to explain, characteristics of this transitional period are “submissiveness and silence” (Turner, *Ritual* 103), and as young girls, Sula and Janie knew their place and behaved accordingly, although their curiosity is hardly extinguished. Kimball writes that van Gennep “considered the rites [of sexual maturity] to be primarily rites of separation from an asexual world, followed by rites of incorporation into a sexual world” (ix). Neither adolescent finds intimacy from sexual experience. Janie marries Logan but is not content. Sula, on the other hand, discovered Nel, a girl similar to her and “they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52). They are marginal because they look for escape from their assigned states within their communities but do not incorporate into a sexual world through the sacred ritual of marriage: a union with a man.

It is Janie’s observations of nature, a transcendent moment “under a blossoming pear tree” (10), that provides her with the knowledge of something more profound: “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight” (11). The episode, where Hurston parallels sixteen-year-old Janie with elements of nature – “flies tumbling and singing,” “kissing bees” (11) – results in Janie’s awareness of self and her desire for a human experience to feel alive. Carla Kaplan argues how “Janie mistakes the nature of the revelation” (138), and that the nature she observes does not mean marriage or a sexual connection. Kaplan claims it is “talk itself, the experience of conversation, the act of
storytelling and self-narration” (Kaplan 138), although it is debatable that she satisfies the “oldest human longing” in telling her story to Pheoby. More plausible is that Janie wants any experience in order to have a story to tell. As she witnesses blooming, she “want[s] to struggle with life” (11). Janie’s direct reference to “struggle” may come from Nanny’s experiences—struggles that likely occurred in slavery and the transition to freedom. Nanny attempts to prevent Janie from experiencing such difficulties by procuring a smooth passage for her granddaughter. However, away from Nanny’s gate, Janie comes to learn firsthand of struggling in oppressive circumstances. In her search to confirm that “Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant” (21), Janie marries three times. And while Janie surrenders to Nanny’s wishes by marrying Logan Killicks, the union is destined to fail. His stability grants no room to grow and experience. Instead, she feels trapped and suffocated. Turner explains:

The state of outsiderhood, refer[s] to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system” (Drama 233).

Evidently, Janie is an outsider when she rebels against the restrictions of this institution—one she sees as another form of enslavement. Alice Walker notes that Janie “refuses to allow society to dictate behavior to her, enjoys the love of a much younger, freedom-loving man, and lives to tell others of her experience” (6). In her abandonment of Logan, Janie rejects Nanny’s rites as well as a perceived rite of freedom—marriage: a social contract, a sign of civilization, and, one that Tate describes as, “a vehicle for promoting family stability, social progress, and respectability” (103). Janie becomes an outlaw woman by acting on her feelings, whereas other women do respect such rituals within
their transitions, not considering possibilities beyond their assigned positions within the community. Janie rebels, and when Jody Starks offers opportunities beyond her neighborhood, she separates into a new liminal state in order to experience life.

By the river, separated from her “household of throbbing disorder” (52), Sula, similar to Janie, has adolescent moments that occur in nature. While Janie is alone in her liminality, Sula begins her passage with Nel, both “unshaped, formless things” (53) who look for mischief and adventure. Audre Lorde best explores the connectedness Sula and Nel find. She writes: “For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is discovered” (111). Morrison deliberately creates an existential place for the girls to gain power in their experience, one created by their imagination, and one we can examine closely to understand Janie’s defining moment under the tree:

They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolor visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream. (51)

The word “solitary” and then its subsequent contrasting words and phrases, enables us to juxtapose Turner’s concept of liminal space. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “solitary” as “Quite alone or unaccompanied,” “solitary” is also defined as “destitute or deprived of the society of others.” Turner also believes “liminality may imply solitude rather than society, the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix. It may imply alienation from rather than more authentic participation in social existence” (*Drama* 52). However, as we absorb his meaning and imagine the girls either alone, at a disadvantage, lacking a connection with their community, or being in need of something, towards the end of Morrison’s lines, the
words “included” and “presence” greatly override any negativity derived from the aforementioned “solitary.” The “someone,” which is later referenced as the presence, “shared” the experience with the “girls” and causes them to appear anything but alone. A “girl”—a female who has not made it to womanhood—often feels alone and disconnected from the grown up world she inhabits. Janie, for example, longingly searched for a connection along the road of her husband’s farm. And yet, Sula has Nel with her to share in this ritual. Once they are joined by “someone,” we can determine that their needs are being met. In turn, we no longer feel a sense of concern brought on from their aloneness but instead feel comforted by their togetherness.

Nevertheless, we are informed that, like Janie, Sula and Nel suffer from a “profound” “loneliness” in this state. However, as we know from the great romantic poets, being lonely does not necessarily imply one’s deprivation from human contact, but rather a deeper connection to one’s surroundings. Similarly, Janie is beckoned by the tree to “gaze on a mystery” (10). “Loneliness,” rather than “aloneness,” in Morrison’s lines, suggests an intense feeling for whatever the two girls are disconnected from. The girls are intensely isolated, forced into a distinct separation from their communities but still together. Again, in the patterns of contrasts within Morrison’s first sentence, “Technicolor visions” hardly leads us to believe their intoxication is necessarily negative, and just as Janie finds the bloom “stir[s] her tremendously” (10), their given state is so deep that it sends them into an excited but, more likely, a stupefied state. “[S]tumbling” into these colorful visions alludes to their lack of control, rather than a deliberate action. Furthermore, one’s stumbling in this fashion implies chaos: a disruption resulting directly from the intoxication, which holds power over the girls.
Sula and Nel’s marginality is best exemplified by the word “Technicolor,” which is purposefully capitalized in the midst of this passage. Because it is a noun – *OED* reveals, “a company producing cinema films that appear in colour to a viewing audience. Hence: the colour of such films [attributed to] designating any of various proprietary processes of colour cinematography, and films made with such a process” (“Technicolor”) – we can visualize the girls in the company’s elaborate cinematic production, led there by the depth of their loneliness. It seems quite accidental that they stumbled into these visions. Turner describes how “‘being in a tunnel!’ would better describe the quality of [liminality]” (*Drama* 232). We, however, might recall Dorothy emerging from black and white Kansas to Technicolor Oz. Furthermore, we would expect the “dream,” or “visions,” that the girls “delight” in to be frightening, smothering, oppressive perhaps. But we know now that they are not. The dream is delightful and takes them both to the unexpected place of an “intoxicated” “Technicolor vision.” They share this discovery. And, at the center of this vision is a “presence,” and like the best vision of a personal God in all religions, this presence is “always” “included” there. This “someone” is, at least, very unlike the profound loneliness and “shares in the delight of the dream.” This is what draws them so close together in a dream state, as, in reality, their need for solitude keeps them apart. Hurston places Janie under a blossoming tree to imagine a connection so profound, and here Morrison sends Sula and Nel off to discover something that really matters, too. We witness them uncover a truth: that in their loneliness, their liminality, they are actually imagining more about the human experience than what can be gained from a reality within their community.
The reality is that Logan Killick’s stable position in society does not come close to fulfilling Janie’s dream. Janie, like Sula, “knew things that nobody had ever told her....She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up” (25), conceivably in a similar cinematic production. So when Joe Starks, “a citified, stylish dressed man” (27), appears on the road, Janie views this as a form of escape from her monotonous life and a way in which to find truth in a dream. The striking, and ironic, part of Janie’s account here is that she does indeed escape from a decent black man’s farm but directly into the arms of a man with characteristics of a white man. Janie recalls how Joe Starks acted like Mr. Washburn or somebody like that” (27), and he was “[k]ind of portly like rich white folks” (34). Furthermore, she is enlivened by his assertiveness, his command for attention, and his confidence to fulfill his business venture. Logan declares to Janie before she departs, “You think youse white folks by the way you act” (30), and it becomes apparent that the union between Jody and Janie is an attempt to move up the social ladder: to replicate what both had observed from white people. Turner reviews problematic results generating from a manipulation of society’s system: “The concept of ‘conflict’ has become connected with the concept of ‘social structure’...and scarce status becomes the object of struggles between persons and groups who lay claim to it” (Turner, Ritual 126). For Jody, the self-serving relationship is just a desire to change the status quo.

There are a few differences between liminal and marginal, and while I have referenced both girls being on the margins of their communities, they are indeed liminal. Turner points out how marginals are similarly in between two given states and can often belong to two or more groups—the inferior one that they emerged from and the
prestigious group in which they often reside (*Drama* 233). Court jesters, for example, are marginals. They will never belong to the higher status with whom they live and entertain but will always be outsiders and outcasts. The difference, however, is that while marginals may aspire to belong to the higher status of one group, and leave their more lowly one behind, there is actually no passage even suggested or presented for this individual, as is the case with Jody. Conversely, Turner indicates mixed ethnic peoples and “women in a change, nontraditional role” (233) can be marginals, as well as creative individuals: painters, philosophers, writers. And we might be able to ascribe all four women in this argument to marginals given that all of them “subjectively fail to feel the identities expected of them” (233). Liminals are passengers though, “moving symbolically to a higher status” (233) and are ritual subjects who are stripped of status in the process of moving forward. All “free” slaves were expected to move through the passage of imprisonment to freedom and aggregate into a structured society. Symbolically, they were stripped of their histories and memories if they were to ever accept freedom and reincorporate into the third phase successfully. In addition, all girls becoming women are ritual subjects with the passage of adolescence. There are particular expectations for them in this passage. When Janie moves to the new town with Jody, she is “stripped” of her dreams and “live[s] between her hat and her heels” (76). She is required to shift into a radically different position with certain boundaries. Janie’s difficult position causes her to feel enslaved once again.

The conflict for Janie emerges when she realizes that, as a woman, moving through her passage and reincorporating does not necessarily mean she will come into flower. Cheryl Wall confirms this notion: “In a society ordered by hierarchies of power
based on race, class, and gender, no one is more powerless, hence more vulnerable, than a poor black girl” (Wall, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook* 3). Jody, like Logan, is financially stable. However, in marriage, Janie is completely dependent on him until his death, and she begins to realize her position is to be a possession and to aid Jody in climbing ranks:

Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang. (41)

Jody insists his wife dress in “silken ruffles” (41), which negatively separates her from other women wearing head-rags, and he stifles her voice “that took the bloom off things” (43). While Jody differentiates between his wife and other women, appearing to place his wife on a pedestal for the town to admire, his reference to a “bell-cow” grants Janie with a clear picture of her role: she must lead the women by example but, nevertheless, still be governed by her master. Anne McClintock writes: “[M]en diminish women’s contributions by reducing them to vessels and machines – mere bearers – without creative agency” (29). As if aware of this, Janie despises the store and the operation. Similarly, Sula refuses to work. Walker sympathizes by adding, “any woman who settles for being owned, for being a ‘prize,’ is more to be struggled with than blamed” (307). In Janie’s decision to marry Jody, she is chained into a liminal space that is controlled by her husband.

Janie and Sula desire to independently separate from their small and limited communities. To really understand the significance of their departures, it is helpful to examine how Black communities and white society differ. Turner explains how there are “two major ‘models’ for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating” (*Ritual* 96).
The first is society as a structured, organized “hierarchal system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation” (96), which “holds people apart [and] defines their differences” (Drama 274). The second, communitas, a Latin term for “community,” emerges within the liminal period and “is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated community” (Ritual 96). The two are diametrically opposed, and Turner frequently refers to communitas as anti-structure.

Furthermore, just as structure categorizes peoples, “Communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms, though this is necessarily a transient condition if society is to continue to operate in an orderly fashion” (Drama 274). The neighborhoods in our novels believe they have been reincorporated into society’s structure and, as a whole, have been successful in moving through their passage to be “in a relatively stable state once more” (Ritual 95). Black communities, however, are segregated from white society, and this alone puts them into a transitory state. Kimball determines, “The critical problems with becoming male and female, of conditions within the family, and of passing into old age are directly related to the devices which the society offers the individual to help him achieve the new adjustment” (xvii). The Bottom of Medallion and Eatonville are made up of threshold people and receive no aid. Norman Cohn referred to such communities as “uprooted and desperate masses in town and countryside...living on the margin of society” (qtd. in Turner, Ritual 111). And, as we witnessed with Sethe’s community, such groups do not have the devices or experience to cope with a unique passage that differs from the general norm. Diane Matza writes a comparison of Morrison’s and Hurston’s novels where she establishes “the role of the community as a moral evaluator” (43). She discusses the conflict—one
she believes is developed “between the individual's desire to explore herself and the community's need to stifle this to achieve order and stability” (Matza 43). It is evident that both communities are unable to tolerate volatile disruptions that reveal their unstable state—such as interference of white men or a betrayal of a member. Ultimately, in Sula’s and Janie’s desire to encounter human experiences, they reject the assigned rituals in their liminal passage, and their conflicts jeopardize the community’s survival.

Turner makes a case for three types of *communitas*. The first two can be used to understand the behavior of our given communities (the last type is ideological communitas: utopian models that do not exist for our authors). The first, Existential or Spontaneous communitas, is described as “the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as homogeneous, unstructured, and free community” (Turner, *Drama* 169). Morrison’s novel presents an ideal model. The Bottom, an area so named by a master who convinced his slave that the land high up in the hills, is “rich and fertile [and] the bottom of heaven” (5), is valued by its inhabitants as being a place where black people can look down on white people in the valley beneath. Turner adds: “Communitas emerges where social structure is not” (*Ritual* 126), although to admit its ephemerality would, in essence, reveal the community’s vulnerable state, one under a white man’s rule, and, therefore, another type of oppression reminiscent of slavery. By living in a make believe world, Sula’s community is oblivious to restrictions and are under the impression that they are indeed free. To further highlight the general misconceptions of the community’s position, when a storm arrives, the Bottom believes it serves to protect white people below. Turner writes: “In liminality, communitas tends to characterize relationships between those
jointly undergoing ritual transition” (Turner, Drama 274). Suitably, Sula’s community is stuck between two pivotal moments in black history: the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement. An individual within the community who calls attention to the group’s instability by breaking away or stepping beyond its boundaries, for needs or desires that are not found within its walls, is likely to be cast aside by his or her own. The rejection occurs in both cases here.

The second type of communitas, which can be applied to Jody’s town (originally unnamed) is Normative communitas, “where,” Turner believes, “under the influence of time, [there is a] need to mobilize and organize resources to keep the members of the group alive and thriving, and the necessity for social control among those members in pursuance of these and other collective goals” (Drama 169). When Jody and Janie arrive in the Floridian neighborhood, Jody has plans to buy property and develop businesses. His desire for the new neighborhood is to replicate the structure of white towns he had worked in—for “Starks was living for the present” (36). In addition, his vision is clear, and he is organized and focused, recognizing that if “a society is unstructured it is nothing (Turner, Drama 250). We can perhaps agree with Matza’s point that Sula’s community is “constantly struggling to survive and push away the always lurking possibility of chaos” (49), unlike Janie’s neighborhood. Jody knew there was a need for hierarchy among the people if blacks were to prosper, and he begins to organize: “menfolks got to call people together and form a committee. Then we can get things movin’ round here” (35). Initially, the community is hesitant. There is a sense of containment, a reminder of a black man’s position. Hicks, for example, is not “ready to think of colored people in post offices yet” (39). But the persuasion of a black man
striving for what a white man has is compelling. Jody is elected as mayor of the town and its structure begins to form. It is important to remember Turner’s findings here: structure is permanent and communitas is evolving. Eatonville is a black community, but with structure, modeled from White society, Jody ensures its durability.

Both post-slavery communities – Eatonville and Medallion – contain reincorporated individuals who are, according to Turner, “expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions” (*Ritual* 95). Hurston’s and Morrison’s social commentary cannot be ignored. They reveal difficulties for the progression of Black communities. Wall argues, “Hurston’s project was in part to demonstrate that black America had created a culture of their own, one that might not be appreciated if judged by the standards of the dominant society” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook* 8). And yet Jody, and his vision, is reflective of the dominant society and is followed by all, although “[t]hey murmured about slavery being over” (Hurston 47). Besides Janie’s associations of Jody to a white man, Hurston weaves numerous other connections to Jody’s master-like status: his “bow-down command in his face” (47); his spittoon that resembled his boss’s; and his extravagant “white” home that made the surrounding properties look “like servants’ quarters” (47). And while, “any man who walks in the way of power and property is bound to meet hate” (48), the town follows its leader preferring the new ways to the old. Janie becomes part of this system.

Jody’s new town develops but neighborhood traditions remain in tact. The members are threshold people, and while not rebellious in their behavior, there are rituals, patterns that continue – “moments of ritualized improvisation [which are staples] of
Hurston's fiction" (Wall, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook* 9), and gathering on the porch is a sacred part of life. Wall remarks on the black life in *Their Eyes*:

Hurston's "characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill: they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears" (9), and most of the folk life exists on porches – just one of numerous liminal spaces Hurston eloquently includes in her story – spaces that are neither here nor there, "betwixt and between." The front porch wraps around its home: a threshold that must be crossed before entering or leaving the property. It serves as a meeting place, a metaphoric courtroom, and a confessional. With its cover, the porch offers shelter, and with its wide-open view, it functions as a Panopticon. Men mock and laugh, and "if nobody was there to speak of, nothing happened" (63). Women swap stories, exchange gossip, and make judgments. Hurston often personifies the porches, presenting the liveliness of the space itself. And, it is the place where people gather at the most liminal time of the day: sundown. Van Gennep explores in-depth how an entranceway is symbolic in all cultures. He claims, "The main door is the site of entrance and exit rites...The other openings do not have the same quality of a point of transition between the familial world and the external world" (25). Moreover, the porch provides a rather perfect metaphor for the liminal space occupied between slavery and freedom.

When "the sun and bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human" (1), but only enough for talk. Janie frequently attempts to belong to the porchlife but is forbidden to do so. It is here, however, we hear Janie's story relayed to Pheoby by lamplight, where, critics believe, she is free to tell the truth and is liberated. But the story is told on the back porch, where van Gennep writes, "[T]hieves...prefer to enter [and] corpses are
removed” (van Gennep 25). We are left imagining Janie relaying her story where criminals desire not to be heard and the dead will never speak again, revealing the same cautionary manner in which Dessa writes her story for Mony.

An extension of the porch metaphor – a place of existence between slavery and freedom – is represented in the community’s mule talk. Janie is sent inside the store to work rather than partake in the stories of the mule, which are imaginative, plentiful, and indulgent. In the words of Martin Buber: “Community is where community happens” (qtd. in Turner, Ritual 127), and it is “richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones” (139). And yet Janie is excluded from such pleasures with her community on the porch. She is, as Turner describes it, “secluded from the spheres of everyday life...rendered inaudible by rules of silence” (169). She is “‘leveled’ and ‘stripped’ of all secular distinctions of status and rights over property. [She is] subjected to trials and ordeals to teach [her] humility” (169). The store serves as a prison for Janie: “she had been set in the market-place to sell. Benn set for still-bait” (90), and it is laborious, stifling, and also a place of abuse. She must follow Jody’s orders, and he slaps her into submission. She perceives the mule as helpless and, like herself, a slave that “Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment” (56). Consequently, Jody’s purchase of the mule, an act that allows the mule to roam freely beyond the boundaries of porches, is seen as an act of power. She tells her husband: “You got uh power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something” (58), but she is painfully aware that she does not possess such freedom trapped in the store, and, like a master, he will not release her. Ironically, once bought and fed, the mule dies, and we are reminded of Nanny’s words of warning: “De nigger woman is de mule” (14). Janie, as if
recognizing the meaning, “[presses] her teeth together and learn[s] to hush” (Hurston 71). Sherley Anne Williams concurs that “The image of the black woman as the mule of the world becomes a metaphor for the roles that Janie repudiates in her quest for self-fulfillment” (23). Nonetheless, Janie begins to imagine a life beyond the porch—a life that is not desired by other women, women who occupy their porches and believe this alone is freedom. Janie envisions herself separate and free from Jody. These visions are in various forms, including, as with the mule, her death.

There are numerous complex rituals common to Ndembu that Turner examines for liminal entities. These rituals, ceremonious in nature, assist the passenger in reaching the third phase: the reincorporated and stable state. Marriage and motherhood, both ritualistic processes that present many ceremonious obligations, are expected and ultimately rejected by Sula and Janie. For Janie, marriage also means tending to the store, remaining silent, and looking a certain way. Turner reiterates that these rituals are loaded with symbols, and “[t]he symbolism attached to and surrounding the liminal persona is complex and bizarre” (Forest 96). Janie’s hair offers an example here. It symbolizes her sexuality—men want to see it swing below her waist. Jody barks orders to keep her hair in a head-rag: “she was there in the store for him to look at” (55). Needless to say, when Jody dies, Janie partakes in a rather ceremonious ritual of her newfound freedom: “She [tears] off the kerchief from her head and let[s] down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there” (87). Later, she burns her head-rags and lets her braid swing freely, redefining how this ritual works. Another example of ritualistic behavior is portrayed in both novels at respective funerals. In Their Eyes, Janie “starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. It was like a
wall of stone and steel” (Hurston 88). Even in community’s most ceremonious moments of transition, Janie desires to escape. Appearing to honor these rituals, Janie “sent her face to Joe’s funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world” (88). At Chicken Little’s funeral, Nel and Sula are distinctly separated from other mourners through Morrison’s purposeful diction. While the community appears to grieve, shown by their animated gestures in unison, Sula weeps silently, her inner thoughts completely private. Similarly to Janie, Sula also participates in the ritual process. She prepares Nel’s wedding with a profound eagerness, but her escape is demonstrated as she removes herself from the celebrations, slipping out and departing from Medallion for the next ten years.

According to their communities, there is an unspoken expectation to conform to the new way of life. Turner finds that when the passenger does not submit, a life crisis develops, which, if not rectified immediately, isolates the individual from the rest of the community and ensures permanence in this phase. A crisis is “one of those turning points or moments of danger and suspense, when a true state of affairs is revealed, when it is easy to don masks or pretend that there is nothing rotten in the village” (Turner, Drama 39). Janie’s and Sula’s life crises are likely episodes that Nanny and Eva would do all to prevent. To the young women, however, the events are character-building, involving feelings that are so intense and painful but cherished all the same. To speak of life crisis in Sula, it is necessary to explore why Nel shows not resistance in transitioning like her friend. What ultimately causes the two friends to separate when they appear to exhibit the same intensity in the liminal passage? As we established earlier, Sula’s is differentiated by her birthmark and Nel, being “the origins of a mule and a mulatto” (52)
but not quite as light-skinned as Janie, is noticeably different from Sula. Toni Morrison opens her novel with an image of “nightshade and blackberry patches” (3) to speak of the girls’ similarities and differences. She explains Sula by how “nightshade” can “counteract witchcraft” (*Unspeakable Things Unspoken* 153), and a certain blackberry vine can be “‘bittersweet’ because berries taste bitter at first then sweet” (153). Like the blackberry patch, Nel, she adds, is “nourished, never needing to be tended or cultivated, once rooted and bearing” (153). Furthermore, Sula’s need is to expand her horizons, and like Janie, grow outside her patch. What can’t be ignored is the looseness in the Peace household versus the restrictions in the Wrights’. Helen “enjoyed manipulating her daughter” (18), and “[u]nder Helen’s hand [Nel] became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasm that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). Matza writes, “Sula wants to answer to no authority but the one she creates” (50). Alternatively, Nel is a replica of her mother and never leaves Medallion.

Structure is often antagonistic to the existence of the individual, as is the case with Sula and Janie, and “To find and become [her]self, the individual must struggle to liberate [her]self from the yoke of society” (*Drama* 54), which in essence captures its subjects. Because their communities are restrictive, the two are limited in their growth, becoming “‘aharmonic’ [in the] phases of the ongoing social process” (33). And so ensues a social drama: a conflict between an individual and her people. As demonstrated, in their necessity to break away from their communities and find a sense of self, Sula and Janie breach “norm-governed social relations [that occur] between persons or groups within the same system of social relations” (*Drama* 38). This is the first
phase of a social drama (the second is the mounting crisis, the third is the redressive action to limit the crisis – only Janie reaches this stage through her storytelling to Pheoby – and the fourth is a reconciliation of the parties involved). As in villages of Ndembu of Turner’s studies, crises emerge when Sula and Janie rebel against their community’s gamut of rituals and behaviors. The social drama is marked by the public’s awareness of the breach, and “To flout such a norm is one obvious symbol of dissidence” (Turner, Drama 38). It is Sula who flouts the norm that further pulls her friendship with Nel apart. Throughout their childhood union, three life crises reveal remarkable differences between the two girls: a sacrificial moment whereby Sula protects Nel from the neighborhood bullies; Sula’s emotional breakdown when she throws Chicken Little into the water and to his death; and when she motionlessly witnesses her mother burn. Sula later reflects that Nel “always thrived on a crisis” (141), and her own imitation of her friend “ended in some action noteworthy for its coolness but mostly for its being bizarre [when] she had cut off her finger tip and earned not Nel’s gratitude but her disgust” (141). She establishes, “From then on she had let her emotions dictate her behavior” (141). Nel confirms this difference: “When it came to matters of grave importance, [Sula] behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out” (101).

Janie, who appears more responsible than Sula, still is driven to act on her emotions. Matza expands on how Janie’s courage is representative of black women’s plight for Hurston, for “Janie lives in a world larger than her own home and backyard; and it is her desire to participate and grow in this larger world that shows her that the individuals closest to her and the community around her are driven by their own need to interfere in her life” (47). The community’s frustration is exacerbated when Sula and
Janie refuse to be a blank slate, preferring to gain knowledge from their own experience, even if it is agonizing—a challenge Turner discusses for liminal individuals. Janie believes Jody is about change, newness, liberation. He had told her, “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (29). And even though his promise brings to mind how a master might envision his wife to be treated on the plantation, Jody is more oppressive. Paradoxically, he presents a structure and a future for Eatonville, and, by doing so, the community supports his ways, thus inadvertently condoning his conduct. Therefore, when Janie chooses to marry Tea Cake, it must transpire away from the porches of Eatonville.

Turner explains that a crisis has “liminal characteristics, since it is a threshold between more or less stable phases of the social process [and] it takes up its menacing stance in the forum itself and, as it were, dares the representative of order to grapple with it” (Drama 39). A life crisis that best represents the danger in liminality is when Sula – standing on her own porch – observes her mother’s death. The community perceives the girl’s motionless observation to be natural, believing she “was probably stuck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma bum up” (78). Eva’s conclusions “that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78) proves to be accurate. On her own deathbed Sula reflects on the sameness of everything around her—“Nothing was ever different” (147), and she contrasts this with the experience of Hannah burning: “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147). Quite striking here is Sula’s double
explanation: “I didn’t mean anything.” The second serving as her justification: “I never meant anything.” “I didn’t” also suggests a singular, current reference, whereas “I never” spans Sula’s lifetime and adds to her need to be believed, and yet, in this moment, she is alone. However, because she is on her deathbed, her confession has a more spiritual meaning—one we know is truthful.

Sula also presents us with two extremes in her words here. The first statement is filled with purpose and also feeling. This demonstrates one extreme. The act of “watching [Hannah] burn” balances the two extremes, and the other extreme is not only the feeling of being “thrilled” by the burning body but the desire for it to continue and wishing that joy could go on forever. Naturally, it is horrific, even inhumane, to just watch something so shocking as a body burn, and yet we are left wondering what the relationship is between not feeling anything and this type of joy. The Oxford English Dictionary offers three variations of the definition for “thrilled”: “pierced, penetrated”; “affected by a thrill of emotion”; and, “caused to vibrate.” Sula feels something so intense and emotional by the terrible scene unfolding that it makes her more human in her reaction than not to feel anything at all. Conversely, the fascinating parts of Sula’s declaration, though, rest in the juxtaposition of inaction and action. Sula “stood there,” while “watching.” Because of the close relationship between the two verbs syntactically, the inaction appears to be more than that – paralysis perhaps. On the other hand, Hannah, while burning, is described as “jerking” and “dancing,” both of which are quite specific and vivid movements. While “jerking” is an awkward, seemingly involuntary motion, “dancing” is purposeful and voluntary. Sula, however, sees them as visually similar. The repetition of the phrase, “to keep on,” proceeds each movement and emphasizes Sula’s
desire for such action. But one might wonder what dance a person is doing if it is compared to "jerking"? The dictionary thrusts this sentence into a different light for us. One variation of "jerking" is "to cure [meat] by cutting it into long thin slices and drying it in the sun." *OED's* early references indicate a butchering of flesh in the Spanish islands' heat. The history of Latin dancing, especially that of the rumba, leans towards the dance's original movements emerging from farm work and heavy fieldwork. Therefore, a connection can be made with curing meat in the sun—we will replace meat with human flesh for this passage—and fieldwork or slave work. Hannah is of course dying. Does Sula see a representation of slavery unfolding, a forgotten history of the slave woman finally dying through her work? Is the moment to be savored as a historical one? This would explain Sula's need to confess her reasons for watching. The declaration is Sula's redemption—her emancipation from the depths of her memory to a peaceful place on liminality's surface.

Turner writes, "When the interests and attitudes of ...individuals [stand] in obvious opposition...Not every social drama reach[es] a clear resolution" (*Drama* 33). Crises, and, subsequently, social drama, will prolong the liminal passage. In *Drama, Fields and Metaphors*, Turner examines cultural pilgrimages that are sometimes part of the rites of passage. For an individual to aggregate, he or she could be expected to complete a spiritual journey in which he withdraws from the group to travel to a sacred place. Quite aptly, Turner himself describes heroes of classic novels pursuing a journey to ultimately save others, maybe even society itself. Definitely applicable to our protagonists, a "heroine goes on a long journey to find out who her or she really is outside 'structure'" (*Drama* 182). Janie's community frowns upon Tea Cake's interest in
her, and she must “smuggle Tea Cake out by the back gate and that made it seem like some great secret she was keeping from the town” (102). In order for her to experiment with her newly founded love for the younger man, she needs to escape from her prison. In a similar way, when Nel marries Jude, there is no room for Sula. In a place where the deweys will never grow to men, Sula will likely never expand her curiosity into something more meaningful that mere observation and imagination. The crisis “cannot be ignored or wished away” (Turner, Drama 39), but it can be temporarily forgotten by the removal of a liminal individual. Turner establishes that “liminality may imply solitude rather than society, the voluntary... withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix” (52). It is reasonable, then, to apply the journeys of Janie and Sula to a pilgrimage metaphor, as both women physically retreat from their own social structures when they embark on a quest for self. The pilgrimages for Sula and Janie are different from one another’s in nature, although, for both, the impetus is to escape the community’s imprisonment.

As with any pilgrim, evident are “hopes for miracles and transformations, either of soul or body” (Drama 197) with such a journey. We know little of what Sula experiences in the ten years she is gone from the Bottom. She attends college in Nashville, but there are no major transformations of soul or body, although Sula is able to make her own decisions and does indeed learn some valuable lessons: “She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman” (121). Let me briefly return once more to Sula’s last thoughts of her childhood memory of watching her mother burn – of how thrilled the young girl was to observe Hannah jerk and dance as flames engulfed her.
Throughout history, the burning of a body has been linked to what Christians will endure if sent to hell. Some images that come to mind are of female heretics who were burned at the stake. We cannot forget the figurative meaning for “burn”: “of the passions, as love, wrath, etc.” as well as “of a battle: To be fierce, furious; to glow, rage.” Any one of these can be applied to how Hannah appeared. We have established how much emotion is evident for Sula watching this. If “burn” is figurative, then Sula mirrors the passion of what she sees in front of her, and when she later tells Nel that she “lived” in this world, we are led to believe such experiences, interesting ones, were part of this. In addition, she has never seen such movement or passion from Hannah, and we can assume Sula was finally getting what she always needed from her mother and what she desired from life itself.

In a comparable fashion, Janie learns the hard way too. She heads to Jacksonville “and to a whole lot of things she wanted to see and know” (116)—a journey “to the horizons in search of people” (89), after having “been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after things” (89). But her journey fails in more ways than one. Her naïveté in believing Tea Cake will provide what her previous two husbands did not, the collapse of the spontaneous communitas in the Everglades, and, seemingly the most important in this argument, Tea Cake’s subjugation of Janie, result in a transformation, but not necessarily the experience Janie set out to discover. Many critics argue that Janie genuinely finds love and happiness in her final marriage. Matza claims Tea Cake is a “man who loves her as an equal” (45), and the novel “follows Janie’s journey from restriction to fulfillment” (45). Her remarks, however, have no basis. Janie tells Pheoby how “she had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her”
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(120). The “it” she refers to is likely a genuine human connection, one she temporarily finds with Tea Cake, but if Sula’s words are true, one that “could never be” (121). In Janie’s union, she discovers a different form of enslavement instead of an extension of a freedom she had found following Jody’s death. Initially, with her utter devotion, she feels an equal to Tea Cake, speaking her mind and playing checkers with her husband. Carla Kaplan offers a more believable alternative: “Within the positive and sometimes even idyllic depictions of Janie and Tea Cake’s love affair there is also something suffocating, almost sinister” (153). Janie becomes desperate to hold on to her dream and her marriage, and Hurston uses “passive” to describe Janie’s happiness. Janie doesn’t actually experience a true love story but imagines one, and she endeavors to make it real.

Victor Turner informs: “In this gap [a liminal space] between ordered worlds almost anything may happen” (Turner, Drama 13), and Tea Cake cannot live up to Janie’s ideal. Once away from Eatonville, the apparent disparity between the couple’s social status creates a new conflict, one that breeds insecurities for both parties. Janie is wealthy and independent once Jody dies, and yet, ironically, she becomes confined to her lodgings waiting for Tea Cake to return with money he stole from her. Janie, however, is more concerned about being abandoned by her husband than she is about him gambling with her money. Later, on the muck, a place that consists of peoples who come and go with each passing season, their insecurities intensify. Here, where workers feel a sense of freedom picking beans and cutting cane in their Spontaneous communitas, the “[g]round so rich that everything went wild” (129), includes its people, too. Janie’s jealousy causes her to run into the cane fields where she finds Tea Cake “shame-faced” (137) with another woman. She is frantic with the idea that he will desert her. For Tea Cake, it is
the whiteness of Janie’s skin that threatens Tea Cake’s manhood. Mrs. Turner is
convinced “De black [men] is holdin’ [them] back” (141), and Janie’s skin color can
prove to be a liberating asset to her if she leaves Tea Cake and marries her son.

Mrs. Turner’s goal to “lighten up de race” (140) results in Janie receiving a
beating and echoes Turner’s claims about taking control: “Communitas cannot
manipulate resources or exercise control without changing its own nature and ceasing to
be communitas” (Turner, *Ritual* 185), which is exactly what occurs. Too much like a
master exercising his rites with his slave, and not different enough from Jody’s control of
her, Tea Cake whips his wife: “Being able to whip her assured him in possession...to
show he was boss” (147). In other words, Black communities attempting to provide their
own type of structure or modify an existing one will encounter its own specific crisis. A
community, like the muck and the Bottom, “is a phase, a moment, not a permanent
condition” (140). Consequently, both communities collapse. In an act of God, a
hurricane comes and sweeps all that is in its path. In moments symbolic of holding on to
a dream – that what is not real but still the truth – Tea Cake and Janie remain and witness
the storm’s destruction: “They had to fight to keep from being pushed the wrong way and
to hold together” (161). Mrs. Turner voice reverberates in the storm’s aftermath. It is
because of the storm that Tea Cake – a dark black man – dies, although Alice Walker
determines that Tea Cake whipping his wife “is the reason Hurston permits Janie to kill
TeaCake in the end” (305). Having contracted rabies in his heroic act to save his wife,
Tea Cake “had to die for loving her” (178). Janie, ironically tells the doctor, “Ah loves
him fit tuh kill” (177), and she does shoot him to save herself.
During Janie’s trial, her life crisis causes her to face “two hostile audiences” (Kaplan 149): the Black community and the white community. We witness Janie liberate herself through her testimony but also establish permanency in her liminal space. Hurston’s opening lines are the most profound in determining what Janie finds out on her journey: “women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly” (1). Janie’s dream of Tea Cake differs greatly from the man he turns out to be. She recalls how “Tea Cake wouldn’t harm a fly” (126), but we know this not to be true. Her perception, her storytelling, and her love are, according to Hurston, the truth—the dream. Her pilgrimage brings her home, where through social processes “an individual undergoing passage may learn the total pattern of social relations involved in his transition and how it changes” (Turner, Drama 240). We, as readers, are left wondering if we should judge Janie’s final marriage like the community does when gathering on their porches. Both women bring back the truth and confess their findings to their closest friends. But they do not share for the sake of their communities. They speak of their sacred findings, their truths, for their own peace of minds and to solidify their sense of belonging in liminality and deny their rites of passage.

In Sula’s and Janie’s quest for experience, their gender and the choices they knowingly make, keeps them liminal and threatens the community, especially upon their return. Turner explains, “structure emphasizes, and even exaggerates, the biological differences between the sexes, in matters of dress, decoration, and behavior, [and] communitas tends to diminish these differences” (Drama 247). The conflict develops when outlaw women flaunt their sexuality. Liminal individuals who move successfully
through the passage “submit[s] to an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community. This community is the repository of the whole gamut of the culture’s values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships” (Turner, *Ritual* 103). Moreover, liminal entities often have no possessions, offer no signs of rank or role, and are usually passive and humble as they transition (95); however, for this study, as with my discussion on Sethe and Dessa, the women boldly declare their resistance, and their gender is to blame. The community wrestles with Janie’s actions: marrying several times. It is deemed unacceptable for her to marry Tea Cake and leave. When Janie returns from the Everglades, wearing her overalls – a clear statement of how she differs from the once Mrs. Starks – the town judges her: “She de one been doin’ wrong” (3). Janie, in turn, perceives this as “mass cruelty” (2).

When Sula returns from her excursion outside of the community, like Janie, she bypasses those who observe her from their porches. They note how she is physically out of place, “dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see” (90). Diane Matza remarks how the two women are similar in their obvious disregard of community’s rules, and she describes them as being “on the edge of possibility; however, Sula is more likely to slip off that edge than to realize any dream” (51). To highlight this difference, Sula is “[a]ccompanied by a plague of robins [that are] flying and dying all around” (89)—a phenomenon Eva directly associates with Sula’s return. Sula’s outsiderhood is further accentuated by the community’s concerns:

Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it....The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. (89-90)
There is no mistaking Sula is the “evil” the community anticipates as they gather on their porches to witness her arrival. And even though “Sula is not a slave...she is hardly free to walk through her own neighborhood” (Li 5). In a turn of events, when Sula is confronted by Eva’s harsh words, Sula makes the plans to have Eva removed and placed in a white people’s nursing home so she can feel safe and free with her feelings.

When Turner uses his in-depth examination of neophytes to parallel other cultural passages, including religious rites, we can use his application to judge how the community symbolically “excommunicates” Janie and Sula. In her account of discovering Zora Neale Hurston, Sherley Anne Williams explains how prior to Hurston, authors had depicted black women in two stereotypical images: “the ham-fisted matriarch [and] the amoral, instinctual slut” (20). We come to understand these figures on deeper level in Morrison’s texts. However, we see the another type of woman in Their Eyes, one that Williams claims fits between the other two: “the tragic mulatto: too refined and sensitive to live under the repressive conditions endured by ordinary blacks and too colored to enter the white world” (20). Because of this, Janie is indeed marginal. While neither community understands the departure of their own, they definitely cannot comprehend their unannounced return. They expect explanations and imagine the unimaginable when they are not told. Sula’s alleged betrayal, the ultimate sin of having sex with white men, fills the community “with choking disgust” (113). By this time, she has separated herself from Nel by having sex with Jude, in part because she had “no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available” (119). However, it is not Nel, but “the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time” (113). The rumor – Sula having sex with white men –
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stresses the symbolic act of being beneath white men, and the information forces them to be reminded of their own skin color: "proof that it had happened in their own families" (113). The community has repressed these memories, and Sula is a painful reminder. Both women are labeled and disowned by their communities.

Had Janie and Sula not returned to their neighborhoods, this argument would conceivably fail. Whatever existed beyond the boundaries does not fulfill their needs, but they do come back informed, even transformed too. But on their return, it is confirmed that neither women can never aggregate with those on the porches. They know too much about living, struggling, and feeling. Once she has finished relaying her story to Pheoby, Janie informs: "Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things eveybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh do fuh themselves" (192). Hazel V. Carby writes that Hurston’s novel “ends with the possibility that that history could be brought into the community and suggests that Pheoby/the text is the means for accomplishing the transformation necessary to reconcile difference” (130), Turner’s fourth stage of social drama. Carby’s claim is arguable. Kaplan, who aligns with my own position, believes “Janie’s community doesn’t change and that Janie (and perhaps Hurston) believes that hearing her story won’t help” (157). Pheoby will return to the others with Janie’s full story, essentially making Janie a prophet, and Turner determines: “Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edgemen,’ who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with…imagination” (Turner, Ritual 128). Sula does not tell her story per se, but she does relay an important message to Nel: “I know what every colored woman in this country is
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doing....Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m
going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world” (143). Their
experiences and their imaginations are their word.

The commonality of Sula and Janie – “the risks [they take] of individualism in a
determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static community”
(Morrison, *Sula* xiii) – cause them to be physically alone at the end of the respective
novels, although because of their imaginations, their liminality is beautiful. Our last
images of Sula and Janie are the same. Both women retreat to the privacy and comfort of
their bedrooms—up the stairs, behind closed doors, free to imagine and be alone with
their thoughts. In the complex structure of the Peace home, a liminal house, where, we
are told, over the course of five years, Eva added “rooms, doors, and stoops” (31), we
come to Sula’s resting place. The several stairways, the most liminal of places, serve as a
threshold, although they differ greatly from porches. They symbolically and ritualistically
present the many steps taken by the women, and as they mount them one last time (for
Sula there are four flights of steps), there is a sense of spirituality in their ascent: “Janie
mounted the stairs with her lamp. The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff
washing her face in fire. Her shadow behind fell black and headlong down the stairs”
(192). The contrast of light and dark places casts Janie in a saintly position, as she breaks
from her shadow and the reach of her community. Turner states that liminality “may
imply alienation from rather than more authentic participation in social existence”
(Turner, *Drama* 52), and Sula and Janie are alone, secluded, and at peace with themselves
once they are up the stairs. Their pilgrimages are over, and they purposefully claim their
positions in liminality.
Sula is free to “explor[e] her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full
reign...As willing to feel pain as to give pain, and to feel pleasure as to give pleasure,
hers was an experimental life” (118). Turner tells us that imagination is a liminal
operation (*Drama* 51), and that the passenger is often free
to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men, the
difficulties that beset their own society, their personal problems, and the
ways in which their own wisest predecessors have sought to order,
explain, explain away, cloak or mask...mysteries and difficulties. (Turner,
*Drama* 242)

It seems somewhat fitting that the women conclude their journeys in such thought. Like
Janie’s desire to struggle in life, Sula finally realizes “it was sadness that she yearned for”
(122)—an intense feeling, an experience to claim as one’s own. She reflects to Nel: “Girl,
I got my mind. And what goes on in it....[M]y lonely is mine. Now your lonely is
somebody else’s” (143). There is a sense of tremendous pain when Sethe puts her story
down and Dessa writes her words for Mony. Janie, on the other hand, is reunited with
Tea Cake’s spirit and completely at peace with her thoughts: “Of course [Tea Cake]
wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking.
The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall” (193). She is
able to have her ideal man in private thoughts, and Sula dies with the knowledge that she
has truly lived and will be remembered and loved in time.

In 1941, the Bottom’s neighborhood is also swept away in a flood. This flood,
like the one on the muck, wipes out the labor and its means for the progression of all
people. *Sula’s* flood emerges because of the unfinished tunnel—a tunnel (replacing the
plans of a bridge in 1927) that was once intended to provide “trade from cross-river
towns” (81). Morrison’s remarkable and poignant passages describe how Sula’s death
marked a restlessness for the inhabitants, and on National Suicide Day, in a chaotic and spasmodic parade, people dance in celebration, but then, when confronted with their oppression, thunder on to their deaths. When reaching “The mouth of the excavation” (161), a hush commences before a revolution begins. In a drug-like state, the community with their “hooded eyes” (161), brutally reacts to “the promise: leaf-dead” (161):

[L]ed by the tough, the enraged and the young they picked up the lengths of the timber and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not mixed or even been allowed to haul; tore the wire mesh, tipped over wheelbarrows and rolled forepoles down the bank....(161)

Morrison’s verbs – “smashed,” “split,” “tipped,” and “rolled” – establish an intense labor desired by black men of the neighborhood, but the contrasting language determines the rage at being denied a chance to prosper, perhaps even to claim who they really were like Sula did. And, for the most part, Morrison’s repetition of “they,” in this scene, binds all people together in a mass suicide. Turner finds that “A man is nothing but structured animal...Thus the breakdown of a social system can only result in...the fragmentation of society into a mass of anxious and disoriented individuals, prone...to pathologically high rates of suicide” (Turner, Drama 250). The community’s repressed people, “Like antelopes...leaped over the little gate – a wire barricade that was never intended to bar anything but dogs, rabbits and stray children” (161), and mimicking an escape, they break through.

Janie’s town remains standing, and will, in all likelihood, exist for some time to come. When Jody purchased land and created the position of mayor, he provided the basic structure to Eatonville. He recognized the importance of established roles and a hierarchy within a neighborhood of Black people, confirming Turner’s words: “structure
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is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law and custom” (Ritual 113). Turner would likely agree that Morrison, on the other hand, demonstrates a breakdown of communitas—a neighborhood that is separate from the influences of White society. The incomplete tunnel seems an obvious metaphor for the containment of a Black community, while the tunnel’s collapse, resulting in the Bottom’s people being swallowed up, reveals the continuous oppression for Black people—people who eventually showed an interest in expansion. The abandoned ideas – a road to a bridge and then, much later, a tunnel – linking the Bottom to a White society beyond the river, presents hopelessness in a connection between the two. Turner remarks on the eventual ruin, writing: “[T]he spontaneity and immediacy of communitas...can seldom be maintained for very long. Communitas itself soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae” (Turner, Ritual 132). It is plausible then that if the community refrains from conversion or is denied the opportunity to conform, it must indeed collapse. Morrison’s community “killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (161) by whites. But, by doing so, they take their own lives. However, in this passage from life to death, like Sula, there is something ceremonial in the dance. Turner claims, “Spontaneous communitas has something ‘magical’ about it” (Turner, Ritual 139), and the neighborhood’s demise in a “ruckus,” “a curious disorder” (160) is viewed by the few people remaining to have “the Spirit’s touch [that] made them dance” (160). The threshold is crossed: “they went too deep, too far...” (162), and we can interpret this to be a mass suicide.
Morrison addresses her opening line of *Sula*—“In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion city Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (3)—by explaining that the word “once” suggests a “history and a longing” (*Unspeakable Things Unspoken* 152), but, she confirms, “having something torn out by its roots—it will not, cannot grow again” (152), but there are the ones who survived, the individuals who chose a different path, the liminals who wrestled with the balance of the two extremes. At *Beloved*’s conclusion, Sethe had to lay her story down, temper her memory to exist in her liminal space without being dangerous. Similarly, the Bottom’s people who “under[stand] whole families bending their backs in a field while singing from one throat” (160) do not partake in the parade, and there is a reason. While the Bottom dies, and is never restored, we are reminded that fifteen to twenty people do survive. They are the individuals who own their stories, reclaim their pasts, and will survive on the surface of the liminal passage by recognizing the structure of the society but not surrendering to its command—our Sethes, Dessas, Janies, and Sulas.

What remains in the final paragraphs of Morrison’s and Hurston’s stories is memory and history. Sula’s name is whispered through the trees, returning to Nel she can immerse herself in “thoughts about the past” (174), and Janie is reunited with Tea Cake when she retires to her “Thinking” (192). And so Sula and Janie are indeed symbols, representative of a blend—the past and the future. Through their search for a freedom—a need to experience and connect on intimate levels—we are able to see how two women reject conformity. Conformity is to surrender, a type of freedom I posed as an option for Sethe and Dessa too, where one can be freed from memory, history, and,
subsequently, from pain, but existence then is without identity, purpose, feeling. Li asks, “Is there freedom in the choice to remain in bondage?” (3), and “bondage” for my argument is within the meshes of a fishnet Janie drapes around her shoulders (193), the liminal passage where rites are traded for the opportunities to experience. This is the somewhat more difficult place to exist and is chosen by Sula and Janie. But we are reminded that “it is the marginal or ‘inferior’ person or the ‘outsider’ who often comes to symbolize what David Hume has called ‘the sentiment for humanity’” (Turner, Ritual 111). In their separation from restrictive communities, through their journeys filled with painful discoveries, and in their unwelcomed return, which leaves them alone and bound to their liminality, Sula and Janie have found freedom, reverberating Lorde’s words: “I feel, therefore I can be free.”
Works Cited


