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RACE, GENDER, AND THE SUPERNATURAL
INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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DEDICATION

In Loving Memory of Toni Morrison

May your Spark shine forever,
and your powerful words of wisdom continue to inspire
the future generations.

“We die. That may be the meaning of
life. But we do language. That may be
the measure of our lives.”

-Toni Morrison

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RESUMEN

Toni Morrison es un ícono y una referencia obligatoria en la literatura Estadounidense. La vasta producción literaria de la autora incluye novelas, crítica literaria, trabajo editorial, y libros para niños y niñas. Además, representa una de las más prolíficas y reconocidas escritoras negras en los Estados Unidos. Ella recibió diversos premios literarios, incluyendo el Premio Nobel. Este proyecto de investigación se enfoca en el análisis de su novela *Paradise*, la cual explora una amplia variedad de temas socio-culturales que incluyen elementos de raza, género, clase, y también aspectos literarios como el realismo mágico. El trabajo de Morrison refleja su serio compromiso con su visión política. Por lo tanto, aspectos como raza y género tienen un significado especial en sus novelas.

Debido a la complejidad del trabajo de Morrison, estos elementos no se deben abordar como aspectos individuales y aislados, sino más bien como aspectos interseccionales que interactúan en el contexto de la novela. Diversos abordajes literarios como feminismo radical, pensamiento negro feminista, estudios de la cultura, y realismo mágico, entre otros, ayudan a develar la transcendencia magnánima de esta novela. Morrison establece claramente tres locales respectivamente, el *Out There*, *Ruby*, y *The Convent*, los cuales sirven de ambiente para que se desarrollen las diferentes formas de opresión interseccional. En este sentido, este proyecto de investigación busca descifrar la complejidad y conexiones de raza, género, y lo sobrenatural en la novela y como estos elementos operan en los sitios mencionados anteriormente.

La relevancia de un trabajo literario complejo y de múltiples facetas como lo es *Paradise* no es sencillo de abarcar. Sin embargo, a través de un análisis detallado de sus aspectos más relevantes, es posible establecer cómo la interseccionalidad de los elementos principales se suma para crear un trabajo literario que cumple un propósito en la comunidad. En primer lugar, la novela desafía el *status quo* cuestionando suposiciones comunes sobre raza, género, y pensamiento binario, entre muchas otras. En segundo lugar, la novela provee un espacio para el empoderamiento femenino, expresión de la experiencia femenina, y reconstrucción de la identidad femenina. En tercer lugar, la novela ofrece una nueva visión y una nueva oportunidad de re-crear el orden establecido. Por lo tanto, *Paradise* epitomiza el trabajo monumental de una comunidad para construir un refugio seguro donde las personas puedan coexistir en amor, paz, y armonía.

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is an icon and obligatory reference in American literature. The author's vast literary production includes novels, literary criticism, editorial works, and children's books. Besides, she represents one of the most prolific and renowned black female writers in the United States. She has been the recipient of multiple literary awards and prizes, including the Nobel Prize. This research project focuses on the analysis of her novel *Paradise*, which explores a wide variety of socio-cultural issues involving race, gender, and class, as well as literary features like Magic Realism. Morrison's work reflects her serious compromise with her political views. Thus, aspects of race and gender acquire a special significance in her novels.

Due to the complexity of Morrison's work, one should not approach these elements, as single, isolated issues, but rather as intersecting aspects that interact within the context of the novel. Different literary approaches like radical feminism, black feminist thought, cultural studies, magic realism, among others help to unveil the magnanimous transcendence of this novel. Morrison clearly establishes three locales in the novel, namely the Out There, Ruby, and the Convent, which serve as the milieu where the intersecting oppressions operate. Thus, this research project aims to decipher the intricacies and connections of race, gender, and the supernatural in the novel and how they operate in the three sites before mentioned.

The relevance of a complex, multi-layered literary work like *Paradise* is not easy to grasp. However, through a detailed examination of its most relevant aspects, one establishes how the intersection of the main issues help to create a literary work that serves a purpose in the community. First, the novel challenges the *status quo* by questioning common assumptions about race, gender, and binary thinking, among many others. Second, it provides a space for female empowerment, voicing of female experience, and reconstruction of female identity. Third, it offers a new vision and a fresh opportunity to re-create the established order. *Paradise* epitomizes the monumental task of a community to construct a safe haven where people can coexist in love, peace, and harmony.



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INTRODUCTION

Prefatory Comments

Discussions of race and gender are crucial to promote equality and justice in human societies. These topics have been addressed in many different ways. Therefore, there is a notion that it is neither necessary nor important to address race or gender anymore. However, conflicts based on race and gender differences occur on a daily basis. This is a sign that these issues require further exploration. The ruling classes manipulate the cultural constructions of race and gender, and the worldview that they endorse prevails as natural, mandatory, and to a certain extent, necessary. I think of questioning these assumptions as obligatory. Analyzing new approaches to aspects related to race and gender discrimination functions as a way of breaking the hegemonic tradition and creating new spaces for discussion. I also consider it urgent to separate critically from the traditional interpretation of these issues. In this sense, I must give a voice to the victims of discrimination, the marginalized groups. The official voice suggests that aspects of race and gender are extinct issues. Nonetheless, subordinated groups demand inclusion in the discussion and the opportunity to present their points of view. Perhaps, from the perspective of the ruling class, there is no need to continue with the discussion, but from the perspective of marginalized groups, the opposite is true.

The questions seem to be, how do we achieve balance? How do we construct a society based on integrity, respect and equality? Is it viable to alienate and discriminate others in order to establish and preserve a community? Is it better to adhere to strict rules and codes to create an isolated space free from outsiders and menacing influences? Or is it better to recur to a more spiritual space to create a society in which all individuals reach

plenitude in a nurturing and supportive community? This constant preoccupation with the construction of an earthly paradise, as the title of Toni Morrison's novel suggests, comes from the manipulation of issues and of power and control. The creation of this "heavenly place"¹ implicates, more often than not, the use and abuse of others.

In her novel *Paradise*, Toni Morrison effectively presents the intricacies of race and gender issues. Without polarizing the topics, she opens up a spectrum of possibilities for race and gender interpretations. The spirit of the novel demonstrates Morrison's determination to give a voice to the abused and marginalized, just as the narrative force of the novel echoes Morrison's conviction that language, as a powerful tool, serves to empower those who face exclusion routinely. Through the exploration of race and gender issues, the author questions the established order, promotes critical and analytical thinking regarding conceptions of race and gender, and proposes alternative options for a more inclusive society. Besides, Morrison includes aspects of the supernatural in *Paradise*, which I interpret as a political standpoint. The supernatural as a literary resource is a sign of black literary tradition that questions and challenges the hegemonic literary cannon. Thus, by including aspects of the supernatural, Morrison provides an alternative approach to her work as she voices the experiences of people of color from a different perspective.

Although race and gender may strike some readers and critics as overly explored issues, Morrison's views provide new and different interpretations, which determine the importance, prevalence and relevance of these aspects. Through the confrontation of traditional thinking, Morrison elicits discussion from the beginning, and argumentation is a constant characteristic throughout the novel. The fact that Morrison locates her story in an all-

¹ I employ two markers to call the attention of the reader throughout this research project: quotation marks and italics. When a word or phrase appears within quotation marks is for tone purposes –usually indicating irony, whereas when the word or phrase appears in italics is for emphasis purposes.

black town, for example, dismantles traditional myths and misconceptions about racism and race-related misinterpretations. She minimizes the traditional black and white oppositions and offers a broader spectrum of how racialized violence operates and affects even the very roots of marginalized racial groups themselves. At the same time, she criticizes the appropriation of paradigms of oppression on the part of the alienated groups. With the representation of these perfect, beautiful, blue-black characters, the author seeks to create awareness about the dangers and consequences of racial self-righteousness in black people. A society that excludes and alienates is condemned to self-destruction, whatever its race. Morrison also undermines patriarchal rule by denouncing and exposing its brutality. She establishes three locales where race and gender converge. First, the outside world, which implies a permanent threat, full of vices and decadence. Second, the self-contained community of Ruby, which apparently is an ideal place but at the end simply reenacts the flaws and vices of other social groups. Third, as an opposition, the Convent emerges as healthy and nurturing community. The unruly women who live in the Convent constantly break, question, and disregard patriarchal rule. These empowered women are capable of creating a true paradise. They live in a place where individuals can heal and grow relying on mutual understanding and spiritual connections rather than succumbing to oppression and subjugation.

Justification

Paradise unveils the intricacies of the stories of five women of different socio-cultural backgrounds who coincide at some point at the Convent. These outcast women are looking for a place of solace and refuge since the patriarchal society has in one way or another victimized them. Eventually they find a safe haven in the embezzler's former mansion, now in a state of evident decay. The women establish a self-sufficient, autonomous community that challenges the patriarchal rule of the other two locales of the novel: Ruby and the Out There. The novel also depicts the friction between the town of Ruby and the women of the Convent. Since Ruby is the nearest community to the Convent, the patriarchs of this elitist, secluded, all black community see this group of fugitive, marginalized women as a direct threat to their town, and all that it stands for. In a state of generalized paranoia, the men of Ruby assault the Convent at gunpoint, killing the helpless women, and unleashing the tragic finale of the novel.

The general purpose of this work is to analyze how the interaction of aspects of race,² gender and elements of the supernatural influence the construction of paradise³ as a concept.

² Although ethnicity is the politically correct term, the present study seeks to question the traditional white supremacist ideology in which race functions as a valid element of discrimination. For this reason the term race appears as a constant element in this discussion. As a matter of fact, several authors have discussed the meaning and implication of race as a concept. The present study endorses the notion that Toni Morrison borrows from Michael Rustin, which describes race as "both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization" (*Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power* ix). Racism surges as the aftermath of this categorization of race. In this respect, Audre Lorde claims that racism "[is] the belief of the superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied" (*Sister Outsider* 124). *Paradise* fights to undermine the traditional perception of both race and racism by presenting the experience of African Americans. bell hooks elaborates on the way race and racism operate: "in a racially imperialist nation such as ours, it is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative" (*Ain't I a Woman* 138). Some authors prefer to capitalize the word race as to accentuate its importance. In the present study when the word appears in capital letters is a choice of the author.

³The term paradise evokes ideas of well being, plenitude, and spiritual balance. However, in the novel, the term is used at two different levels of meaning. At one level, it retains the original connotations. The traditional definition of paradise reflects the aspiration of human beings to achieve a higher state of existence. When the original meaning applies, the term will not be within quotation marks. But at a second level, Morrison uses the term in an ironic manner, which contradicts the essence of the concept itself. Consequently, in this discussion, "paradise", within quotation marks, refers to the ambivalent and restrictive use of the term as a cultural

The novel establishes three different locales, namely, the outside world, Ruby, and the Convent, where the concept of paradise is negotiated. Throughout the nine chapters of the novel, each one named after one female character, the author explores the possibility of creating an ideal site where equality, respect, and self-fulfillment are possible. However, in the novel, paradise is never fully achieved.⁴ I intend to determine how the intersecting oppressions of race and gender affect and determine this concept of paradise. Marked by constant struggle, the novel questions the traditional and exclusive conception of “paradise” and provides alternative options like the supernatural in order to create a place where individuals are able to achieve spiritual balance.

This research project adds significantly to the existing literary criticism of the novel because it provides new insight not only on the issue of race itself, but also on the interactions of gender and the supernatural as acting elements of the literary work. Moreover, the state-of-the-art analysis I carry out in the project seeks to reveal the relation of intersecting oppressions throughout the novel.

construction, which relates to patriarchal oppression. The structures of power and domination arbitrarily decide who participates in their creation, who is in control, and who belongs and who does not belong in the patriarchal “paradise”. Besides, throughout the novel, the author reveals that race and gender, which alienate individuals, have an active role in defining the ideal of patriarchal “paradise” as well.

⁴ Teresa Delgado explains the multi layered use of the term “paradise” in the novel. She argues that “paradise does not exist for Morrison’s ‘patriarchs’. . . and neither does it exist for us on this earth –at least not in the way that paradise has been used as a literary device to invoke a pure, uncorrupted original state of being” (135). Delgado affirms that Morrison’s challenge in the novel is to create a new vision of the concept of paradise: “Morrison’s skill as a writer offers us a glimpse into what I believe is a new way of envisioning ‘paradise’ that rejects its Dantian or Miltonian definition or even her own ‘patriarchal’ one” (135).

Hypothesis

Although in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* the patriarchal ruling system impose race and gender structures that promote the marginalization and subjugation of women, the untamed⁵ female characters of the novel defy male authority, gain empowerment and eventually are able to establish a nurturing community, a true paradise where they can satisfy their spiritual needs and find balance and harmony.

General Objective

To analyze, from a race-oriented feminist point of view how wild women⁶ are able to challenge racialized and gendered impositions, escaping patriarchal rule and establishing a feminine⁷ space where equality and selfhood function as pillars to support the creation of an earthly paradise.

⁵ In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly explains the significance of the verb "to tame" as applied to the situation of women in patriarchal societies. To tame means "brought under control: 'HARNESSED.' It means made docile and submissive: 'MEEK, SUBDUED.' It means 'CULTIVATED.' It means lacking in spirit, zest, or interest: DULL, MILD, INSIPID" (344). She goes on to clarify that "in some ways, the verb to *tame* more adequately expresses the fate of females spooked and possessed in the State of Feminitude. In the tamed state, women are domesticated, dedicated to the cult of male divinity" (344). As for the unruly women found in *Paradise*, the opposite is true since they are on a journey of self-discovery and self-affirmation.

⁶ According to Mary Daly, in a feminist context, the term wild means "not subjected to restrain or regulation. 'UNCOTROLLED, INORDINATED, UNGOVERNED'" (343). In this sense wild functions as the exact opposite of tamed.

⁷ It is necessary to define feminine spaces to make the difference with patriarchal rule. Mary Daly explains that patriarchy is in essence a state of "necrophilia" while feminine rule is "life giving, nurturing, and fecund" (343).

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze how race, gender, and the supernatural shape the conception of the Outside World which, in turn, functions not only as a lingering and constant threat but also as a controversial duality that serves both as a reminder of past abuse and as a pattern for the recreation of abuse.
2. To determine how race, gender, and the supernatural influence power struggles in Ruby, which, as a consequence of racialized and gendered impositions, becomes a failed version of paradise.
3. To discover how the Convent functions as the feminine site where the unruly female characters overlook and challenge the patriarchal impositions of race and gender and how this community, based on spiritual connections, recreates the concept of Paradise.

Methodology

The selection of a manageable corpus has become the first element of my analysis of the novel. Toni Morrison was a prolific writer, and her literary production spanned from the novel, to literary criticism, to children's literature. Thus, the selection of one novel allows the development of a complete and articulated analysis. Therefore, after intensively reading the whole series of novels and criticism that Morrison wrote, this researcher has chosen the novel *Paradise*, as main corpus and source text. This novel offers the opportunity to analyze and criticize several aspects from different points of view.

The novel has a wide range of subtexts that allows diverse literary approaches. In this sense, *Paradise* has a kaleidoscopic quality that concedes different interpretations depending on the way you look at it. In this case, the novel serves the main purpose of unveiling intersecting oppressions through the analysis of the elements of race, gender, and the supernatural. Moreover, the text allows the study of how these elements function within the novel, and most important of all, how they interact to produce the undeniable richness of this literary work. This research project applies theories regarding the interaction of intersecting oppressions and the supernatural. These theories enlighten the dynamics of the different study subjects present in the novel. Radical feminism, black feminist thought, cultural studies, magic realism, female separatism, among others, serve as a frame of reference to guide the dissection of the multiple layers that compose the novel.

In conclusion, this research project follows a qualitative methodological approach, which analyzes the source text or corpus in the lights of the theoretical premises of feminism, cultural studies, and race theory, major approaches to study literary works. For this purpose, Mary Daly, Angela Davis, and bell hook's ideas, among other critics and theorists, serve as

the theoretical framework to unveil the main aspects of the novel. This project does not intend an exhaustive analysis of *Paradise* because its multilayered nature offers many possibilities of approach and interpretation of other lines of thought. Thus, this research relies on the triangulation and cross-verification of above-mentioned elements: corpus, theory and inter or exotextual references.

I. Setting the Context: Toni Morrison⁸

In the context of race and gender studies, biographical aspects have an important impact in the interpretation and understanding of an author's production. More than in any other literary approach, cultural and gender studies emphasize how personal circumstances influence and determine the experience of the writer and how s/he depicts this reality in her/his work. Toni Morrison is no exception to the rule since her literary production portrays the experience of an African American woman living in the United States from many points of view. Chloe Ardelia Wofford, later known as Toni Morrison, was born in Lorain, Ohio, on February 18, 1931. Both her parents, Ramah Willis and George Wofford, came from southern families. Her maternal grandparents, from Greenville and Birmingham, Alabama, had moved to Lorain via Kentucky, where her grandfather worked as a coal miner. Her father came to Ohio to escape the racial violence of Georgia. Although she is the second of four children in a working-class family, Morrison was the only one to pursue a formal education. In 1958, she married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect and fellow faculty member at Howard University. They had two children, Harold and Slade. They divorced in 1964. After the divorce, Morrison moved to New York, where she worked as a textbook editor. She would eventually occupy a position at Random House as an editor, where her service to black writers was remarkable. She edited books by authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones, which helped black female authors gain recognition in mainstream American literature. Toni Morrison passed away on August 5, 2019. Her legacy is unmeasurable.

⁸ This biography is based on the work of several authors who have studied and analyzed the influence of Toni Morrison as a black woman writer in the U.S. (See respective biographical entries for Peach, Taylor-Guthrie, Peterson, and Tally).

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Toni Morrison was educated at America's distinguished Howard University in Washington. She received a B.A. in English in 1953. In 1955 she earned a Master of Arts degree in English from Cornell University. She wrote her thesis on the theme of suicide on the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. She worked as an English professor at Texas Southern University in Houston from 1955 to 1957. After that, she returned to Howard to teach English where, incidentally, she changed her name to Toni Morrison (Peach 3). From a black feminist perspective, the name change has a practical purpose. As Peach explains, "given her recurring concern in her work with the search for identity and with the significance of names for black people, this is probably one of the most interesting biographical details as far as the novels themselves are concerned" (6). The critic also explains how this name change affects her work: "it highlights the conviction that black people, at the level of the personal self, have the capacity to 'invent themselves' and, as we shall see, this is a significant trope in most of her novels" (6). In terms of patriarchal impositions, Morrison's formal education and writing career is exceptional for a black, divorced, mother of two, which emphasizes her commitment to the empowerment of women. Her novels represent a political statement to the dominant group by reclaiming spaces for the alienated and the subordinated.

LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS

Morrison's literary career began at Howard. She was part of an informal group of writers of fiction and poets who met to discuss their work. As Peach comments, here Morrison presented the incipient project that would eventually become one of her most acclaimed works: "She went to one meeting with a short story about a black girl who longed to have blue eyes. She later developed the story as her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which she wrote while raising two children and teaching at Howard. This was the beginning of

a prolific writing career” (6).⁹ Concerning literary achievements, Morrison’s career has been both acclaimed and criticized. As Peach declares, “there is a recurring interest in black people who have acquired social status through accommodating themselves to white society and by appropriating white values” (1). In this way, some critics suggest that Morrison has become part of the hegemonic group by adopting their standards. However, most critics agree that Morrison’s work has been able to trespass the limits of the hegemony and that she has become a confrontational voice inside the literary canon. Controversial and daring, her literary production has earned the recognition of both canonical and non-canonical groups. As a matter of fact, “few African American authors gain recognition in mainstream magazines and newspapers so Morrison being featured on the cover of *Newsweek* in 1981 was a major occurrence” (Taylor-Guthrie viii). Morrison’s outstanding literary achievements are undeniable. Obviously, her most impressive literary accomplishment is the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded, according to the organization, for “novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import [giving] life to and essential aspect of American reality.” This prize “makes her the first African American to be so honored” (Taylor-Guthrie vii). In accordance, different organizations have widely acclaimed her successful literary career.¹⁰ She won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction with *Beloved* and the

⁹ After *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison wrote other novels including *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), *God Help the Child* (2015). Morrison’s literary work also includes other productions, namely the piece of short fiction *Recitatif* (1983), the plays *Dreaming Emmet* (1986) and *Desdemona* (2011), and the libretto for the opera *Margaret Garner* (2005). Besides, in cooperation with Slade Morrison she wrote the children’s books *The Big Box* (1999), *The Book of Mean People* (2002), *Remember* (2004), and *Please, Louise* (2014).

¹⁰ A more complete list of awards and nominations includes the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977), the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award (1977), the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award (1987-88), the Helmerich Award (1988), the American Book Award for *Beloved* (1988), the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Race Relations for *Beloved* (1988), the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Beloved* (1988), the Frederick G. Melcher Book Award for *Beloved* (1988), the MLA Commonwealth Award in Literature (1989), the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), the Commander of the Arts and Letters in Paris (1993), the Condorcet Medal in Paris (1994), the Pearl Buck Award (1994), the Jefferson Lecture (1996), The National Book Foundation’s Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters (1996), the National Humanities Medal (2000). In 2002, Toni Morrison was included in the 100 Greatest African Americans list by Molefi Kete Asante.

1978 National Critics Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters for *Song of Solomon* (1977). She has achieved professorial status with the Schweitzer Chair in Humanities at the State University of New York, Albany, and later on, the Robert F. Goheen Chair of Princeton University (3). In 1981 she was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1990 she won the Chianti Ruffino Antico Fattore International Literary Prize. *Beloved* also won the Robert F. Kennedy Award, the Melcher Book Award and the Before Columbus Foundation Award. The Elizabeth Cady Stanton Award also recognized the contribution that this novel made to the history of black women (7). In addition, two years after the publication of *Jazz* Morrison won other international awards: The Rhegium Julii Prize for Literature, the Condorcet Medal, the Pearl Buck Award, and other prestigious honours, the Condorcet Chair, Paris, and the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters (Peach 10). The emblematic global recognition of Morrison's work highlights the importance of her contribution in drawing attention to black feminist thought and black feminist writing.

IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL VIEWS

In terms of ideology and political views, Toni Morrison is consistent in one aspect: she refuses categorization. The author does not want to be labeled as a specific "type" of writer. She resents being "pigeonholed". Taylor-Guthrie asserts that "she unapologetically declares herself to be a 'black woman writer' but beyond that chafes at categorization" (viii). This affirmation denotes the two major currents that influence Morrison's literary production: feminism and black cultural studies. The author herself has acknowledged that "the 'call' to

She also received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Oxford University in 2005. Also, she received the Coretta Scott King award in 2005. In 2009, Morrison was awarded the Norman Mailer Prize for Lifetime Achievement. In 2010 Morrison was made an officer of the French Legion of Honor. Most recent distinctions include the Honorary Doctor of Letters at Rutgers University Graduation Commencement (2011) and the Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Geneva (2011). Morrison was awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012.

write is not only a personal vocation; it also serves her community” (ix). In this sense, Morrison openly declares that there is not such a thing as naïve or, in other words, ideologically innocent writing. All writing has a purpose besides the aesthetic. Morrison’s ability to denounce the situation of black people in the U.S. constantly reminds the ruling class of the presence of subordinated groups. It not only serves the black community by giving them a voice, but it also opens the way for other minority groups to resist marginalization. Concerning feminist issues, her position is ambivalent. In this respect, Taylor-Guthrie considers that “it is noteworthy there is no articulation of a feminist perspective evident in her interviews . . . though she finds political philosophies . . . to be confining” (x). Declaring herself a feminist would be limiting, to some extent, and this goes against Morrison’s resistance to classification. However, her writing is evidently concerned with the cause of feminism. Morrison’s works denounce the subjugation of women –and especially of minority group women— in patriarchal societies in diverse ways. This aspect, which eventually becomes an identifying feature, appears in her early literary production. When discussing the impact of *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, Taylor - Guthrie declares that “Morrison became an integral part of a nascent group of black women writers who would alter the course of African American, American, and world literature” (vii). The critic considers that “Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Gayl Jones, and Morrison all directed their unwavering gazes on subject matters previously marginalized in literature –black women and their worlds” (vii). Clearly, as an author, Morrison is committed to feminist issues and her work is undeniably a milestone in the development of black feminist thought.¹¹

¹¹ Toni Morrison acts in two different contexts in this research project. First, as the author of the novel and second, as literary critic, since her non-fiction work represents a major contribution to black feminist thought, and an obligatory reference for the research and analysis of this investigation.

TONI MORRISON IN TRADITION

Since one particular trait of Toni Morrison as a writer is resisting categorization, placing her in literary tradition proves a challenging task. Critics who try to relate Morrison to a tradition are often disappointed. As columnist Paul Gray declares, “the debate about where Morrison ranks among the American Laureates will probably simmer for years” (2). Trying to locate her in a tradition may prove illusory. As Gray questions, “does she belong with Steinbeck and Pearl S. Buck; authors whose earnest social concerns and novels now strike most critics and readers as passé?” (2) The truth is that Morrison’s writing continues to create controversy. Taylor- Guthrie recognizes important influences in Morrison’s narrative: “The African American culture of her childhood, formal education in English and the Classics at Howard and Cornell Universities, and her experiences as an African American woman” (vii). From the aesthetic point of view, the influence of Faulkner in her writing is palpable. Hailed by critics as the finest American author of the last century, Faulkner captured Morrison’s attention. As a matter of fact, she wrote her thesis dissertation for Cornell based on comparisons between William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Most definitely, the way in which Morrison approaches certain themes in her writing and some traits in her style are reminiscent of these two authors: the use of language, aspects of imagery, and the theme of the small town consuming itself from the inside, among others, reveal Faulknerian inspiration. For instance, Gray considers that “for her lyricism, for her ability to form the mundane into magical Morrison look to be a lot closer to William Faulkner” (2). He also argues that “the Mississippian’s incantatory prose rhythms still crop up in her writing” (5). Thus, regarding form and style, Morrison’s work reveals the influence of her formal study of the classics as well as the influence of mainstream American and European literatures. What is more, Morrison uses those influences to create her own style, which is ideologically compromised with voicing the experience of black women in the United States.

Thus, the thematic orientation of Morrison's writing reveals her location in literary tradition. In this sense, the two main aspects that influence and direct Morrison's literary production are gender and race. As mentioned earlier, Morrison belongs to an exceptional group of female writers whose literature voices the experience of African American women and other minorities living in the U.S. Hence, achieving the status of a writer of the category of Toni Morrison is not an easy task. Besides, being able to penetrate the canonic circles and opening the possibility for other writers to do the same, as she has done, represents a formidable accomplishment. Thus, the importance of Morrison's work is twofold. Her writing not only enacts and denounces the situation of marginalized African American communities, it also allows the author to access the canon, reclaim a place in the "elite" group, and promote the representation of minorities. As Gray asserts, "Toni Morrison is the author who almost single-handedly gave African-American women their rightful place in American literature" (5). Also, the presence of race issues in Morrison's writing identifies her tradition. The author's choice of subject and themes, the singularity of her aesthetic representation, and her particular approach to form, reveal her commitment to the black community. Morrison's work truly represents black writing.¹² In like manner, Justine Tally explains how Morrison has been able to blur the lines and reclaim a space for the African American experience in the literary canon:

These days . . . [it] is more than inappropriate to define Morrison as 'marginal', not because she has moved to the center of the canon, but because she has managed to

¹² Taylor-Guthrie explains that "Morrison declares some aspects define a piece as 'black': a participatory quality between the book and reader; an aural quality in the writing; and open-endedness in the finale that is agitating; an acceptance of and keen ability to detect differences versus a thrust toward homogenization; acknowledgement of a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery and the body; a functional as well as aesthetic quality; an obligation to bear witness; service as a conduit for the 'ancestor'; uses of humor that are frequently ironic; and achieved clarity or epiphany and thus a tendency to be prophetic; and an ability to take the 'tribe' via art through the pain of a historical experience that has been haunted by race to a healing zone" (x).

move the center; or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that because of her multi-faceted and untiring work, she has helped change a restricted, predominantly white, and male-centered literary world into a cultural mosaic. (1)

Thus, Morrison belongs to the tradition of black female writers who endorse black feminist thought¹³ and whose main concerns are voicing the experience of African Americans, acknowledging the presence of black female writers, and reclaiming a place in the literary establishment. Tally emphasizes the importance of Morrison's task: "not that it did not take enormous effort on her part to attain the canonization seldom granted to women writers, almost never to blacks. And yet Morrison was hardly the first non-white, non-male author to challenge the hegemony of the white-male center: that effort has been both political and collective in nature" (2). In the end, Morrison's work has a double function in American literature, as her writing both challenges the established order and regains spaces for the marginalized.

CRITICISM

Besides her work in fiction, Toni Morrison is also well known for her work in non-fiction and criticism.¹⁴ Like her narrative, her work in academic writing carries her compromise to

¹³ In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins explains the essence of this movement as reflected in literature, which can be related to Morrison's work: "social theories reflect women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion. Black feminist thought, U.S. women's critical social theory, reflects similar power relationships. For African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central question facing U.S. black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African-American women as a *group* remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African-American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others. Black feminist thought's identity as a 'critical' social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups" (9).

¹⁴ Morrison's works of non-fiction and criticism include *The Black Book* (1974), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* (editor 1992), *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993* (1994), *The Dancing Mind: Speech upon Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for*

challenge traditional ideas related to race, gender and marginalization. Her critical writing addresses, from a new point of view, diverse cultural aspects that inform not only literature but also the social conditions of the African-American community. According to Justine Tally, in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in American Literature*, Morrison clearly explains what the role and the duty of the writer and the critic is.¹⁵ Writing in any form must serve as a tool and authors and critics are liable for the use they make of it. As Tally asserts, “if there is one thing that Toni Morrison –author, playwright, librettist, lyricist, Nobel Prize winner, social and literary critic –has taught us, is that we all are responsible for those choices, and ignorance is not a lawful excuse for committing an infraction: For Morrison ‘as far as the future is concerned, when one writes, as critic or as author, all necks are on the line’” (1). Thus, the writer has the command of the power of language and her/his literary production must obey a purpose. The pursuit of a purpose generates a strong sense of responsibility, or as Morrison herself declares “response-ability,” which is “the capacity for a dialogue between writer and reading public, of the mediated by the critic, which demands that we take the author and her work seriously and meet her in her own terms, and we prepare ourselves, yes, academically, but equally important physically to free our minds from the strictures and constraints of the inherited, the given, the unquestioned, the ‘unspeakable,’ in order to meet marginal authors in their own terms” (Tally 1). Morrison’s criticism addresses different issues related to the political struggle dealing with race, class, and gender

Distinguished Contribution to American Letters (1996), *Birth of Nation’hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case* (co-editor 1997), *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004), *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (edited by Carolyn C. Denard 2008), *Burn this Book: Essay Anthology* (editor 2009).

¹⁵ “What we do as writers and critics is not just important, it is crucial; it is not just informative, it is formative; it is not just interesting, it profoundly shapes the perception of the world as we, and others come to ‘know’ it. It is a responsibility that we as critics must take extremely serious because what we do makes a difference, whether it is frowning over a popular writer whose subtext is actually pernicious to human relationships, or unfairly criticizing a more complex writer struggling to speak from a different world. The choices we make are not gratuitous; they are most often political, emerging from an ideology that we are not even, not necessarily anyway, aware of” (quoted in Tally 1).

oppression. It is not surprising, then, that Morrison's literary work focuses on the situation of marginalized groups and explores the possibilities of those groups to break free from oppression.

In her acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, Morrison points out the responsibility of the writer as a controller and manipulator of the force of language. Morrison portrays the writer as an old black woman who lives in the margins of society, thus empowering the deteriorated image of black womanhood. However, she emphasizes the big burden of this old woman, which is liberating language from the oppressing connotations that patriarchy has assigned to it. The task seems fit for a midwife, who would succeed in this enterprise through a magical incantation. The old, wise, black woman has to come up with a spell to liberate language from its negative connotations, because, as Morrison explains, "the systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge" (1). Morrison, the critic, deplores the dangers of oppressive language. This preoccupation is present in her novels too. As a writer, she uses language as a weapon to fight race and gender oppression. The writer has the responsibility to employ language conscientiously, and to avoid "sexist language, racist language, theistic language –all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas" (1). Morrison warns about the constraining quality of language, and the dangers of using it as a device to alienate and marginalize. Language must create, illuminate, and promote the exchange of ideas. That is the duty of the writer. For this reason, language functions as a vehicle to contest patriarchal impositions in Morrison's novels. She considers that committed writing has the task of denouncing and fighting the limitations of oppressive language. *Paradise* is an example of language at the service of

creative discussion. By challenging patriarchal connotations of language, Morrison promotes a new way to interpret race and gender. Hence, in *Paradise*, Morrison combines the voice of radical feminism, the focus of black feminist thought, and the force of cultural studies to create a language that defies patriarchal oppression. This novel demonstrates that the vitality of language depends on the intentions of the author.

Paradise: Review of the Literature

A primary definition of *Paradise* is “Pleasure Park.”

The walls of Patriarchal Pleasure Park . . . the father’s foreground is precisely this: an arena where the wilderness of Nature and of women’s selves is domesticated, preserved.

Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*

Our view of Paradise is so limited: it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people –chosen by God that is, which means that your job is to isolate yourself from other people. That is the nature of Paradise: it is really defined by who is not there as well as who is.

Toni Morrison, Interview with J. Marcus

Tony Morrison’s novel *Paradise* presents a serious challenge for readers. Charged with symbolism, sensual imagery, and an intricate plot, it rewards the senses and functions as well as a provocation to question race and gender issues. The source of inspiration to write the novel and its themes are a source of heated debate. Presumably, Morrison read an article in the newspaper about the murder of a group of nuns who practiced Candomble¹⁶ in a convent in Brazil. Although the piece of news was largely speculation and the author may

¹⁶ Candomble “is an Afro-Brazilian religion. It is based in the anima of the natural environment, and is therefore a kind of Animism. It was developed in Brazil with the knowledge of African Priests that were enslaved and brought to Brazil together with their mythology, their culture, and their language. Candomble may be called Macumba in some regions, although Macumba has a distinct set of practices more akin to European witchcraft” (1).

have followed a false clue, this situation was most definitely the source of inspiration for the Convent in *Paradise* and at least one of the characters, Consolata, who is Brazilian. From the article, Morrison may have also inferred basic elements of magic, murder, (religious) seclusion, abuse, and gender-specific rage, all which are central themes in her literary work. Combining the largely imaginary background of the Brazilian convent and a very specific period of American history,¹⁷ Morrison presents three different locales, namely, the outside world, Ruby and the Convent, which will become the stages for the interaction of race oppression, gender issues and the intervention of the supernatural.

Paradise was a source of great expectations for both the reading public and the critics. *Paradise* is part of a trilogy that started with *Beloved* (1987), which won the Pulitzer Prize. This novel tells the captivating story of a mother who prefers to kill her own daughter rather than send her away to slavery. The second rendition is *Jazz* (1992), in which the author explores the relationship between an older man and a younger woman during the Harlem Renaissance. *Paradise* (1997) is the first work that Morrison published after winning the Pulitzer. In the novel, the emblematic search for an ideal place –a paradise- actually becomes a journey of introspection and self-discovery for some of the characters. Morrison completes the trilogy with this novel, which reveals her constant motivation to question crucial aspects of race and gender as imposed cultural constructions that enslave the mind. The author takes the debate over race and gender to the next level by giving a new turn to these familiar topics, playing with the expectations and assumptions of both readers and critics. The

¹⁷ "There is a rich history of African Americans in the American West, and although this subject was left out of many of the history books this is starting to change. Some people fled the policies of slavery, whereas others simply sought opportunities in less-populated areas of the country. Advertising, recruitment campaigns, and land incentives ensured that many thousands of black settlers went west, ready for new lives that would involve greater freedom and control of their own destinies. All-Black towns sprung up by the dozens throughout Oklahoma and elsewhere. Two in particular seem to be inspiration for material in *Paradise*: the town of Boley and Langston City (Gracer 2)."

way in which Morrison approaches the themes in the novel allows new interpretations of how patriarchal impositions influence racial prejudice and gender domination. The presence of the supernatural and spiritual elements adds a new perspective to the narrative that challenges traditional points of view. In addition, race and gender are not presented in plain dual oppositions but rather acquire kaleidoscopic qualities that allow different ways of looking at them. Highly historical yet highly imaginary, *Paradise* recounts an untold part of history. The novel unveils the history of alienated and rejected colored women, and how this marginalized group of social outcasts responds to oppression and face discrimination.

In terms of criticism, Morrison's work received mixed reviews. Gray argues that "some reviewers have found Morrison's novels overly deterministic, her characters pawns in the service of their creator's designs" (2). Other critics believe that the author would benefit from a change in direction. Essayist Stanley Crouch says, "Morrison is immensely talented. I just think she needs a new subject matter, the world she lives in, not this world of endless black victims" (quoted in Gray 2). However, these opinions should be taken with a grain of salt because they might represent just another effort to silence an important voice that denounces the reality of marginalized groups. Although the opinion of critics may vary, Morrison's treatment of aspects of race and gender in the novel generates controversy. For some critics, like Crouch, Morrison repeats "the same old story." For many others, the novel is an emblematic reworking of Morrison's traditional themes. As Elizabeth Bartelme points out, "[Morrison's] books resonate with her passion and commitment to racial dignity and equality" (1). This ability of the author to elicit discussion and controversy makes the power of her writing evident. As a matter of fact, most critics agree on one point: themes of race and gender play a transcendental role in the novel and their reading and interpretation requires keen awareness. Both issues merge and become the backbone of the narrative. Thus, it is necessary to emphasize not only their relevance but also their significance. Even if they are

the themes of previous novels, race and gender serve important and new purposes in *Paradise*. As writer Evelyn E. Shockley explains, “we are familiar with the territory being fought over in *Paradise*. Male-dominated turf and woman-centered space. Putatively porous boundaries of racial integration in opposition to rigid racial separatism. skin-colored-coded zones. Generational gaps widened into chasms” (1). These two elements become basic ingredients of a narrative that elicits still-relevant analyses. Critic Linda J. Krumholz agrees with Shockley when she points out that “in *Paradise* Morrison guides the reader into the volatile conjunction of race and gender; within it she constructs a process of revelation or insight that is best understood not as an unveiling but as a vision of the many veils of history, ideology, and desire through which we see the world” (1). Besides, a touch of the magical, the spiritual, and the supernatural complement and balance the issues of race and gender. The author links magical elements to the female characters in the narrative as a way to confront male-constructed and male-dominated impositions. This innovation ascribes power to femininity and gives the novel a new theme for analysis. Thus, *Paradise* opens up different possibilities of race and gender interpretation. The novel functions as a productive discussion space where these issues acquire new strength. Besides, the novel offers the opportunity to question and critique the various ways in which readers and critics approach these issues.

Paradise works as an interesting fusion, in which Morrison develops race and gender as signature elements of her writing. Also, she explores innovations in content and form, such as the incorporation of the supernatural, finally constructing a narrative charged with the special vitality her narrative usually displays. Consequently, the author does not leave anything to chance. From the beginning of the novel, she points out the important issues in her narrative. Morrison constantly highlights the importance of the first sentence in a novel. For her, this is an ideal opportunity to captivate the reader. *Paradise* is no exception to her rule. From the opening scene, the author reveals that race and gender will be of great

importance in her narrative. With the sentence “They shoot the white girl first” (3) the author is engaging and provoking the reader, playing with diverse elements such as biased thinking, assumptions and misconceptions. Critic Chanette Romero suggests that “the reference to the one white woman in the first sentence of the text suggests that . . . race itself [is] significant” (3). Morrison’s purpose in doing this keeps critics arguing and the result is strikingly effective. Romero goes on to affirm that “although many critics have speculated about which Convent woman is white, by keeping this information ambiguous the text asks readers to believe that race need not be the most salient category for grouping and understanding individuals” (3). When questioned about her decision to keep readers speculating about the race of the women in the Convent, Morrison is very emphatic: “I did that on purpose . . . I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn’t matter. I want to dissuade people to read literature in that way” (5). She adds that “race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It is real information but it tells you next to nothing” (quoted in Gray 5). The way in which the author deals with race and gender in her novels keeps avid readers and eager critics motivated. Thus, Morrison’s writing creates a space for recognition, critique and argumentation. Morrison’s work presents itself in diverse layers of meaning and needs careful analysis. *Paradise* is part of this tradition. Its first sentence is revealing, but at the same time it elicits many questions. The truth is that in her writing race and gender are relevant not only for what is present but also for what is absent. This narrative strategy promotes questioning and re-thinking. The silences in the novel speak louder than the actual voiced facts. Even more importantly, in *Paradise*, Morrison re-discovers diverse connections of race and gender through the exploration of female characters. Each woman in the novel embodies a different way in which race and gender serve as forms of discrimination. Besides, the writer adds spiritual elements associated to women as a way to challenge traditional rule. The incorporation of magic in her narrative is part of the ideology and form of Black writing, as Morrison herself has declared. In previous

works like *Beloved* the presence of the supernatural is almost overwhelming. In *Paradise*, women mainly are in touch with magic, have the ability to communicate with the supernatural, or come in contact with the supernatural. To contest the interaction of race, gender, and the supernatural, Morrison establishes three different spheres: the outside world, Ruby, and the Convent, each with specific characteristics that will influence and affect these three themes. The construction of *Paradise* depends largely on this interaction.

The existing criticism of *Paradise* leaves a hollow space regarding the detailed analysis of the interaction of intersecting oppressions and the role that race, gender and the supernatural play in the context of the literary work. Precisely, this research project pretends to illuminate that obscured part of the criticism of the novel. This research seeks to present a different approach to race and gender issues and, at the same time, explore the intricacies of the diverse types of oppression that coexist in the novel and how they make it a referent in the context of black literary tradition. *Paradise* is one of the less studied novels of Toni Morrison and, in this sense, the research that I conduct is absolutely necessary to give a broader perspective of the existing literary criticism.

This study provides critical innovation in the following aspects: first, re-vising the issues of gender in the literary context of the novel by analyzing how the female characters become empowered agents of change. Second, re-interpreting racialized assumptions by offering a wider perspective that departs from the traditional black/white dichotomy and rather delves in colorism and internalized racism. Third, discovering the supernatural as a literary frame that contains the work and makes it part of black literary tradition. Fourth, conducting the analysis of intersecting oppressions as part of the dynamics of the novel and a milestone in the literary criticism of *Paradise*. A closer look of the different elements that actuate in the novel gives further insight of the importance and transcendence of this research project.

RACE

Morrison's awareness of race is present both in her novels and in her work as a critic. In her novel *Home* the author reflects on the power of language and her decision to fight against "the accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis and sheer malevolence embedded in race language so that other kinds of perception [are] not only available but [are] inevitable" (quoted in Krumholz 1). This does not mean that race is not important; it means that race should have the place that it deserves. For people who use it as a way to alienate others, race is mind-binding and oppressive. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison reveals a similar preoccupation. The author wants "to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (quoted in Krumholz 1). Morrison employs all these elements to approach race in *Paradise*, where she reveals the dangers of "narrow thinking." The ultimate purpose of Morrison's appreciations is to create awareness of the implications of racial discrimination.

Race stands out as a constant preoccupation in Toni Morrison's work. As Gray points out, "racial questions have figured prominently in many of Morrison's critical essays" (5). Morrison displays the diverse layers of racial oppression not only as a novelist but also as a critic. Part of her appeal as a writer is that she can address racial themes in a unique way. For instance, characters such as Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* have become an obligatory reference in American literature. These characters reveal motifs of racial oppression in forms that are unprecedented. Very few writers have the sensitivity and the nerve to unveil race the way that Morrison does. Race-related problems are palpable in every page of Morrison's work because she has the ability to present them from the inside. It would be naïve to consider that an author like Morrison would neglect or give a superficial treatment to the aspect of race in one of her novels, given her political responsibility. As Krumholz explains, "in *Paradise* Morrison confronts the racial imaginary in its inseparable connection to

gender, class and sexual relations, and she engages with contemporary feminist, black, and postmodern theories of representation in her literary choices” (1). Evidently, this novel honors the tradition of the author’s commitment to denounce racial oppression by exploring the possibilities and risks of an all-black community. However, her treatment of race is different this time, and keeps critics arguing about the way in which she approaches race themes. Perhaps Morrison wants to minimize the traditional dual opposition White/Black as the sole form of racial oppression. Krumholz agrees that “Morrison also dismantles racial ideology in *Paradise* by deconstructing whiteness without reifying or sanctifying blackness” (5). In her novel, she uncovers the many different layers related to discrimination based on skin color. This particular aspect of the novel intrigues critics enormously. Gray points out that “[the subject of race] is not mentioned a great deal in *Paradise*, perhaps because nearly all the characters are black. It is almost impossible to identify the white woman whose shooting is announced in the opening sentence” (5). By disarming the assumed white/black opposition Morrison makes a statement against the established order and at the same time explores the ramifications of racial oppression. She addresses race with irony and contradiction. Thus, the author plays with diverse preconceptions, misconceptions, assumptions, and expectations related to race themes. In sum, Morrison sets the context in an all-black community, which warns us about the influence of discrimination because black people reproduce different forms of subjugation, alienation and, domination.

Gray believes that “[Morrison] views her life and work as a struggle against the use of racial categories, or any categories, as a means of keeping groups of people powerless and excluded. She resents seeing her writing pigeonholed by her skin color” (5). The irony lies in the fact that by making race unnoticeable, it attracts much more attention. Not mentioning race makes it even more evident. Hence, what is not said is as important as what is said. Besides, the deterministic force of skin color among the people of Ruby is impossible to

ignore. The way in which the people of the town deal with racial issues themselves reflects this irony. Color variations are not mentioned at all, but they are constantly affecting, influencing, and changing people's lives. A good example is how the people of the town treat Patricia's mother because she is white. Patricia remembers the profound implications that skin color has for her and her family: "You and me, Mamma, among those skinny blue-black giants, neither they nor their wives staring at your long brown hair, your honey-speckled eyes" (200). Skin tone marks them as outsiders and also designates a status to them: "remember how they needed you, used you to go into a store to get supplies or a can of milk while they parked around the corner?" (220). The emotive recollections of Patricia also reflect Morrison's preoccupation with racism spreading as a contagious disease that reaches Ruby. Patricia's mother is a victim of ruthless racism: "That was the only thing your skin was good for. Otherwise it bothered them. Reminded them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place. The one-drop law the whites made up was hard to live by if nobody could tell it was there" (200). The subtle attacks against Patricia's mother are silent since people in Ruby do not confront race issues. However, racism is ever present in their lives. Morrison explores this expanded irony throughout the novel, and in the end she highlights the transcendence of race by minimizing its visibility in the narrative.

GENDER

Two pillars run through the narrative of Toni Morrison. Like race, gender is a central theme in her novels. Many critics believe that she needs to "change topics" and "demonstrate" her rich talent. However, the fact that she elaborates on these two subjects signals her true commitment to her political agenda, whether she wants to admit it or not. As Gray points out, "*Paradise* picks up and elaborates on subjects and themes from the author's earlier works. There are for example, females rebelling against patriarchal mores, as in *Sula* (1974), and black characters judging one another on the relative darkness or lightness of their

skin as in *Tar Baby* (1981)"(3). *Paradise* sheds new light on gender issues. The very structure of the novel reveals this fact. Morrison concedes great importance to stories and story-telling. Gray asserts that "Morrison has argued for years that stories and story-telling convey information, necessary information, available nowhere else" (4). The story that she tells in *Paradise* is women-centered. The way in which she presents the novel, naming every chapter after a woman, points out that the book revolves around them. That is, women and their stories will be the backbone of *Paradise*. Readers are eager to know the details of each of the controversial female characters that she creates. From the opening lines the author reveals that the two elements –race and gender- will be essential, giving, in this way, consistency to her novel.

As in the case of race, Morrison does not present gender discrimination as a pale reflection of a social reality. In *Paradise*, gender acquires diverse overtones worth close attention and analysis. The very concept of "paradise" constitutes an issue of debate. Morrison openly criticizes the traditional religious patriarchal notion of a man-made "paradise." In this sense, Morrison echoes Mary Daly's idea that the concept of "paradise" prevails as a male invention, which corresponds to a construction of men, by men, and for men, so to speak. According to patriarchal tradition, within this concept of "paradise" women function merely as facilitators of men's needs, reflections of their desires, and the objects of their fears and deviations. In the novel several examples demonstrate how this male-centered definition of "paradise" is at odds with the interests, autonomy, and well-being of women. As Krumholz points out, "the men of Ruby act as if they actually know God's will" (1). They strongly believe that they have been invested with the supreme task of constructing a safe place. But is it safe for everyone or is it safe only for men? Here, dramatic irony arises because, as Krumholz says, "the men become what they wish to destroy, and thus they destroy their Paradise" (1). The critic also considers that in this way "Morrison makes

abundantly clear the dangers of both narrow interpretations and the belief in one's own righteousness" (1), which is a constant flaw of patriarchal society as presented in the novel. Krumholz goes on to affirm that "the New Fathers of Ruby counter the 'anxiety of belonging' by establishing a town based on racial and gender ideals that instigate a process of exclusion and othering" (2). Romero has a similar view of the imposition of the concept of "paradise," which clearly benefits a specific group of men. She explains that "the town leaders wind up killing and oppressing women, deliberately setting high interest rates that divide town members by socioeconomic class, and punishing individuals without 'blue black' skin" (5). Evidently, this is an effort of the elite group to protect its interests, backed up by their own created concept of "paradise." Morrison also makes it clear that the ruling group of Ruby is no better than any other group of oppressors. As Krumholz says "the men are blind to the ways that their hidden laws of racial purity, masculine dominance, and economic competition replicate the society they mean to escape and repudiate" (2). Morrison suggests that this distorted patriarchal conception of "paradise" is doomed to perish. As Romero points out, "the text suggests that a town or belief system that allows no difference, new ideas, or new members is bound to destroy itself from within" (3). Morrison denounces patriarchy, an ideology and a system that, with its rules and limitations, does not allow personal growth – especially that of women- but rather promotes its suffocation and eventually destruction.

THE SUPERNATURAL

Morrison uses supernatural elements to confront patriarchal oppression in the novel. If traditional male-created societies have proven that exclusive and male-oriented ideology discriminates, marginalizes, and subordinates, then a new way to confront the world is necessary. Magic and the supernatural have always been inextricably linked to women, and in *Paradise* they emerge as a solution to the problem of alienation. Spirituality, thus, becomes a new way to perceive and interpret the world. When the old prescriptions to construct a

paradise have failed, spirituality, magic, and the supernatural appear as an option to create a nurturing community where the individuals, all women, are able to coexist in a harmonious environment. Morrison believed that labeling or categorizing her work was restrictive, which is why she resented being labeled “a feminist” as much as a “magic realist.”¹⁸ However, critics agree that the supernatural embodies an important feature in the literary production of Morrison, and her name relates with other authors that belong in this trend like García Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Louis de Bernieres, and Angela Carter, among others. In works like *Beloved*, which is part of the trilogy that *Paradise* belongs to, the presence of the magical and supernatural functions as a salient feature of the story.¹⁹ In a similar way, *Paradise* retains this characteristic, and magic and the supernatural serve a relevant purpose regarding both form and style. Morrison has declared that in order to recognize a piece of work as “black writing,” it must display certain characteristics such as “an open-endedness that is agitating, acknowledgement of a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery and the body” (quoted in Taylor-Guthrie). In this sense, magic realism helps to meet these characteristics, and, magic and the supernatural act not only as a way to portray a very specific literary style but also to reinforce power as linked to women and femininity. The supernatural also helps to build that sense of community and to acknowledge the presence of ancestors, which are important elements in black narrative. As P. Gabrielle Foreman explains, referring to the specific case of Morrison, “magical realism unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the

¹⁸ According to Angel Flores, “in magical realism we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. It is predominantly an art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision” (quoted in Rios 1). In this sense, the works of Toni Morrison present several characteristics of magic realism even if the author herself opposes being labeled as a representative of this literary movement.

¹⁹ Luis Leal declares that “the purpose of magical realism is to discover the mysterious relationships between man [sic] and his circumstances. In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magic realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things” (quoted in Rios 1).

community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (quoted in Rios 1). For this reason, along with race and gender, magic functions as a way to dismantle patriarchal assumptions and challenge traditional patriarchal power. The unruly women of the novel have abilities, which are reserved only for them. Discovering that inner power and learning how to use it for their own benefit and for the benefit of the community is part of the journey that these daring outcasts accept to go on. Connecting with the magic inside denotes the toughest challenge that these women have to take. Learning to guide and control this energy implies a constant trial. Supernatural elements in the context of magic realism help to depict and understand this impending display of female power, which provokes a lot of tension in the novel.

In order to explore the intricacies of the interaction of race, gender, and the supernatural, Morrison establishes three locales: the outside world, Ruby, and the Convent. Each of these settings has specific characteristics and connotations that help reinforce the plot, ideology and themes of the novel. The relationship of these environments and the characters becomes decisively intense to the extent that, at certain point, distinguishing if the people are the product of the place they live in, or if the places are the product of the people is very difficult. In addition, Morrison’s narrative emphasizes the concept of community, and by extension, location. The life of the community, associated to the physical space where that life takes place, is fundamental in “black writing.” Generally speaking, the idea of community helps to construct identity and create a sense of “belonging.” However, the concept of community is not always positive in Morrison’s novels because it is usually male-oriented and, more often than not, these men scapegoat, oppress, and abuse women. In *Paradise*, for instance, the different locales have very specific characteristics. The community can be menacing, like the outside world, suffocating like Ruby, or nurturing like the Convent. In this

way, Morrison makes a statement about her political views and proposes womanist²⁰ options for change.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Although the book does not refer to the outside world explicitly, the “out there” is always present as a symbol of latent danger. Unspeakable realities are an important part of Morrison’s tradition. Omissions, whether they are conscious or not, have a purpose. Throughout the novel a sentiment of lingering fear relates the outside world to a menacing place. However, the outside world has a different meaning for each community depicted in the novel, and it may even represent something different for each character, in some cases. Oppressive systems constantly remind people living in the margins of their situation. They displace marginal groups and create boundaries to reinforce the idea of not belonging. Actually, for most outcasts, the outside world stands as a source of constant threat. For the people of Ruby, for instance, the outside world conveys the idea of an oppressive hegemonic society, in which race and class issues have delimited their participation.²¹ But these alienated people are not only victims of the racism of white people but also of well-to-do all-black communities that consider them a potential burden.²² The process of a systematic

²⁰ The modern use of the term “womanist” is attributed to Alice Walker. In her book, *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, the author “uses the word to describe the perspective and experiences of ‘women of color...’ Although most Womanist scholarship centers on the African American woman’s experience, other non-white theorists identify themselves with this term. Some authors use womanism and black feminism almost interchangeably, as they have much overlap and share heroines and foremothers” (1). Black feminist thinkers believe that traditional white feminism tends to be classist and racist. Hence, the ideology of womanism emerges as a response to the alienation of black feminist thought. Although Morrison has opposed the treatment of an “-ist” writer, her political views support womanist thinking most definitely.

²¹ “These towns had to endure a variety of pressures and destructive elements. While white settlers in the region did not enjoy their neighbors, Native Americans saw all settlers as threats. *Paradise* is the story of how the people in the fictional town of Ruby, Oklahoma, dealt with those pressures” (Gracer 3).

²² “Of all virtues for which the American West was famous, the most important was self-sufficiency. No town could afford to receive several hundred poor, broken refugees from the South. Moreover, as a general principle, weakness was not tolerated. This sentiment greatly disheartens the novel’s characters on their way to Haven” (Gracer 2-3).

“disallowance” pushes them to the margins. Therefore, these victims of abuse and discrimination risk anything to find a place where they can create their own paradise at any cost. *Paradise*, however, does not seek to reflect a patronizing view of all black communities. Morrison shows, ironically, the way in which Ruby has an almost pathological propensity to replicate much of the abuse and discrimination of “the outside.”

On the other hand, for the women of the Convent things are different. The outside world represents not only a repressive society; it also involves very specific threats for each character: abusive husbands, absent parents, obsessive lovers, missing children. For these women, the outside world is a source of constant anger and frustration. Thus, most of them have been doubly abused, not only by the hegemonic group but also by “their own people”. For them, the outside world implies a double burden. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, “depending on the context individuals and groups may be alternately oppressors in some settings, oppressed in others, or simultaneously oppressing and oppressed in still others” (246). The women living in the Convent face the situation that Hill Collins describes. They suffer alienation from both the hegemonic group and their own community. The people of Ruby become the oppressors of these dissident women and treat them to race, gender, and class discrimination, therefore reproducing oppression. Consequently, the world outside the Convent becomes a double source of marginalization for these women.

RUBY

Ruby illustrates the second space in which race, gender, and the supernatural related to female power coexist. Men govern the town; they construct Ruby with patriarchal ideals in mind. The town conforms the center of male power and domination. In the novel, the attitude of Ruby’s ruling group also resembles the attitude of patriarchy towards women, based on

marginalization, control, domination and destruction. Patriarchy maintains marginalization by creating and promoting stereotypes, blaming women for the evils of society. In the specific case of Ruby, where race plays such an important role, women bear the burden of transmitting racial purity. Krumholz explains that “women, as mothers and potential mothers have a natural connection to birth (and all the dangers of difference and ‘tainted blood’ that reproduction brings) and death, and these women embody the threat of change to men” (4). For this reason, the women of Ruby live under strict patriarchal control. This critic explains that “women also represent men’s power and control to other men” (4). In other words, Ruby’s men measure and demonstrate their power based on how well they can control and dominate “their” women. Hence, the unruly women of the Convent are an abomination to their eyes. The fathers create a distinction between a good woman –one who accepts and promotes patriarchal rule- and all those who do not. As Krumholz explains, “this distinction between good and bad women allows them to scapegoat the women of the Convent, to see these women as an insult . . . [to their own system]” (2). The overt challenge of the women of the Convent centers on their disregard of male rule. Transgressions destabilize male power. Thus, the controlling elite of Ruby sees these women as a bad example and as a blatant threat to their too convenient male-oriented convictions. Also, the Convent women mirror all the limitations of the “paradise” that they have created. Therefore, “silencing these women,” Romero points out, “provides an outlet for the anger that the townspeople have for their own static lifestyle as they deny and cover over Ruby’s limitations” (3). But controlling women is not enough for the ruling elite of Ruby. They must eliminate any and all source of power that these women have. Consequently, magical elements, aspects of the supernatural and alternative spiritual practices represent an outrage. Conveniently, the men of Ruby believe that these practices of female power related to the supernatural are old fashioned, or, according to the ruling elite, they are responsible for the towns’ disgrace. The fathers of Ruby classify women who show different spiritual views as rebels. For this reason, patriarchs feel

compelled to neglect, ridicule, and ostracize them. Ruby is the “paradise” of men, and they must control the power of women strictly.

THE CONVENT

In contrast, Morrison presents the community of the Convent, which makes the limitations of patriarchal domination even clearer. Gray explains that “*Paradise* establishes these two locales, --the place where men rule and the one where women try to escape that rule” (4). Unlike the town of Ruby, the Convent is a place for renewal and rebirth. The women of the Convent are able to create an open community where the needy and afflicted can go through a healing process. As Gray points out, “the Convent becomes with Consolata’s diffident acquiescence, a refuge for broken young women, on the run from husbands or boyfriends, parents, or the mess they have made of their lives elsewhere” (4). In the Convent marginalization, or exclusion do not exist. It is the place where the oppressed can find help and support. Evidently, this community of independent women provokes the suspicion and eventually the fury of the ruling fathers of Ruby. In this respect, Krumholz considers that “the women of *Paradise* test the limits of racial and gender representations” (3). The Convent stands as an affront to patriarchal domination. Therefore, men feel the obligation to conquer, dominate, and in the end, destroy it. In addition, Romero suggests that “the Convent women learn to empower themselves without needing to adhere strictly to male patriarchal control or a rigid belief system [based] on division and hierarchy” (3). In this sense, Morrison questions and challenges the entire system of patriarchal rule. She points to the inadequacy of traditional patriarchal systems by denouncing the shortcomings of the ruling class in Ruby. As Romero points out, “the portrayal of the ‘peace’ that the women of the Convent are able to achieve by acknowledging their past traumas suggests a belief that more enabling identities and communities can be constructed around spiritual connections and affiliations, rather than on divisions predicated on race and gender” (5). Thus, the Convent turns out to be the place

where spirituality, elements of magic, and the supernatural find their maximum expression. This alternative system of belief, which exemplifies the process of women's empowerment, becomes a reality in the Convent. These women are able to connect with one another and with their community in a spiritual way that it is only possible in the context of a different set of values. Patriarchy does not permit this type of bonding. The spiritual balance that these women achieve at the end of the journey does not have anything to do with the outside world, and does not relate to Ruby either. Only the Convent offers the conditions of equality and tolerance, which allow these dispossessed women to become empowered eventually. Thus, the Convent functions as the "safe" place in which the women's peace of mind and soul becomes a reality.

The multiple layers of *Paradise* allow the reader to confront race, gender and the supernatural from a wide variety of perspectives. The polyphony of this work makes a statement against partial, restricted, narrow-minded way of thinking. Morrison's expression of black feminist thought favors multiplicity and variety. A true paradise stands for that ideal place in which a wide diversity of skin color, gender, or spiritual views can coexist. Morrison presents societies that impede the personal and spiritual growth of individuals as toxic. In her work, she criticizes the vices of patriarchy by making an exhausting analysis of the consequences of gender role impositions. Besides, the author rediscovers important issues related to race. She plays with traditional assumptions and presents an innovative insight, in which race no longer represents a valid category to "classify" people. In this way, she reinvents race-oriented relations. In addition, Morrison presents alternative options to creating a nurturing community. The empowerment of women through magical elements and the supernatural emerges as an opposition to the traditional degrading patriarchal rule. Three spheres coexist in the novel, each representing a different scenario that reinforces the main themes and supports the arguments of race and gender. The outside world, linked to the

hegemonic white supremacist society, conveys the invisible danger that haunts the existence of the marginalized. Each time that the outside world collides with the other spheres the result is problematic. Ruby, a microcosm in itself, acts as a mirror that reflects the flaws and vices of other societies. In this way, Morrison denounces and exposes the negative influence of traditional patriarchal rule, which oftentimes recurs to extreme and brutal ways to exert domination. The place where magic happens, the Convent, shelters a diverse group of outcast and untamed women. These unruly women constantly break, question and disregard patriarchal rule in various ways. When empowered, they are able to create a true paradise, a healthy and nurturing community that contrasts with patriarchal rule. The Convent becomes the site where female individuals can heal and grow through spiritual connections. The instauration of Connie as the spiritual leader of the group demonstrates what the Convent truly means to these women: "This sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them the best, who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was" (262). Moreover, these women establish a unique relationship with Connie, who they perceive as:

[The] ideal parent, friend, companion in whose company they were free from harm ... this perfect landlord who charged nothing and welcomed anybody; this granny goose who could be confided in or ignored, lied to or suborned; this play mother who could be hugged or walked out on, depending on the whim of the child. (262)

Eventually, Connie urges the women to make a decision to stay in the Convent or leave: "If you have a place . . . that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me . . ." (262). The response of the women shows that the Convent is the ideal place for them because "no one left ... in no time at all they came to see that they could not leave the only place they were free to leave" (262). Hence, Morrison

makes it clear that the construction of a community must rely on mutual understanding and caring rather than on domination and oppression of any kind.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

RADICAL FEMINISM

The approach of the present study to Morrison's novel *Paradise* includes three important fields of study, feminism, black feminist thought, and cultural studies. Feminist theories function as a valuable tool to read and interpret Morrison's work. Although Morrison resents being labeled as a "feminist" writer, her work, both as a creative writer and as a critic, makes a major contribution to the feminist movement. A feminist work challenges, questions, and provides alternative options to patriarchal rule. Hence, *Paradise* exemplifies essential features of feminist writing. The novel embodies the struggle of a group of marginalized colored women to exercise their free will, gain autonomy, and obtain empowerment. Radical feminism, in the voice of Mary Daly, provides useful elements to explore the expression of feminism in *Paradise*.²³ Daly's theories cover a wide range of topics related to the feminist

²³ Mary Daly's work in the field of radical feminism is emblematic. Her criticism is one of the most important voices in womanist thinking. Daly's witty, brilliant and subversive writing uncovers the intricate plots of patriarchal oppression. However, Audre Lorde -another important representative in this field- considers that Daly's writing does not include colored women as agents of power. In her "Open Letter to Mary Daly", Lorde critiques the way in which Daly discriminates colored women in her book *Gyn/Ecology*. According to Lorde, Daly depicts colored women only as victims and not as sources of power. Lorde believes that Daly fails to see the importance of "Black foremothers" as part of the liberatory forces of feminism. As she explains: "I ask that you be aware of how this [exclusion] serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women -the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization" (69). Lorde insists that "to exclude this aspect of connection from even comment in your work is to deny the fountain of non european female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions" (70). Yet, Daly's omission, whether intentional or not, does not diminish the strength of radical feminist thinking. On the contrary, it encourages the dialogue among feminist scholars. Audre Lorde's demands for recognition and inclusion demonstrate the necessity of sharing visions that would eventually benefit and strengthen feminist thinking. Audre Lorde's terminal illness and death obscures Daly's response to her open letter. Among the papers that she leaves behind, researchers found a note by Daly clarifying some of the major points of the discussion. Although the response of Mary Daly is not as popular and wide spread as Lorde's Open Letter, Gina Messina publishes the note in *Feminism and Religion*. Basically, Daly thanks Lorde for broadening her perspective: "you have helped me be aware of different dimensions of

cause, and her incisive analyses of the dynamics of gender provides the foundation for the critical feminist approach of this novel. Daly's radical feminist criticism, like Morrison's work, promotes a serious rethinking of the prevalence of patriarchal rule. In her book *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly emphasizes the power of femininity. As she explains, "Gyn/Ecology is about discovering, de-veloping the complex web of living/loving relationships of *our own kind*. It is about women living, loving, creating our Selves, our cosmos" (11). Daly's purpose of liberating women illustrates the process of empowerment of the women in the Convent perfectly. Morrison, like Daly, considers that the real power of femininity depends on the creation of nurturing bonds between women. Daly also criticizes the interaction of gender roles in patriarchal societies. As she asserts, "the fact is that we live in a profoundly anti-female society, a misogynistic 'civilization' in which men collectively victimize women, attacking us as personifications of their own paranoid fears, as *The Enemy*" (29). Morrison shares the same preoccupation, and she depicts this situation in the way that the fathers of Ruby treat "their" women, and how they scapegoat the women in the Convent. Besides, Daly considers that racism functions as an element that patriarchy uses to separate women. Hence, she explains that "beyond racism is sisterhood, naming the crimes against women without paying mindless respect to the "social fabric" of the various andocratic societies, including the one in which we find our Selves imprisoned" (172). Moreover, in her book *Pure Lust*, Daly also recognizes the consequence of race and other forms of oppression in the subjugation of women, which parallels Morrison's views: "for poor women, for women of color and for others whose individual circumstances are particularly oppressive, the struggle

existence and I thank you for this" (1). She also declares that her choice of focus depends on her sources. As she explains, "I wrote *Gyn/Ecology* out of the insights and materials most accessible to me at that time" (1). About the alleged racism and exclusion of Black foremothers Daly clarifies: "when I dealt with myth I used commonly available sources to find what were the controlling symbols behind judeo-christian myth in order to trace a direct line to the myths that legitimate the technological horror show" (1). The argument between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly is provocative. As a matter of fact, this discussion remains controversial to this day, stirring debate and adding polyphony to radical feminist issues.

against the fragmentation of energy that brings physical disease and psychic paralysis is often unspeakably hard” (344). The women of the Convent are a good example of women who have depleted their inner force fighting against the establishment. Morrison also believes that race should not create divisions among women. Patriarchal communities reinforce and promote differentiation based on skin color. On the contrary, the community of women, as exemplified in the Convent, concedes little value to racial differences, and promotes sisterhood as a healing practice. Daly also regards the supernatural as a special form of female empowerment. This power unsettles patriarchal rule; therefore, men feel a compulsion to control it: “patriarchal males, sensing the ultimate threat of Female Sparking,²⁴ make every effort to put out women’s fires whenever we start them” (320). In *Paradise*, the experience of the women of the Convent with the supernatural exemplifies this female sparkle that men need to put out. The men of Ruby interpret the supernatural as a direct threat to their power, and therefore, to their stability. These men need to repress and control a power which they do not understand, the power of femininity. The “female Sparking,” which stands in direct opposition to male “matter of fact,” “rational” thinking, is an overt challenge to the “paradise” that they have built for themselves. In *Pure Lust*, Daly argues that “from the earliest beginnings of our lives all of the agents of patriarchal patterning work unceasingly to destroy women’s Elemental Wildness” (354). Therefore, dominating the women of the Convent is a valid action in the eyes of the murderers. Patriarchal oppressors are willing to prevent any force contrary to their goals, needs, or demands by any and all means necessary.

Radical feminist Marilyn Frye offers a clear explanation of the need of patriarchy to control and dominate women. In her essay “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power,”

²⁴ In her book *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly defines Female Sparking as the special power that women possess, and which is in touch with the magical attributes inside each woman. Female Sparking is the inner force of women, the essence, the internal fire that patriarchal rule constantly tries to put out.

Frye juxtaposes two concepts: “feminist separatism”²⁵ and “male parasitism,”²⁶ which are related to the ideas of Daly and Morrison regarding patriarchal rule. As a matter of fact, each and every woman that visits the Convent puts into practice in some way or another Frye’s concept of separatism. As she points out: “the feminist’s separations are rarely if ever sought or maintained directly as ultimate personal or political ends . . . generally, the separations are brought about and maintained for the sake of something else like independence, liberty, growth, invention, sisterhood, safety, health, or the practice of novel or heretical customs” (2). The women of the Convent deliberately seek, embrace and proclaim separatism from male rule. They create their own sacred space in which they can unleash the power of femininity. However, confronting male rule has serious consequences. Morrison not only proclaims the power of separatism but also denounces its tragic outcome and joins Frye in demonstrating that separatism usually has serious implications.

The reaction of the men of Ruby towards the women of the Convent follows the response pattern that Frye establishes.²⁷ In the end, “separatism” and “parasitism” reveal that the real fight is for power. Frye determines that when women retreat from male dominions, they are blocking the access those men have to them, which means that they are interfering with the male compulsive need to impose and exercise power. As Frye explains: “Male

²⁵ According to Frye, “feminist separation is, of course, separation of various sorts or modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege-this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, by women” (2).

²⁶ Frye explains that “males and females generally live in a relation of parasitism, a parasitism of the male on the female . . . that it is, generally speaking, the strength, energy, inspiration and nurturance of women that keeps men going, and not the strength, aggression, spirituality and hunting of men that keeps women going” (3). She also asserts that “the parasitism of males on females is, as I see it, demonstrated by the panic, rage and hysteria generated in so many of them by the thought of being abandoned by women” (3-4).

²⁷ Frye believes that “men affected by . . . separations generally react with defensive hostility, anxiety and guilt-tripping, not to mention descents into illogical argument which match and exceed their own most fanciful images of female irrationality. My claim is that they are very afraid because they depend very heavily upon the goods they receive from women, and these separations cut them off from those goods” (6).

parasitism means that males *must have access* to women; it is the Patriarchal Imperative . . . female denial of male access to females substantially cuts off a flow of benefits, but it has also the form and full portent of assumption of power (6). The women of the Convent reclaim power as they detach from male supervision. Consequently, this fight for power triggers the final outcome of *Paradise*. The men of Ruby see the all-women community of the Convent as the impending force that will shatter their “paradise.” In the words of Frye: “total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access” (6). When Ruby men fear that they are not able to have access to and therefore control the outcasts of the Convent, they decide to put into practice an extreme mode of parasitism; one in which the parasite ends up killing the host that it feeds upon.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

In *Paradise*, in addition to gender, race plays an important role in the discussion. Intersecting oppressions provide the subtext, which unveils patriarchal oppression. Therefore, a critical approach that combines both race and gender theories offers an important input to this investigation. For this purpose, black feminist thought represents a valuable option. This body of theories includes many of the themes that Morrison explores in her novels. Angela Y. Davis is a pioneer in the field of black feminist thought. Davis’ criticism compromises to reveal the experience of black women living in the United States. Also, she is one of the first authors to center her work on the experiences of black women. Davis’ book *Women, Race and Class* contains essential information to understand the complexity of race and gender interactions. In her critical analysis, she gives a historical account of the social position of black women in America, and how race and gender influence that position. Davis’ approach helps to understand the imposition of race and gender-specific roles on black women. Many of the problems that preoccupy Davis also appear in Morrison’s writing. For instance, Davis refers to

the various stereotypes associated with black women. In *Paradise*, Morrison criticizes and questions those stereotypes by presenting female characters who contradict patriarchal standards. As an example of those misconceptions, the men of Ruby assume that the women in the Convent are “loose” and promiscuous only because they deny access to men’s rules. Phallographic order expects women to live under strict male supervision, following the commands of men, otherwise their allegedly “impetuous” character may result in misconduct. According to patriarchal views this group of women living by themselves in the Convent, are “fallen” women who have lost the favor of the hegemonic group and therefore deserve punishment. In addition, Davis’ concern with the oppression of black women, oftentimes involving sexual abuse, is also present in the novel. Most of the characters suffer abuse from their husbands, parents, and lovers and, in many occasions, this abuse carries sexual connotations. As a matter of fact, this is a recurrent topic in Morrison’s narrative, which openly denounces the victimization of black women who suffer sexual abuse recurrently. In *Paradise* Mavis and Seneca exemplify how patriarchy reduces women of color to sex objects. Mavis suffers the recurrent sexual abuse of her own husband. In like manner, a rich woman recruits Seneca to fulfill her sexual fantasies. In both cases, these colored women fall into pattern of exploitation that repeats itself from the early days of slavery. But Davis also exalts the role of rebellious black women in her writing. She acknowledges the capacity of these oppressed women to find and exercise power. In like manner, Morrison presents colored women who defy submission. Although the colored women depicted in *Paradise* live in a complex web of domination, they are able to fight back and construct a place that meets their social, psychological, and spiritual needs.

Patricia Hill Collins also figures as another important reference in black feminist thought. Like Davis, she focuses on the theme of feminism from the perspective of black women. This approach to feminism is fundamental to grasp the multiplicity of connections

between race, gender, and the supernatural that *Paradise* proposes. Hill Collins explains the scope of black feminist thought as “a critical social theory: [it] encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment” (31). Morrison also acknowledges the differential treatment of black women in her novel. Actually, Morrison takes the discussion one step further, and presents the discrimination of women within an all black community, which makes the discrimination based on skin color even more reprehensible. Hill Collins considers that the essence of black feminist thought resides in its struggle for social justice: “Black feminist thought’s identity as a ‘critical’ social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups” (9). Revealing injustice constitutes one of the major concerns of Morrison’s work as well. The killing of the women in the Convent points to a larger problem of cruelty and violence against black women. The sentiment of injustice lingering in the final pages of *Paradise* reveals the victimization of colored women in general. Abuse occurs on a daily basis and it goes unnoticed, as a crime that society does not want to acknowledge, just as the people of Ruby refuse to take responsibility for the crimes in the Convent: “when they learned there were no dead to report, transport or bury, relief was so great they began to forget what they’d actually done or seen . . . the whole thing might have been sanitized out of existence” (298). To avoid victimization, black feminist thought proposes empowerment as the “escape” route. Hill Collins considers that “black feminist thought cannot challenge intersecting oppressions [of race and gender] without empowering African-American women” (36). In like manner, Morrison advocates for the empowerment of black women. Even though they live under strict patriarchal control, the women of Ruby discover various ways to find a voice and exercise power. They are able to resist oppression, and through female bonding, they confront the impositions of the ruling class.

CULTURAL STUDIES

Simon During defines cultural studies as “the engaged analysis of contemporary cultures” (1). In this sense, the approach to *Paradise* from the perspective of cultural studies proves absolutely necessary. During points out that cultural studies is engaged in the sense that “it is not neutral in relation to the exclusions, injustices, and prejudices that it observes” (1). Therefore, cultural studies as a discipline has a valuable function within the context of the analysis of this literary work. During explains that cultural studies “tend to position itself on the side of those to whom social structures offer least, so that here ‘engaged’ means political, critical” (1). Having in mind the political quality of cultural studies, and how it informs the approach of a black literary production, I include black critics like bell hooks whose political views enrich the discussion of the novel.

In her critical approaches, bell hooks combines key elements of radical feminism, black feminist thought, and insightful views on cultural studies. For this reason, hooks’ theories are an obligatory reference to analyze race and gender in *Paradise*. In her book *Ain’t I a Woman*, hooks advocates for a full recognition of black womanhood. Her main goal is to include black women in the context of feminism. According to hooks, traditional white, bourgeois feminist movements exclude the experience of black women. As she declares when she explains the purpose of this book,

I wanted to provide concrete evidence to refute the arguments of antifeminists who so loudly proclaimed that black women were not victims of sexist oppression and were not in need of liberation . . . I became increasingly aware that I could arrive at a thorough understanding of the black female experience and our relationship to society as a whole only by examining both the politics of racism and sexism from a feminist perspective (13).

hooks' appreciations echo Morrison's preoccupation with voicing the experience of black women in the U.S. The best way to include black women in the discussion of race and gender themes is by writing about black women, from a black feminist perspective. In this way, Morrison accomplishes hooks' ideal in two different ways: she writes from a black womanist point of view, and she writes about matters concerning black women. *Paradise*, for instance, centers on the adversities of black women when dealing with race and gender oppression. Morrison not only acknowledges the presence of black women in her work, but also promotes the understanding of their unfair situation in a highly gendered and racialized social system. Like hooks, Morrison wants to fight the one-dimensional perspective on black women's reality, and presents a more comprehensive view of their reality.

However, voicing the experience of black women is not enough. hooks pursues a higher endeavor. She wants to change the "situation" of black women. She wants to move black women from this traditional marginal position, and she wants to place them in the center of race and gender discussions. Voicing black female experience proves as important as giving those voices the place that they deserve. Black women's voices should not exist in the margins only. They should be part of the center as well. In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, hooks explains how race and gender define the position of black women. Even within the feminist struggle, race and class issues affect the agenda. hooks wants a feminist discourse which is inclusive and transparent, not tinted with racist and classist undertones. She wants to move black women from their marginalized position by making them participate in the feminist discourse from a "black perspective." As she points out, "I emphasize that we need feminist writing that speaks to everyone; that without it feminist education for critical consciousness cannot happen" (xiv). Therefore, black feminist thought should occupy a central position in the discussion of race and gender. Like hooks, Morrison moves black female voices from the margin to the center. She presents the struggle of black women to

occupy a prominent place in intellectual discussions not only as a creative writer but also as a critic. The feminist orientation of *Paradise*, in which a complex web of women's stories interlock, illustrates Morrison's concern with re-defining the margins. As race and gender collide, the women in the novel are able to come to terms with their own lives, and find spiritual alternatives to confront patriarchal oppression. Like hooks, Morrison challenges the established order, and gives black women the opportunity of re-birth. The women in *Paradise* have the opportunity to speak for themselves, make their own decisions, and find their own path. Although patriarchy pushes them to the margins, the women in *Paradise* fight back, and re-create their own experiences. The Convent women in spite of their race, reconcile with their past. They revise their lives, and finally, they find plenitude. They are like the survivors of a shipwreck when they reach a safe port:

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise (318).

hooks suggests a non-traditional approach to feminism. One that is "liberatory", in the sense that it condemns not only gender-based discrimination, but fights all other types of discrimination as well. As she explains in *Talking Back*, "a liberatory feminist movement aims to transform society by eradicating patriarchy, by ending sexism and sexist oppression, by challenging the politics of domination on all fronts" (50). Morrison shares this way of thinking. She provides her writing with a non-traditional feminist view. Her writing goes beyond denouncing sexist oppression. It challenges other forms of oppression such as race, class, and religion. Morrison feminist view is "liberatory" as well, to the point that she even acknowledges the supernatural as a way in which oppressed women can fight against

domination. In *Paradise*, the women in the Convent practice this type of “healing” feminism, which is based on female bonding. Through the creation of a community, which ignores patriarchal impositions of race, gender, and creed, these women find a space to re-create and re-define themselves. Morrison acknowledges the power of feminism both as a political discourse and as a liberating practice. The feminism that challenges oppression of any kind proposes a radical demand for freedom.

CHAPTER II. THE OUTSIDE WORLD

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison establishes three locales: the outside world, Ruby, and the Convent. Analyzing and exploring these locales proves an important approach to the novel. In this sense, the signature aspects of Morrison's writing surface in the multiplicity of scenarios. The main purpose of this variety of locations is to give polyphony to the narrative as well as to add a contrasting effect in the tone of the novel. Morrison relies on the plurality of interactions that the collision of the outside world, the all-black community of Ruby, and the Convent provoke. The novel offers diverse layers of meaning and interpretation that illustrate Morrisonian narrative.²⁸ Her writing departs from traditional writing standards and offers innovative resources where multiplicity is a signature trait. One word, one image, one situation, one character has diverse functions and interpretations in her novels. As Wendy Harding explains, "Morrison's fiction generates innovative artistic responses to sociopolitical problems" (8). In the case of *Paradise*, presenting three different spaces of interaction is a way of expanding the narrative possibilities of the novel and exploring the interactions of race, gender, and the supernatural at a new level, because, as Harding declares, "replete with a multilayered signification as it is, the Morrisonian interface simulates the violence of conflicts and the forces of resistance that underpin it" (8). Presenting the influence and the impact of the outside world on these communities confirms the fact that Morrison's writing has the political task of questioning the traditional order. According to Harding, Morrison challenges the establishment by presenting "a further dimension in her writing –its unpredictable departures into inscrutability . . . [which] are marked by abrupt (or

²⁸ Philip Page asserts that "readers are familiar with Morrison's tendency to delve beyond the *what* into the more problematic *how* and *why*; with her nonlinear, polyvocal, multistranded narratives; and with such challenging techniques as jump-cutting radically from one scene and/or perspective to another and dropping unexplained tidbits that leave readers suspended, waiting for more information" (637). Thus, aspects such as multiplicity, plurality, and indeterminacy explain Morrison's decision to include contrasting locales in *Paradise*.

imperceptible) breakups in logical, syntactical, or semantic continuity or tantalizing ambivalences” (8). By opposing one-dimensional writing, “Morrison’s work exploits the territory unmapped by rules [without] produc[ing] poetic misrule or ethnic funkiness” (Harding 8). Thus, the different locales support not only the aesthetic but also the ideological purpose of Morrison’s work, to convey the diverse ways in which race, gender, and the supernatural function in the novel.

The concept of the outside world²⁹ functions as a recurrent topic in African American literature. Throughout history, black communities have suffered systematic alienation and separation from mainstream society in the U.S. This exclusion has often been violent and brutal because it relies on physical and psychological abuse. Hence, black authors illustrate the outside world as a menacing and dangerous place that threatens the integrity of black people. Critics and writers explore this separation of the black community from the outside world. As bell hooks asserts in her book *Talking Back*, “black people in the United States share with black people in South Africa and with people of color globally both the pain of white-supremacist oppression and exploitation and the pain that comes from resistance and struggle. The first pain wounds us, the second pain helps heal our wounds” (112). Taking into consideration hooks’ point of view, the black/white opposition and its reenactments provokes the friction between the black community and the outside world. From that point on, numerous types of oppression and alienation arise. Since white supremacy forces black

²⁹ The concept of the outside world refers to what is alien to black communities. Audre Lorde Explains in *Sister Outsider* that “Black people . . . must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves” (6). In other words, those external forces that threaten the integrity of the individuals or the integrity of the black community represent the outside world. However, the outside world epitomizes diverse connotations as presented in the novel. Morrison uses this concept at different levels, and she also deconstructs the concept of the outsider. The menaces of the outside world in *Paradise* vary according to the approach of those who suffer them and, in an ironic twist of meaning, the outsiders are not necessarily alien to the black community.

people to live in the margins, hooks explains living in the margins openly as well as the meaning of the outside world for black people as follows:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. For black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world, but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to beyond the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town . . . there were laws to ensure our return. To not return was to risk being punished. Living as we did –on the edge- we developed a particular way of seeing reality. (*Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, xvi)

In like manner, Patricia Hill Collins explores the phenomenon of ghettoization in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. Ghettoization refers to the invisible boundaries that delimit all-black communities, which echoes hooks' description of her all-black town. According to Hill Collins, all- Black³⁰ communities “[are] designed to foster the political control and economic exploitation of Black Americans” (9). This practice of grouping black people in all-black communities, with all-black schools and all-black churches has a double effect accomplishing the original purpose of alienation but, at the same time, “[providing] a separate space where African-American women and men could use African-derived ideas to craft distinctive oppositional knowledges designed to resist racial oppression” (Hill Collins 9-10). In this way, the marginalization of black people in the U.S. has created a solid consciousness of the dangers of the outside reality, and has helped them learn how to rely on their own

³⁰ Some black writers use Black with a capital “b” to denote race. Whenever the term “Black” appears capitalized it is the choice of the author.

communities for support. Hill Collins explains that “confining African-Americans to all-Black areas in the rural South and Northern urban ghettos fostered the solidification of a distinctive ethos in Black civil society regarding language, religion, family structure, and community politics” (10). Ghettoization, thus, helps to construct the identity of African American communities. Although these separate spaces intend to disconnect and divide, black people transform them and use them to create, foster and develop a sense of identity that unites all-black communities. Writing by black authors tends to reflect on the self-contained aspect of all-black communities which implies, accordingly, a general mistrust of outside influences. Therefore, the “out there,” the outside world, becomes an essential concept integrated to the African-American reality because the outside world contains, and at the same time defines, the black community. In this sense, ghettoization has a double effect. On the one hand, it alienates, separates, and puts the black community at odds with the outside world. On the other hand, it gives black communities the space to create their own art and identity. Toni Morrison delves into the meaning and importance of black communities in her literary works extensively. As a matter of fact, she envisions her prose as “village” literature, a type of literature that not only defines but also criticizes and serves the black community. As Morrison herself explains, “the function of novels in this literature is to ‘clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those elements from the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment’” (xii quoted in Taylor-Guthrie). Morrison’s novels deal with this duality of black communities that become both a confining space and a safe haven for African Americans. But also, the problems within the black communities that surface in *Paradise* appear since Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Nelly McKay asserts that “[*The Bluest Eye*] examines the experiences of a young black girl as she copes with the ideal of beauty and the reality of violence within the black community . . . ‘violence,’ says Morrison, ‘is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do’” (139 quoted in Taylor-Guthrie). Morrison addresses the peril of the isolation of black

communities, which separates from other realities and sever their links with other communities. This concern evolves as one of the major issues in *Paradise*. The all-black community of Ruby faces the challenge of maintaining its core values and at the same time of relating to the outside world. In this sense, the “Out There” plays an important role in Morrison’s work, helping to identify, define, and criticize black communities.

This preoccupation about the relationship between black societies and the outside world acquires special connotations in *Paradise*. The “Out There” represents a different challenge, conflict, or menace not only for each community but also for each character. Like hooks and Hill Collins, in her novel Morrison defines the significance of the “Out There” for black people:

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose- behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There were your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of white men looked like a posse, being alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. (16)

The overwhelming anxiety that the outside world produces in black people involves serious conflicts in the novel. The “Out There”³¹ stands for eminent peril for both Ruby and the Convent. However, Morrison refuses to present those conflicts in a traditional binary opposition. She employs indeterminacy instead, a signature trait of black writing that challenges conventional expectations. Besides, she combines diverse aspects that help to elaborate on the complexity of the confrontation between the community and the outside

³¹ The concept “Out There” appears in capital letters in the text of the novel as a choice of the author to emphasize its importance.

world. In *Paradise*, the outside world embodies a lingering and constant threat, and at the same time, a reminder of past violence, and beyond that it provides an excuse for the re-creation of abuse. The ways in which race, gender and the supernatural interact in the “Out There” creates the tension between the outside world and the other communities in the novel. Different examples that show the conflicts of the outside world³² appear throughout the text. Each of these instances points out how what lays “Out There” has shaped both Ruby and the Convent as places for refuge and solace. Hence, aspects of race, gender and the supernatural fuse to create that “void” that challenges the stability of the characters constantly.

³² Linden Peach emphasizes the importance of the “Out There” in *Paradise*. He considers that the “Out There” in African-American mythology is very much an urban experience. However, ‘Out There’ is not based solely on the antagonism black and white. What has happened to the previous generations does not justify but helps explain the solipsism and the behavior of the men of Haven” (169). Besides, the critic asserts that “a key irony in the book is that . . . there is another ‘Out There’ for women, [where] the threat comes not only from white but black men and in some cases from females” (170). In this sense, the Convent functions as a refuge for those women who have confronted the cruelty of the outside world. As Peach points out, “nearly all women who come to the Convent have suffered physical, sexual and mental abuse, usually from men” (170). According to Peach, the different stories of the women who come to the Convent help to materialize the significance of the “Out There” for them: “the various details gradually build up a picture of the ‘Out There’ for women. And because they are released piecemeal and often out of chronological sequence, they not only reflect the chaotic, arbitrary nature of the violence and the harassment but provide us with the kind of raw, unnarrativised black woman’s history that interests Morrison” (170). Moreover, he believes that “presented in this way, the violence and abuse which women have suffered ‘Out There’ is contextualized within a larger pattern of institutionalized or arbitrary abuse—the way in which people in Ruby are ranked according to their skin color . . . not surprisingly the Convent offers women, from Pallas’s point of view ‘a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters’” (171). Peach concludes that “the way in which ‘Out There’ is rendered complex in *Paradise* reflects the increasingly complicated and contradictory nature of identity in Morrison’s work” (171).

RACE IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Indeterminacy remains an important trait of Morrison's narrative. For this reason, the traditional opposition black/white has a different connotation in *Paradise*. Even if most of the characters in her other novels are black, I think that Morrison decides not to acknowledge race as a feature of her characters explicitly in the case of *Paradise*.³³ As part of that indeterminacy, since the very first sentence: "They shoot the white girl first" (3) and throughout the novel, the racial identity of most characters remains undetermined. Morrison does not identify the white girl. Thus, she recognizes that she decides to minimize race as a determinant reference to her characters because she wants readers to approach the novel without racial prejudice.³⁴ In my opinion, the black/white opposition in *Paradise* proves different from other traditional approaches because Morrison keeps the readers guessing about the race of the characters, which provokes, questions, and challenges all the previous (mis) conceptions about race that the reader may bring to the novel. Although the story does not center on the white racist oppression on black people, white domination determines important themes of the novel. The "Out There" remains decidedly a white supremacist world that defines the way in which black characters perceive their reality. This outside world has very specific overtones for black people. First of all, the "Out There" exists as a lingering threat, an omnipresent peril that haunts black people's existence. In this sense, black people respond to the abuse from the outside forces with silence. They ignore and refuse to

³³ In his article "Furrowing All the Brows," Philip Page comments on Morrison's decision to carry out race ambiguity, and he concludes that "Morrison's own brow was also apparently furrowed while she wrote the novel, for she describes having to work very hard to create three-dimensional characters without indicating their race" (637).

³⁴ Regarding the issue of the race of her characters, Toni Morrison declares in an interview with Bill Moyers: "what I really want to do, and expect to do, is not identify my characters by race. But I won't be writing about white people. I'll be writing about black people. It will be part of my job to make sure my readers aren't confused. But can you think what it would mean for me and my relationship to language and to texts to be able to write without having to always specify to the reader the race of the characters?" (quoted in Tylor-Guthrie 266).

acknowledge the outside world. They even refuse to give it a name. They do not want to mention it. They just call it the “Out There,” and they know all the connotations of discrimination, violence and oppression that it involves.

Steward Morgan reflects on the duress that their forefathers had to face outside of the limits of an all-black community: “Saddled on Night, he discovered every time the fresh wonder of knowing that on one’s own land you could never be lost the way Big Papa and Big Daddy and all seventy-nine were after leaving Fairly, Oklahoma” (95). However, being lost in the “out there” does not only mean losing their way for these families; being lost means that they are at the mercy of constant abuse and peril. As Morgan ponders, “on foot and completely lost, they were. And angry. But not afraid of anything . . . it was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones” (95). The sentiments of despair, anger and shame that the forefathers experience run down in the younger generations, and they set the tone of how the patriarchal members of the all-black community of Ruby confront the “out there,” which becomes prophetic. In addition, Morgan tries to understand what it would be like to face such a harsh reality: “how would he have felt if some highfalutin men in collars and good shoes had told [his pregnant wife,] ‘Get away from here,’ and he, Steward, couldn’t do a thing about it? Even now, in 1973, riding his own land with free wind blowing Night’s mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody” (96). Clearly, the Morgan brothers, as leaders of the patriarchal rule of Ruby, assume that they have the moral and spiritual obligation to “protect” their families of the abuses of the “Out There” at no matter what cost, which also supports the patriarchal sentiment of man-as-head of the family. However, their intention to “safeguard” their families and their town reveals other interests. Keeping in mind that the Morgan brothers also belong to the elite class of Ruby, their compulsive obsession to

defend “their” people reveals their need to preserve control over a wide variety of aspects of Ruby’s life including traditions, the moral and religious standards, and of course the financial system of the town.³⁵ Head of the family and head of the town, the Morgans could do anything to maintain the *status quo*. The “Out There” lingers as a menace of the past that can have serious consequences in the generations of the present. The damage that the outside world inflicts upon this all-black community is ready to ignite a dangerous reaction to any potential threat. In this sense, it is my interpretation that Morrison is also contemplating the tremendous challenge of modern black society in America. Although black people confront abuse and discrimination on a daily basis, they have to channel all that anger and helplessness in a way that does not imply their own destruction. They have the double task of protecting their community and of projecting to the outside world in a positive manner.

Morrison states that the way in which the people of Ruby react to the outside world might lead to the annihilation of the community. *Paradise* makes a powerful statement on the dangers of the isolation that Ruby represents, which could end up in this town consuming itself. Ruby becomes a fortress, but at the same time, the town could become a vault that traps and suffocates the dreams and aspirations of young people especially. Under severe patriarchal rule Ruby refuses to change. The revolutionary critical views of Reverend Misner help to better understand the whole situation: “How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders?” (306) Misner implies that a town ruled by people who prey on their fellow citizens has an unpromising future. Accordingly, Billie Delia, victim of the town’s ostracism, decides to pursue her personal goals elsewhere. Like Misner, she has the

³⁵ Philip Page explains that this urge of the men of Ruby to exercise their power to “protect” their families and also to provide for a safe place to live can have serious consequences: “[men’s] attempt to enforce an overly rigid community harmony is not only deadening but can easily disrupt the desired harmony. Unity that is too tight only precipitates the dissolution it is designed to prevent” (644). In this way, Morrison calls attention on the rigorous methods of patriarchal control, which have destructive results.

capability to see the sickening enclosure of Ruby as “a town that had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded in swallowing her mother and almost broke her own self. A backward noplace ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively free, unarmed females the mutiny of mares and so got rid of them” (308). In this way, through the patriarchal establishment of Ruby, Morrison cautions us about the dangers of ideological “inbreeding” and about creating defenses that might end up trapping and asphyxiating.

Discrimination sets the limits between black people and white people. As hooks estates, these boundaries clearly exist for both groups, and although most of them do not appear as written laws, black and whites alike respect the margins. I consider that differentiation starts very early. In *Paradise*, from early childhood, black children “understand” that the outside world denies them the rights and advantages reserved for the white ruling class. One of the characters of the novel, K.D., has a bitter recollection of his childhood, which involves the boundaries of the outside world. He is the son of Ruby and the nephew of Stuart and Deacon Morgan, who are prominent members of the town. K.D., an emblematic character of the community, experiences the cruelty of the “Out There.” Ruby, K.D.’s mother, dies a victim of the apathy of the outside world when doctors deny her medical assistance because the hospital that she attends being seriously ill, does not have a ward for people of color. For this reason, the people of the all-black town regard Ruby as an innocent victim of limitless malice, and K.D. reminds them of the perils of indifference. Therefore K.D. receives much attention from his uncles and the other members of the community. He turns out to be a spoiled and self-indulgent young man. Therefore, K.D. exemplifies how the new generations deal with all the frustration, bitterness, and pain. As a matter of fact, I think that Morrison uses the character of K.D. to confront the ambivalence of the new generations, which inherit the pain of the past but at the same time do not fully appreciate the sacrifices of their ancestors.

Although they suffer subjugation, the new generations do not take responsibility for the well-being of the community and take their “freedom” for granted. K.D. represents the type of young adult that fails to honor the past and therefore has no capacity to project into the future. Although he knows about the hardship and sacrifices of his forefathers (and foremothers, of course), his sole preoccupation relies on his self-satisfaction interfering with any possibility to create solid bonds with other people (especially women) and the community.³⁶ In my opinion, Morrison’s harsh criticism of this type of character reveals her preoccupation on how some members of the new generations do not want to help to construct communal identity because they do not have any ideals, and they do not acknowledge their past. K.D. turns out to be a whimsical and violent boy who will inherit the patriarchal status of his uncles without making any effort whatsoever. Yet, K.D. learns very young what boundaries imply. He remembers one particular trip with his uncles, in which he sees and feels discrimination: “Behind a chain-link fence bordered by white seamless concrete he saw green water. He knows now it was average size, but then it filled his horizon. It seemed to him as though hundreds of white children were bobbing in it, their voices a cascade of the world’s purest happiness, a glee so sharply felt it had brought tears” (57). Morrison begins this apparently innocent scene with a “chain-link fence bordered by white seamless concrete” (57) that sets off the limits. This fence, the material border of a limitation, implies more ideological and psychological limits. K.D. understands that the outside world reserves the promise of a life filled with happiness and glee for white people that he is not allowed to share in the swimming pool. This is the way in which discrimination works in the

³⁶ K.D. has controversial relationships with women. He falls prey of his instincts and gets involved with Gigi in a turbulent romance, which only means pleasure and elation to him. At the same time, he has to confront an arranged marriage with his girlfriend Arnette to satisfy the impositions of his uncles. At some point, in an outburst of anger he beats Arnette, which demonstrates that he has no self-control and also that he does not respect women. Eventually, K.D. yields to the social pressure of the community and marries Arnette demonstrating, in this way, that his sole interest relies on his own well-being because he fears losing the favor of his uncles and also his privileged status he holds in Ruby.

outside world, making the difference between blacks and whites. This profound realization awakens such sentiments in K.D. that it brings tears to his eyes.

Acts of violence exemplify of how black people relate to the outside world. One of the crudest moments of the novel occurs when Ruby needs help because she is ill. This passage, in which Ruby, “the sweet, modest, laughing girl” (113) confronts the “Out There,” inspires the ideal of the black people of the town to stay away from discrimination. They actually name their city after this beloved woman who is the personification of white oppression:

[Ruby] had gotten sick on the trip; seemed to heal, but failed rapidly again. When it became clear that she needed serious medical help, there was no way to provide it. They drove her to Demby, then further to Middleton. No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them. She had lost control, then consciousness by the time they got to the second hospital. She died on the waiting room bench while the nurse tried to find a doctor to examine her. When the brothers learned the nurse had been trying to reach a veterinarian, and they gathered their dead sister in their arms, their shoulders shook all their way home. Ruby was buried, without the benefit of a mortuary, in a pretty spot on Steward’s ranch. (113)

I consider that in this world, black people actually have the quality of sub-human creatures. This extreme violence annuls blacks. This cruel episode sets the tone of the novel because it illustrates how in the black/white opposition, white rule regards colored people as little less than animals.³⁷ The outside world, the world of white supremacy, reveals itself as an

³⁷ According to traditional perspective, animals belong to a “lower” category when compared to human beings. This conception obeys to the general notions of speciesism, which imply that humans are superior to animals by nature and therefore, have the right to rule over them. Experts assert that speciesism “involves the assignment of different values, rights, or special consideration to individuals solely on the basis of their species membership. The term is mostly used by animal rights advocates, who argue that speciesism is a prejudice similar to racism or sexism . . . it usually refers to ‘human speciesism,’ the exclusion of all non human animals

extremely dangerous place for black people. The outside world denies the spiritual integrity of people of color and the ideological alienation that K.D. suffers becomes actual physical abuse, as in the case of Ruby. In other words, the violence of the outside world can have ideological and psychological manifestations as for K.D. and his memory of the white children at the pool, or it can have a physical manifestation the case of Ruby shows, which results in her death literally.

The “Out There” presents recurrent forms of oppression. The violence and discrimination of white supremacist society often appears in the form of psychological abuse.³⁸ Toni Morrison reveals how the racism and the division of color operate in America in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

As slaves and ex-slaves, black people were manageable and findable, as no other slave society would be, because they were black. So there is an enormous impact from the simple division of color –more than sex, age, or anything else. The complaint

from the protection afforded to humans. It can also refer to the more general idea of assigning value to a being on the basis of species membership alone . . .” (1). In the case of *Paradise*, the white dominant group acts according to the premises of speciesism and assigns a “lower category” to black people, which they consider “less than human.” Accordingly, the doctors at Demby Hospital try to get a veterinarian to attend on Ruby because she cannot enter the ward assigned to white people.

³⁸ The black/white opposition appears in all of Morrison’s novels. However, she denounces discrimination in a very subtle way by incorporating vivid passages or images to the main narrative. For instance, in her novel *Home*, a young black couple suffers physical abuse while on a trip. Frank, the main character remembers the episode: “You didn’t see that?’ ‘No. What was it?’ ‘That there is the husband. He got off at Elko to buy some coffee or something back there’. . . ‘the owner or costumers or both kicked him out. Actually. Put their feet in his butt and kicked him down, kicked some more, and when his lady came to help, she got a rock thrown in her face” (24-25). Morrison does not even have to mention the skin color of the aggressors as the black/white opposition automatically reveals that white people have abused black people physically systematically in the U.S. The man continues with the story: “We got them back in the car, but the crowd kept the yelling up till we pulled away. Look,’ he said. ‘See that?’ He pointed to egg yolks, not sliding now but sticking like phlegm to the window. ‘Anybody report to the conductor?’ Frank asked him. ‘You crazy?’ ‘Probably”” (25). Morrison points out a very important aspects of the black/white opposition in this almost “casual” intervention in the narrative: it reveals violence, mistrust, and hatred on the part of white people and it also reveals fear, repressed anger, impotence, and courage on the part of black people. Indeed, Morrison’s tone does not appear as accusatory or condemnatory. As a matter of fact, she wants the actions to speak for themselves. This passage illustrates clearly how the black/white opposition traditionally operates in America.

is not being seen for what one is. That is the reason why my hatred of white people is justified and their hatred for me is not. (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 127)

In my opinion, the division of color that Morrison explains accounts for the decision of the black people of Ruby to separate from white society. At one point, the constant threat against blacks becomes unbearable. For this reason, they decide to retreat and reinforce the limits of their own world and create a space in which they protect their families from victimization. The simple idea of risking their own lives remains an inconceivable possibility. They strengthen their defenses and brag about it: “they were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white man’s kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility –neither of which they could bear to contemplate” (99). It is my thesis that the underlying oppression of the outside world forces the people of Ruby to reinforce the limits that white supremacy imposes. Besides, Morrison emphasizes on patriarchal mechanisms of control, in which the most powerful group, the white male elite, in this case, has absolute control over the dominated group. They even have sexual access to the women of the dominated group as a way of control and repression to the point that rape represents both a “certainty” and a “possibility.” Thus, following patriarchal standards, the men of Ruby cannot allow anyone to have access of any type, and even less sexual access, to “their” women. Exposing “their” women to the sexual advances of white elite men would imply not only the obvious atrocity of the rape, but also it would menace the patriarchal mission that the men of the community have to protect and safeguard “their women” as property.³⁹ For this

³⁹ In this case, the men of Ruby want total control of “their” women and as Mary Daly explains, “it is quite understandable that males in power should fear ‘losing control.’ It may seem less comprehensible, at first, that women should experience terror of ‘getting out of control.’ However, adherence to ‘the role’ for women has been equated with safety, shelter, and –most serious of all- sanity” (*Pure Lust* 410). Being this the case, by refraining “their” women from working in white’s kitchens the male counterparts of the white elite assert their own power, control, and domination in Ruby and provide “security” for “their” women. However, Daly concludes that “women of the Right and women of the Left as well as women of the middle/muddle road, have

reason, they decide to alienate themselves even more, and adopt stricter rules in order to evade violence and victimization. This all-black community decides to repel oppression by not relating to the white world in any way. They prefer the harsh work of the fields to the possibility of abuse at the hands of the white ruling class. Morrison thus defines the dynamics of the black/white interaction in the United States. In spite of their fight for equality and inclusion, people of color remain outsiders in the eyes of the hegemonic society. I consider that Morrison elucidates the way in which racism operates within the individual: “racism hurts in a very personal way. Because of it, people do all sorts of things in their personal lives and love relationships based on differences in values and class and education and their conception of what it means to be Black in this society” (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 135). In this way, Morrison wants to show in her books how black people respond to racism in this society. Although they are the targets of continuous abuse, they learn to protect and defend each other to survive. This explains the way in which black people use ideology in *Paradise* to protect their children from the physical and psychological victimization of white people, like those “parents who wiped the spit and tears from their children’s faces and said, ‘Never mind, honey. Never you mind. You are not and never will be a nigger, a coon, a jig, a jungle bunny not any other thing white folks teach their children to say. What you are is God’s” (212). Morrison portrays how abuse starts at an early age, which intensifies its effect and also implies continuity and perpetuation in future generations.

It is my interpretation that Morrison warns about the pernicious consequences of reaffirming these patterns of abuse in the black/white antagonism. The episode of the lost white couple with the sick baby proves extremely significant: “a station wagon drove up and

more to dread than abandonment by their male ‘protectors.’ The patriarchally embedded fears have made women terrified of our Selves, our Souls, our Sanity. Succumbing to these terrors would mean settling for inanity” (*Ibid* 410). In other words, women pay a high price for male “protection” because they give away their own “Selves” in exchange.

parked so close to the store, both Misner and Anna could see the fever in the baby's blue eyes. The mother held the child over her shoulder and stroked its yellow hair" (121). These white people prefer to drive in an unknown road, with the menace of an upcoming blizzard, than accepting the help of colored people. "Ask your wife to come in out the cold" (121), offers Anna, then Misner advises, "tell your wife to bring that baby inside" (122). But the answer is adamant: "the man came back shaking his head. 'I'll just keep the motor running. She says she'll stay put" (122). Racism represents a powerful social construct instilled in the collective unconsciousness of people. In this case, racialized assumptions turn out to be even stronger than the instinct of this white couple to save their child. Yet, misunderstandings and prejudices circulate both ways. When Stewart Morgan learns about the strangers in Ruby, he is ready to respond to the situation and becomes relentless:

"Who all is that?" asked Steward.

"Just some lost folks." Anna handed him a thirty-two tin of Blue Boy.

"Lost folks or lost whites?"

"Oh Steward, please."

"Big difference, Anna girl. Big. Right, Reverend?" Misner was just stepping back in.

"They get lost like everybody else," said Anna.

"Born lost. Take over the world and still lost. Right, Reverend?"

"You just contradicted yourself." Anna laughed.

"God has one people, Steward. You know that." Misner rubbed his hands then blew on them. (122-123)

The result of this mutual intolerance is catastrophic. I consider that Morrison elaborates on a reversal of the story of Ruby in this passage. The reversal has a special connotation because it demonstrates that violence, oppression, and discrimination are potentially destructive in either direction, even if it obviously affects black people much more. In this case, the probable victims are white. They fall prey to their own short-sightedness and lack of compassion. Although a fake sentiment of camaraderie prevails, and things seem to go on smoothly, a lot of underlying tension exists. The white man asking for directions in an all-black town, the sick baby, the white woman refusing to enter the store, Anna and Misner trying to help, and then Steward Morgan trying to control the situation all point to impending calamity. The decision of the white man to leave as soon as possible reflects his distress. Even though he knows about the upcoming danger of the weather, he prefers to continue his trip: "You might want to ride [the blizzard] out somewhere. Gas station on eighteen. Wouldn't go no further than that if I was you.' 'I'll beat it . . . I'll gas up on eighteen, but we crossing that state line today. Thank you. You all been a big help. 'Preciate it.' 'They never listen,' said Steward as the station wagon drove away" (123). As in the story of Ruby, prejudice triumphs over common sense and the needed help never comes. Furthermore, with this episode, the author sets the precedent for other tragedies to come. The white couple seems more worried about the possibility of spending the night in an all-black town than about the peril of freezing to death, or their baby dying of fever. Their unjustified fear, based on racial prejudice and discrimination, has a high price. White people assume that black people are dangerous, violent and unreliable. However, this fear may result of the impending possibility of retaliation. White people have a constant apprehension of a reversal of discrimination, in which they might become the victims. Obviously, this uncalled for fear has its origin in the way white people have treated black people historically.

As Morrison explains, black people visualize evil, which includes racism, in a different way: “we [black people] believe that evil has a natural place in the universe. We try to avoid it or defend ourselves against it but we are not surprised at its existence or horrified or outraged. We may in fact live right next door to it, not only in the form of something metaphysical, but also in terms of people” (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 62). In this sense, my interpretation is that black people would not seek to destroy or eliminate the perpetrator of evil, which however would be a typical response of white supremacy. Black people would avoid racist violence, which explains why the people of Ruby separate from the “Out There,” and which also explains their fear of outsiders. In the end, the alarm of the white couple demonstrates the racialized set of mind of the hegemonic society. This passage provides us with important insight on the futility of racism: unfounded fear and anger that has serious consequences not only for the victim but also for the victimizer.

However, besides the black/white opposition, I consider that Morrison shows other preoccupations. She analyzes race relationships among black people. Morrison’s novels present mostly black characters, and *Paradise* continues with that tendency. In this way, the author offers an opportunity to confront racial issues from a new perspective. Discrimination, violence, and abuse transcend the limits of the traditional black/white duality effectively, permeating colored communities. I strongly believe that in *Paradise*, Morrison shows authentic concern for diverse signs of oppression, like discrimination based on skin tone, class, and gender, that exist within all-black communities. The concept of “disallowance” allows to understand how black people use the black/white opposition to replicate abuse. The term relates to class issues specifically. Black communities imitate the hegemonic economic model, in which not only material wealth but also skin tone constitute important markers of class and status. In other words, according to this model, disfavored dark-skinned people are at the bottom of the socio-economic scale. Consequently, the impoverished dark-skinned

people of Ruby suffer constant dis-allowance. They are “not allowed” because white towns and prosperous black towns of lighter skinned people consider them dangerous outsiders and a potential burden. The Christmas play that the children of Ruby perform every year illustrates the time of hardship of disallowance, when other towns constantly rejected the founding families. Using the gospels as reference, the people of Ruby recreate the hardship that Joseph and Mary suffered during their trip to Bethlehem. According to the tradition, the holy family cannot find accommodation in the inns of the small town, and they have to look for shelter in the manglers with the animals, where Jesus is born. For this reason, the holy family stands as symbol of modesty and dispossession in the Christian tradition. They endure the cruelty of the world even when they possess the absolute divine grace –the son of God. The people of Ruby establish a parallelism between themselves and the holy family. However, they adapt the religious tradition to reinforce the ideology of their own hegemonic group. Thus, material possessions, skin color, and gender roles function as pivotal elements of discrimination in the play: “four figures in felt hats and too big suits stand at a table, counting giant dollar bills. The face of each one is hidden by a yellow and white mask featuring gleaming eyes and snarling lips, red as a fresh wound” (208). The retelling of the journey of the Holy Family engraves the cruelty of disallowance in the minds of the people of Ruby: “they count money, make slurping noises and do not stop when a parade of holy families dressed in torn clothes and moving in a slow two-step approaches them. Seven couples line up before the table of money. The boys carry staffs; the girls cuddle baby dolls” (208). The issue of disallowance reinforces the idea of the “Out There” as a menacing place. The outside world represents dangers that come not only from the white ruling class but also from flourishing black communities. Interestingly enough, the ruling class of Ruby ascribes a double meaning to the Christmas play. On one hand the play functions as a cautionary tale that warns people about the risks of the outside world and on the other hand, the ruling class uses the Christmas play to assert their power and status. They establish a direct connection

between the founding families and the holy family, which suggests almost a divine origin.⁴⁰ Besides that, only the people who belong to the “original” families participate in the play, which implies a kind of “royal” exclusivity. The threat of the outside world with the constant “disallowance” provides the ruling class of Ruby with the perfect motive to justify and assert control.

This continuous disallowance, which they revive every year, defines the idiosyncrasy of the town of Ruby. As the narrator indicates, “in staging the school’s Christmas play the whole town helped or meddled: older men repaired the platform, assembled the crib; young ones fashioned new innkeepers and freshened the masks with paint. Women made doll babies, and children drew colored pictures of Christmas dinner food” (185). This activity, which involves the whole town, reenacts the dangers of the “Out There”. Also, the play justifies the tendency of the people of Ruby to remain isolated from the outside world and to respond to race and class issues in an aggressive manner. As a matter of fact, the people of Ruby take the concept of “disallowance” and transform it into the mythical foundation of the town. Rejected from the outside world, they learn to see themselves as “the chosen ones,” and automatically close their defenses. Thus, any exterior influence becomes a threat to their integrity. The Christmas play also reflects this reality. The black people of Ruby consider themselves “the holy families,” and they firmly believe that they should destroy anything or anyone who would try to attempt to change that. In one part of the play, well-to-do people

⁴⁰ Rob Davidson explains that what hides behind this necessity of the fathers of Ruby to acknowledge their “pure” origin turns out to be their need to legitimize their power and thus their right to assert control over the community: “The essence of the Morgan mentality [is] the perpetual ‘state of emergency,’ [which] is one of their chief tactics for retaining power, as it justifies –in their minds, at least- practically any course of action. Of course, the Morgans are not merely brute terrorists. Their strategy for maintaining their position can be more subtle: they understand, on some level, the power of narrative to establish moral authority, and this is why communal historiography –that is, a tightly controlled version of the town’s history- becomes paramount” (359). Thus the Christmas pageant represents an excellent opportunity to ascribe an almost “divine” category to the origin of the founding families, which will also eventually justify their power and any measure of control that they want to put into practice.

humiliate and mortify the founding families by giving them leftovers of food and a few coins to get rid of them. The prosperous communities do not show sympathy or compassion for the founding families. They just want these poor intruders out of their territory. The founding families react in anger because they are not looking for charity or pity. They want an opportunity to establish themselves and grow as a community. In response to the “disallowance,” the founding families invoke the wrath of God, who according to their beliefs is on the side of the poor and the dispossessed. This also reinforces the idea that they are “the chosen ones,” and that they benefit from special divine protection:

The masked ones reach under the table and lift up big floppy cardboard squares pasted with pictures of food. “Here take this and get on out of here.” Throwing the food pictures on the floor, they laugh and jump about. The holy families rear back as though snakes were being tossed at them. Pointing fingers and waving fists, they chant: “God will crumble you. God Will crumble you.” The audience hums agreement: “Yes he will. Yes he will.” (211)

Also, this passage foreshadows how the people of Ruby react to exterior menacing forces. The fact that they believe that “God will crumble” their enemies validates any response that they might have to prevent eminent peril, even if this involves the use of force and violence. They displace the responsibility for their actions and place it in God’s hands who, in fact “crumbles” their enemies according to their reasoning. Their vision of a punishing God also serves as an excuse and a justification to sustain and validate the atrocities of patriarchal rule. When they yell “He” will crumble you, it is not “Him” but “them” who will go to any lengths to destroy possible menaces and protect their power. Davidson points out that “in *Paradise*, every potential threat to the *status quo* becomes an emergency for the Morgans and their sympathizers . . . and as the assault on the Convent demonstrates, to preserve their power the older men are capable of terrible violence” (359). This vision of a punishing God

synchronizes with patriarchal standards: a God full of wrath, anger, and thirst for revenge whose almighty power crushes the enemies. In many ways, this vision of a punishing God confirms Mary Daly's notion of patriarchy as a state of "necrophilia," which kills, destroys, and annihilates.⁴¹ In addition to that, Morrison reveals that racial relations are tense and complicated through the concept of "disallowance." Oppression, abuse, and discrimination do not come from the white supremacist group exclusively. As in the case of the founding families of Ruby, "disallowance" may come from other colored people. Thus, the decision of the people of Ruby to create their own separate community and to turn away from the outside world responds to the systematic abuse that they have endured. However, the way in which the fathers of Ruby behave represents a source of constant controversy in the novel because in spite of all that they have been through, they turn and do the same: they look down on the poor of their community, they discriminate people because of their skin color, and they oppress women. Morrison harshly criticizes this incapability to learn from the past and to correct endangering practices as well as the failure to avoid imitating evil. The patriarchs of Ruby endorse and imitate the vice that they have so fiercely fought. As Deacon Morgan eventually realizes, "his long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different (302)". This rancorous and violent frame of mind sets the stage for

⁴¹ Mary Daly comments on the diverse aspects of violence in patriarchal society in which men displace their violent behavior to justify their actions. In the case of *Paradise*, they put all their anger in God's hands. However, as Daly points out, this violent environment not only serves to confront their "enemy" but also ends up affecting the traditional scapegoat of patriarchy: women. Daly explains that "the practitioners of horizontal violence also mirror the strategy of the sadosociety which I have called *reversal*, for instead of naming the *active perpetrators* of the social evils they claim to oppose, they choose the cowardly device of scapegoating women. Rather than confronting real anger, they promote among women the very atmosphere of irrationality, stigmatization, and hatred which endanger all women" (*Pure Lust* 67-68). Clearly, the common resource of patriarchy to displace anger and violence has fatal consequences because, more often than not, patriarchs direct that anger towards women as Toni Morrison demonstrates with the women of the Convent in *Paradise*.

the events that evolve in the plot of the novel and that will have fatal consequences for the women in the Convent.

GENDER IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD

It is my thesis that Morrison's narrative emphasizes the role of gender in American society.⁴² Her novels unveil the diverse dimensions of patriarchal oppression. Furthermore, she engages in the radical effort to voice the experience of colored women living in the United States. Like Morrison, others critics share the same concern about the role of black women in American society. As radical feminist Mary Daly points out in her book *Gyn/echology*, "beyond racism is sisterhood, naming the crimes against women without paying mindless respect to the 'social fabric' of the various andocratic societies, including the one in which we find our Selves imprisoned" (172). Morrison's narrative focuses on racial aspects and criticizes how male rule victimizes women at the same time. *Paradise* centers on the story of nine different women and how they interact with the male-centered society. Each woman in the novel confronts an issue, or several issues, related to the outside world. Each one experiences different forms of abuse of the "out there" because the male-oriented society routinely exposes women to danger and conflict. As Daly explains, "the fact is that we live in a profoundly anti-female society, a misogynistic 'civilization' in which men collectively victimize women, attacking us as personifications of their own paranoid fears, as The Enemy" (29). Lone DuPres, who possesses a gifted power of visualization, realizes how women go to the Convent to escape from the constant menace of the outside world:

⁴² Margaret H. Burnham explains, in the book *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, the tension between the issues of race and gender within the black community and how these tensions project to the rest of the society. As she asserts: "Within African-American political and cultural life the question of how to accommodate gender tensions has always been linked to black perspectives on white racism and how best to struggle against it. Although it is now generally accepted that male chauvinism hinders the efforts of black men and women to build strong relationships, there is a fairly widespread view that nothing is to be gained from public discussion of the black male-female conflict because, first of all, whites will intentionally exploit this gender tensions to show disharmony within the race at a time when racial unity is needed, and secondly, white opinion of blacks will be negatively affected by what they learn about their gender and sexual conflicts" (309).

It was women who walked [the] road [to the Convent]. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. Out here in a red and gold land cut through now and then with black rock or a swatch of green; out here under skies so star-packed it was disgraceful; out here where the wind handled you like a man, women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians (270).

As Lone asserts, not only the women of Ruby, victims of patriarchal oppression, but also other women who come from different locales seek the security and comfort of the Convent.⁴³ The outside world corresponds to the place of patriarchal rule, and in this world women play the role of “the Other.” Feminist activist Patricia Hill Collins explains why black women complete this role: “Maintaining images of U.S black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression . . . the Other . . . is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (70). Thus, Morrison analyzes this permanent condition of women as outsiders in patriarchal society and embraces the challenge that Hill Collins proposes: “many black women have insisted on our right to define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history” (72). I think that Morrison challenges the established order by uncovering the oppression of patriarchal rule and voicing the experience of black women. She also brings to light different dimensions of race, class and gender discrimination because the outside world functions as the stage for patriarchal oppression.

⁴³ Regarding the episode that Lone DuPres narrates, Peter Widdowson makes an interesting observation: “The oblique irony of this passage simultaneously implies the mechanistic dominance of the men driving [to the Convent] for solace of one kind or another—a dependence which later helps fuel their hatred of the Convent women- and the spontaneous complicity of women in trouble with their ‘throwaway’ sisters when the only succour is that which other women can give” (331).

From my point of view, Morrison represents the outside world as a “sad, scary, all wrong” (33) place in *Paradise*. Women try to find an escape route from the oppression of patriarchy, in which they are the objects of victimization. For instance, Mavis Albright epitomizes the situation of black women “out there.” She has to fight the harsh reality that colored women in the U.S. have to face. Victimization comes from different sources, like close relatives, the community and the society. The sad case of Mavis Albright encapsulates the different layers in which patriarchy subjugates women. The most important pattern of abuse for Mavis involves her own family. She has to endure physical, psychological, and sexual abuse from her alcoholic husband. Mavis tries to fulfill the expectations of patriarchal roles assigned to women, but fails in the attempt. The accident in which the twins suffocate occurs as Mavis tries to keep up with dreadful domestic impositions. She cannot count on her husband for help. He refuses to take care of the children. As Mavis explains, “the [babies] wasn’t crying or nothing but he said his head hurt. I understood. I did. You can’t expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him. I know that ain’t right” (23). In this way, Mavis accepts the role of devoted housewife that patriarchal rule imposes, but, more than that, she takes the blame for the death of the twins and liberates her irresponsible and abusive husband from all faults. Patriarchal impositions make her even justify her husband’s “headaches” –or alcoholic binges, and free him from the responsibility that he shares in the accident. Before the death of the twins, Mavis’s life is hard, but after the accident it becomes simply unbearable. Mavis’s impossibility to connect with her husband or her other children at an emotional level makes her recovery from the traumatizing experience of the accident almost impossible. The permanent sentiment of deception and isolation leads her to a state of paranoia and makes her believe that her own children are trying to kill her: “She didn’t think it would take them long [to kill her], and seeing how they were at supper, enjoying each other’s jokes and all, she knew Frank would let the children do it” (25). However, Mavis fails to understand that

perhaps her family has already killed her -if not in a physical way, in a psychological way they already have. Her husband, children, and other close relatives have judged and condemned her unhesitatingly. The family and the community condemn her as the sole responsible person for the death of the twins, and according to patriarchal decree, she must pay for it. When Mavis tries to find comfort and support in her own family, she does not find any. Mavis's visit to her mother results in an emotional and psychological disaster. Mary Daly explains that "in Sado-Ritual Syndrome . . . [women] are used as scapegoats and token torturers . . . this masks the male-centeredness of the ritual atrocity and turns women against each other" (*Gyn/Ecology* 132). Patriarchy uses other women to inflict pain in the institutionalized and ritualized scapegoating of women.⁴⁴ In this way, patriarchs elude their responsibility on the matter and at the same time damage female bonding; Morrison denounces this reality. In *Paradise*, Mavis's mother enacts the old patriarchal edict that women are hard on women. Birdie Goodroe does not show any significant emotional connection to her daughter. Birdie instills more pain and insecurity in Mavis, instead of providing her with a healing experience. The first time Birdie sees Mavis, after the dreadful trial that Mavis has been through, Birdie reacts in an insensitive and temperamental way: "She was not pleased. Not then and not later when her daughter tapped on the kitchen window looking like a bat out of hell, which is what she said as soon as she opened the door. 'Girl you look like a bat out of hell what you doing up here in little kiddie boots?'"(30) Birdie

⁴⁴ Audre Lorde shares Daly's and Morrison's concern about patriarchy dividing and putting women against each other. In the specific case of black women, Lorde discovers that much of the contempt of black women against each other originates in the racialized connotations that the white supremacist rule has ascribed to women of color. As she declares: "when I started to write about the intensity of the angers between Black women, I found I had only begun to touch one tip of a three-pronged iceberg, the deepest understructure of which was Hatred, that societal death wish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America. From that moment on we have been steeped in hatred—for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring to presume we had any right to live. As children we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves, and for the most part, we still live our lives outside of the recognition of what that hatred really is and how it functions. Echoes of it return as cruelty and anger in our dealings with each other. For each of us bears the face that hatred seeks, and we have each learned to be at home with cruelty because we have survived so much of it within our own lives" (*Sister Outsider*, 146).

does not give Mavis the support that she needs. She responds to the whole situation as a very “practical,” “matter of fact person,” or “masculine,” and “rational,” if you wish, who prefers to deal with reality in a different way. When Mavis confronts her for her lack of emotional support, her tough answer surprises Mavis:

“Ma... why couldn't you make it to the funeral?” Birdie straightened. “You didn't get the money order? And the Flowers?”

“We got them.”

“Then you know why. I had to choose –help bury them or pay for a trip. I couldn't afford to do both. I told you all that. I asked you all straight out which thing would be the best, and you both said the money. Both of you said so, both.”

“They are going to kill me, Ma.” (31)

Finally, Mavis realizes the uselessness of staying at her mother's place. She decides to continue with her quest for emotional recovery and affirmation. In this way, Morrison demonstrates that even family may represent a lingering menace or a threat in the “outside world” for a black woman in need like Mavis.

In addition, it is my interpretation that Morrison emphasizes the role of the community as a form of extended kinship. The community -like close relatives, shows little interest for Mavis's pain. As a matter of fact, Mavis lives in a complete state of abandonment and isolation. Her controlling husband interferes with any possible friendship or any other type of healthy or nurturing relationship that she may have with other members of the community. When Mavis needs the support of friends and neighbors, she has no one to recur to. Frank

carries out the patriarchal custom of minimizing female bonding,⁴⁵ which for Mavis implies complete and overwhelming solitude and total dependence on her husband. She understands the magnitude of her seclusion when she runs away from home and tries to find someone who can give her shelter. Mavis realizes that there is none in her neighborhood that she may ask for help. As she declares, “getting out of the house had been so intense . . . she drove toward Peg’s; she didn’t know the woman all that well, but her tears at the funeral impressed Mavis. She had always wanted to know her better, but Frank found ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship” (27). Mavis’ impossibility of establishing bonds with anyone in her community makes her weak and vulnerable. This emotional separation from other people makes her an easy prey for Frank and his iron fist rule. This type of negative response of the community to the problems of women appears as a recurrent topic in Morrison’s narrative. In other novels like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*, Morrison condemns the lack of interest of people for those in need. This generalized apathy is the result of patriarchal impositions, which favor those in control. In contrast, the community neglects the interests of those in need, like women, children, and the poor. As in the case of Mavis, the community offers no support whatsoever. On the contrary, the cynical way in which they react to the death of the babies demonstrates the lack of humanity in male-ruled societies: “The neighbors seemed pleased when the babies smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they died had annoyed them for some time. They did all the right things, of course: brought food, telephoned their sorrow, got up a collection; but the

⁴⁵ Mary Daly explains that “women are spatially separated from each other on many levels –forced into conditions of isolation and alienation which are felt as ghastly and spooky. Women desperately *need* our own space-medium for self-centering movement and emergence of life processes (*Pure Lust*, 12). Indeed, Daly insists on the urgency of female bonding, which produces healthy, strong connections between women: “Since friendship implies a sharing activity –in a special sense, intellectual activity- the necessary context will be one that awakens and encourages women to exercise their powers to full capacity. It will inspire women to share Happiness, to make metamorphic leaps and to encounter Metamemory. Such as context I have called Be-Friending (*Pure Lust*, 379). Needless to say, patriarchy sabotages every attempt of women Be-Friending each other.

shine of excitement in their eyes was clear” (21). These controversial affirmations reveal a social pattern that is extremely cruel and that reflects what Mary Daly calls “the state of necrophilia of patriarchy,” a society that ignores the pain of the needy and actually seems to rejoice in their suffering and death. As Daly asserts, patriarchal rule promotes a state of desolateness, which affects women principally. Mavis’s distress confirms that the outside world is indeed a menacing place for the dispossessed.

This patriarchal danger does not exist only within the limits of the community, but it also extends to the rest of the society. When June, the journalist, comes to report on the death of the twins, she reflects the same disdain and lack of concern. As an observer from the outside world, she looks at the case with morbid curiosity rather than real interest. The reporter remains aloof and distant rather than showing empathy for Mavis. Like all the others, June judges and condemns her readily. I think that Morrison creates false expectations because no one would believe that June, the only female reporter in the network, would approach this case with special care from a different perspective. However, she endorses patriarchal assumptions and, in the end, represents the point of view of an implacable society. She addresses Mavis in a particularly offensive and disrespectful way: “Is there something you want to say? Something you want other mothers to know? . . . You know something to warn them, caution them, about negligence” (22). Like the rest of society, June imposes the guilt on Mavis, and consequently treats her with cruelty:

‘So you left the newborns in the car and went in to buy some chuck steak-’

‘No m’am Weenies.’

‘Right. Wieners.’ ‘But what I want to ask is, why did it take so long? To buy one item.’

‘It didn’t. Take long. I couldn’t of been in there more than five minutes, tops.’

'Your babies suffocated, Mrs. Albright. In a hot car with the windows closed. No air. It's hard to see that happening in five minutes' ...

I've punished myself over that, but that's pretty near the most it could have been.' (23)

Consequently, and according to patriarchal views, Mavis stands for the "failed" and "incomplete" woman who cannot fulfill patriarchal expectations. Actually, she becomes the image of the "bad mother"⁴⁶ because of her inability to take care and protect her own children. Double discourse traps Mavis, like it does with most colored women. On the one hand, she faces abuse, alienation, and lack of opportunities.⁴⁷ On the other hand, she must meet patriarchal expectations and create a perfect nurturing environment for her family. Based on her own experience, bell hooks explains in her essay "Understanding Patriarchy" what the male-oriented society expects from women. Relating to her own process of socialization, she realizes that "at church [my parents] had learned that God had created man to rule the world and everything in it and that it was the work of women to help men perform these tasks, to obey, and to always assume a subordinate role in relation to a powerful man" (1). hooks finds it difficult to accommodate patriarchal expectations because, as she explains: "as their daughter I was taught that it was my role to serve, to be weak, to be free from the burden of

⁴⁶ Patricia Hill Collins refers to the controlling image of the "bad mother" in *Black Feminist Thought*: "The matriarch symbolizes the 'bad' Black mother... African-American women who failed to fulfill their traditional 'womanly' duties at home contributed to social problems in Black civil society." (75). Some other characteristics associated to the 'bad mother' image blame black women themselves for their "failure" to meet patriarchal standards. As Hill Collins points out, "as overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands . . . From the dominant's group perspective, the matriarch represented a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant" (75). Hence, Hill Collins exposes the double catch in the images of black women. They face a "lose-lose" situation since the dominant group hinders their possibility to occupy a dignified space in society, and at the same time censure their inadequacy to fulfill "their role." Hill Collins recommends understanding African-American mothers "as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions, or who become beaten down by the incessant demands of providing for their families" (75-76).

⁴⁷ Mary Daly explains that in patriarchal society: "women . . . are possessed, domesticated, deprived of [the] Elemental Divine Daughterhood . . . the sublimers intend that all be relegated to the role of breeders, vessels, vehicles of the repetitive discharges that produce phallic culture (*Pure Lust*, 122).

thinking, to caretake and nurture others”(1). hooks’s experience sums up some of the most common patriarchal expectations for women, which Mavis fails to comply with accordingly. As a result, the two realities clash. Patriarchal demands do not correspond with Mavis’s reality: “Didn’t you know your husband was coming home for supper, Mrs. Albright? Doesn’t he come home for supper every day ...? ‘Yes, m’am. He come for supper every day.’ And wondered what that would be like: to have a husband who came home every day. For anything” (24). The demands and expectations of patriarchy do not parallel the way in which she lives. Although she has a husband, Mavis feels that this person is alien to her. She does not have a physical or sentimental connection with Frank. She wonders what would it be like to have a soul mate, and not just a controlling and abusive macho who demands all his needs fulfilled. The outside world divides Mavis between patriarchal expectations and her particular difficult circumstances.

Besides meeting patriarchal exigencies, women of color face a big challenge: they have to confront the outside world facing abuse, abandonment, isolation, lack of opportunities, and objectification. For this reason, Mavis becomes an excised woman who succumbs as a victim of the “Out There:”

Mavis felt her stupidity close in on her head like a dry sack. A grown woman who could not cross the country. Could not make a plan that accommodated more than twenty minutes. Had to be taught how to dry herself in the weeds. Too rattle-minded to open a car’s window so babies could breath . . . Frank was right. From the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her: she was the dumbest bitch on the planet. (37)

Mavis thinks that she embodies the role of “the other” that patriarchal society assigns to her. Colored women routinely incarnate otherness in the outside world. As bell hooks explains in

Ain't I a Woman, this misconception has its roots in the early periods of American history during slavery, in which rape and other forms of physical and psychological abuse serve as common ways to control and subjugate women: “[this constant abuse] permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society –the predominant image is that of the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore the slut, the prostitute” (52). Due to patriarchal oppression, Mavis ends up accepting the guilt and considering herself “the dumbest bitch on the planet.” In this way, Morrison’s narrative denounces that in the outside world –a site of patriarchal domination- black women suffer constant abuse, which results in the eventual shattering of their selfhood. Morrison’s work reflects profoundly on this shattering of the persona of black women. She talks from her own experience when she explores what other colored women like Mavis have to deal with: “It wasn’t that easy being a little black girl in this country –it was rough. The psychological tricks you have to play in order to get through –and nobody said how it felt to be that. And you knew better. You knew inside better. You knew you were not the person they were looking at” (quoted in *Conversations with Toni Morrison* 199). Thus, Morrison shows genuine concern in voicing the experience of women of color like Mavis, whose untold stories vanish in the lack of awareness of the outside world.

Grace, like Mavis, has to confront the austerity of the outside world. The shocking experience of the riots⁴⁸ changes Gigi forever. She confronts violence and death face to face, which forces her to run away and look for refuge. The riots as an example of the intrinsic

⁴⁸ During the 60’s and the 70’s, riots become a common manifestation of the fight of black people for equality. Morrison presents this violent reality in the novel and she unveils the double abuse that black people suffer in American society. First, they have to fight for human rights and, in addition to that, they confront the aggressive reaction of the hegemonic group. Riots, like lynchings, serve as excuses to abuse, victimize, and eventually reduce black people. Gigi faces this horror when she participates in a riot in which she witnesses the killing of a young boy. For Gigi, this moment of awakening leads her to question the integrity of the outside world and to reconsider her participation in the construction of this cruel reality.

violence of the patriarchal system in the out there demonstrate the intense fight of people of color to reclaim a space in white supremacist American society. In this way, Morrison denounces the cruelty of the killing of innocent people to defend the rights of blacks. The death of the young boy during the riots shocks Gigi (as it should shock the entire society) seeing a young life wasted, victim of generalized racial violence. Grace renounces to the numerous deceptions of the outside world, and she decides to go some place where she can disassociate from the cruelty and violence of racial prejudice. In her quest for this special place, she idealizes a spot that has a very unusual landmark: a couple making out. Her boyfriend told her about this magical place called “Wish” in the middle of the desert in Arizona. They make plans to meet there, but after her boyfriend leaves her, Gigi understands that this will be her personal quest: “Gigi gave [Mike] up. Reluctantly. The eternal desert coupling, however, she held on to for dear and precious life. Underneath gripping dreams of social justice, of an honest people’s guard –more powerful than her memory of the boy spitting blood into his hands- the desert lovers broke her heart” (64). However, Gigi’s actual goal is finding a place where love, caring, and mutual understanding predominate. She strongly believes that she can make a fresh start and recover from the brutality of the “Out There” after seeing this magic landmark of endless love. At last, the quest dead ends, as the landmark seems to be a fraud. However, Gigi will have the opportunity to find this special place that she has been looking for when she arrives at the Convent.

It is my interpretation that Morrison endows Grace, as a character, with very special features to criticize gendered and racialized patriarchal assumptions about black women. Her personality suggests a common trait ascribed specifically to black women in patriarchal society: the Jezebel.⁴⁹ Gigi shows a raw sexuality that alarms the people around her.

⁴⁹ The white patriarchal elite uses the controlling image of the “jezebel” like the one of the “bad mother” to the detriment of black women. As Hill Collins explains, “[the controlling image of] the jezebel, whore or ‘hoochie’ is central in this nexus of controlling images of black womanhood. Because efforts to control Black women’s

However, Morrison warns about this kind of representations since they tend to typify black women into the “whore” category. Patriarchy, or the “lecherous” state as Mary Daly calls it, puts black women in jeopardy because on the one hand, it assigns them an image of a hyper-sexualized creature, and on the other hand, it condemns that “lustful” disposition. Grace exemplifies this paradox of the double standard of patriarchy. Gigi’s quest for love and personal fulfillment leads her to a place with another peculiar landmark: “a lake in the middle of a wheat field . . . and near this lake two trees grew into each other’s arms” (66). The promise of endless pleasure lures Gigi to find these trees with magical attributes: “if you squeezed in between them in just the right way, well, you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate. ‘They say after that can’t nobody turn you down” (66). Finally, Grace will find the sensual and spiritual connection that she longs for in the Convent, which significantly is located in the middle of a wheat field. But before that, following her hedonistic instinct, she ends up in Ruby, Oklahoma and her brief passing by the town ignites passions and controversy. The town of Ruby does not tolerate outsiders, and Grace, with her provocative look and appealing looks, stands in direct opposition to the local patriarchal rigidity. The reaction of the people gathered at the Oven reveals their intolerance for any

sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black female sexuality” (81). In its origin, “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men . . . Jezebel served yet another function . . . Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites” (Idem). These misconceptions of black female sexuality have resulted in modern stereotypes about black women, which Morrison exemplifies in the character of Gigi. The sexual tension that she arouses wherever she goes obeys this strict of categorization of which the ruling class makes her a victim. Another important aspect of the “Jezebel” image relies on the fact that it comprises other manifestations of black female sexuality that the white patriarchal elite might consider “deviant.” Hill Collins points out that “when it comes to women’s sexuality, the controlling image of jezebel and her hoochie counterpart constitute one part of the normal/deviant binary. But broadening this binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality reveals that heterosexuality is juxtaposed to homosexuality as its oppositional, different, and inferior ‘other.’ Within this wider oppositional difference, Jezebel becomes the freak on the border demarking heterosexuality from homosexuality. Her insatiable sexual desire helps define the boundaries of normal sexuality. Just across the border stand lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women who are deemed deviant in large part because of their choices of sexual partners” (83-84). Thus, all these negative associations prove why the people of Ruby, and even some women of the Convent, like Mavis, react to Gigi with fear and apprehension.

possible menace from the Out There: “Ruby was not a stop on the way to someplace else . . . the vision that appeared when the bus drove away . . . riveted the attention of everybody lounging at the Oven” (54). The narrator describes Gigi as having “sapphires⁵⁰ hidden in her shoes” (54). Her navel “peeked out over the waist of her jeans” (54) and she had “screaming tits” (55). “She didn’t have on any lipstick, but from one hundred and fifty feet you could see her eyes” (54) and “she cracked her gum like a professional” (idem). Grace, as an outsider, causes trouble. Upon seeing, her K.D. falls for her “attractive” looks and Arnette immediately reprimands him: “If that’s the kind of tramp you want, hop to it, nigger” (idem). K.D. reacts with violence, slapping his pregnant girlfriend. Grace adores this arousal of emotions and “she enjoyed the waves of raw horniness slapping her back as she walked off down the street” (67). This brief but significant encounter of Grace with the people of Ruby will have serious consequences. First, it marks the beginning of her affair with K.D. Second, it foreshadows the problematic and unfortunate visit of the women of the Convent to Ruby during K.D. and Arnette’s wedding. Third, it provokes the uneasiness of the men of Ruby, which “justifies” their raid on the Convent.

Moreover, Gigi shows other features that expose her hedonistic nature. For instance, she has a tremendous appetite, which exemplifies her continuous desire for self- satisfaction. She devours the food of Mother’s funeral when she arrives at the Convent: “Suddenly, like a legitimate mourner, she was ravenous. Gigi was gobbling, piling more food onto her plate even while she scooped from it . . . her mouth was full of baked beans and chocolate cake so Gigi could not speak” (69-70). Gigi shows an almost sensual connection to food that completes her disposition to satisfy her desires: “Suddenly she was fiercely hungry again and returned to the kitchen, to eat . . . she was finished with the macaroni, some ham and another

⁵⁰ In racialized patriarchal terms, Sapphire and Jezebel function as synonyms. Interesting enough, Morrison uses the image of sapphires hidden in the shoes of Gigi to describe the seductive way in which she walks.

slice of cake when the woman on the floor stirred and sat up” (72). Also, she strives to obtain instant gratification. For this reason, she keeps drugs at hand. She manages the stressful situation of Mother’s death with a little help: “She sat there . . . wondering just how bad could it be riding with a dead person? There was some herb in her pack. Not much but enough, she thought, to keep her from freaking” (69). She loves self-exposure and sunbathes naked to impress the others, which irritates Mavis intensely: “you put some clothes on!’ ‘You kiss my ass!’ ‘Do it Grace,’ said Connie. ‘Go, like a good girl. Cover yourself we love you just the same.’ ‘She ever hear of sunbathing?’ ‘Go on now.’ Gigi went, exaggerating the switch of both the cheeks she had offered Mavis” (76). Desperate for the love and the attention that the “Out There” does not provide, there is more to Grace than meets the eye.

As a matter of fact, like all of Morrison’s characters, Gigi shows a complex and controversial disposition. She aims for a significant connection of body, mind, and spirit that the “Out There” has denied her: “She just wanted to see. Not just the thing on the wheat field, but whether there was anything at all the world had to say for itself (in rock, tree or water) that wasn’t body bags or little boys spitting blood into their hands as not to ruin their shoes” (68). She longs to leave behind the dark sentiments that the outside world inspires and find the sense of liberty that she experiences when Roger Best takes her to the Convent for the first time: “Gigi pulled out a mirror and, as best as she could, repaired the wind damage to her hair, thinking, Yeah. I’m free, all right” (68). The very name Grace reveals one important aspect about this woman’s personality. Morrison amplifies the complexity of this character and invites the reader to look beyond the façade that patriarchy has created for Gigi. Behind the “Jezebel” controlling image exists a complex human being in search of self-assertion. In this way, Morrison warns about hasty judgments and shallow thinking. Consolata, the visionary, sees through all these patriarchal impositions and finds the real essence of Grace, which inspires love and compassion:

What did your mother name you?' 'Her? She gave me her own name.' 'Well?' 'Grace.' 'Grace. What could be better?' Nothing. Nothing at all. If ever there came a morning when mercy and simple good fortune took to their heels and fled, grace alone might have to do. But from where would it come and how fast? In that holy hollow between sighting and following through, could grace slip through at all? (73)

Connie, Gigi, and the rest of the Convent women will eventually realize that grace already lives within them, and that grace surpasses the common benevolence and luck that patriarchy assigns to women. Although patriarchal impositions have disassociated women from themselves, Gigi and her friends at the Convent succeed in finding grace. Mary Daly explains in *Pure Lust* that women who can find the lost connection with themselves that the patriarchs have destroyed experience renewal. She talks about those inspirational moments in which women, like the women in the Convent, can achieve introspection and see themselves. She calls those "moments of Grace": "at moments of Grace, Crone-logical crossroads, Muses so Touch 'the creative spirit of the individual' that she becomes/is one with her Muse. At such moments a woman *is* The Creative Spirit if the individual (her self). Then there is no sharp dichotomy between a woman's native power and her Attendant Spirit" (301). Far from the prejudicial patriarchal projections and controlling images, the women of the Convent find Grace, or the inner force to come in contact with their own spirit. Gigi represents that dichotomy: on one hand, the patriarchy manipulates female's force and, on the other hand, women fight to reclaim that force for themselves.

According to my reading of the novel, in the chapter "Seneca"⁵¹ Morrison reveals other shocking experiences that black women confront in the outside world. Seneca embodies the

⁵¹ Morrison's emblematic choice of character's names always puzzles readers and critics alike. As a matter of fact, some critics argue that the name of the character "Seneca" refers to the Seneca Falls Convention, an early and influential women's rights convention, which illustrates the critical impact of feminist issues in *Paradise*.

abandonment and indifference of the “Out There.” She defines herself as a “stray puppy . . . no, not even that. But like a pet you wanted to play with for a while- but not keep. Not love. Not name it. Just feed it, play with it” (138). Seneca’s story of neglect starts at a very early childhood. Her teenage sister Jean, who Seneca finds out is her real mother eventually, deserts her when she is a child leaving only a letter behind. Teenage pregnancy and family disruption shock the foundations of black communities. The reference to child abuse appears between the lines. Jean has to be a victim of rape, for no child can legally engage in sexual intercourse voluntarily. Thus, Seneca actually comes from the violence and indifference of the “Out There,” which silences and obliterates the distress of sexually abused young girls. The suffering and pain that Seneca goes through at such an early age changes her forever: “fifteen years ago, when the brokenhearted hitcher was five years old, she had spent four nights and five days knocking on every door in her building. Is my sister here? Some said no; some said who?; some said what’s your name little girl? Most didn’t open the door at all” (126). Seneca discovers the indifference of the outside world in a rough way, which pushes her to confront the closed doors of apathy and disdain. Unimaginable anguish invades little Seneca. She even believes that she is to blame for her own abandonment: “the third day, she began to understand why Jean was gone and how to get her back. She cleaned her teeth and washed her ears carefully. She also flushed the toilet right away, as soon as she used it, and folded her socks inside her shoes” (127). Being a “good girl⁵²” is not enough, though: “Those were her prayers: if she did everything right without being told. Either Jean would walk in or when she knocked on one of the apartment’s doors, there’d she be! Smiling and holding out her arms. Meantime the nights were terrible” (127). Seneca’s prayers go unanswered,

⁵² One of the ironies of patriarchy consists of making women believe, from early childhood, that if they behave according to patriarchal rules like “good girls,” they will receive love, affection, and protection from the figures of power. As the case of Seneca demonstrates, being a “good girl” according to patriarchal standards does not guarantee safety. Morrison illustrates through this metaphor of childish innocence the harsh reality that black women face in the outside world.

unfortunately. She goes to foster homes and becomes a passive young adult who seeks approval from everyone. Like other victims of abuse, she does everything to please everyone and avoid rejection. However, the “Out There” reminds Seneca repeatedly that she has become a pariah. In fact, she has internalized abuse: “Seneca stared at the ceiling. The cot’s mattress was thin and hard . . . she had slept on floors, on cardboard, on nightmare-producing water beds and, for weeks at a time, in the back seat of Eddie’s car. But she could not fall asleep on this clean, narrow childish bed” (131). The repeated reference to the interrupted innocence of childhood evidences the nightmare that Seneca has been through. In the end, she becomes a submissive woman who, like a child, has lost her way in life. She tries to be agreeable and neutral, thus denying her inner self: “Always the peace maker. The one who said yes or I don’t mind or I’ll go. Otherwise –what? They might not like her. Might cry. Might leave. So she had done her best to please” (131). For this reason, Seneca gets involved in relationships that annul her as a person and, at length, harm her.

Seneca learns about hardship and how people hurt in the outside world. Three important affective connections that she has to others, fail. First, her mother who, leaves without a trace. Second, Eddie, her abusive and unloving boyfriend, who goes to jail leaving her behind. Although she does everything to please him, like she always does, it seems that she cannot get anything right for him: “Can’t you get anything right? [he tells her] Just a *small* Bible! Not a goddamn encyclopedia!” . . . She had only known him for six months, but already he knew how hopeless she was” (131). Eddie devaluates Seneca, like Frank Albright devaluates Mavis, to the point of mutilating her self-respect, which reinforces a pattern of abuse that patriarchal society condones. Like all the rest of society, Eddie ignores Seneca blatantly, as long as she is not of any use to him: “He didn’t want to hear anything about her new job at a school cafeteria. Only Sophie and Bernard [the dogs] interested him: their diets” (132). Eddie, in the name of patriarchal oppression, literally invalidates Seneca as a person

and just uses her to cater his needs, while disregarding her need for care and affection. The third important relationship of Seneca with other people, which shows the cruelty of the “Out There,” occurs during her encounter with Norma Keene⁵³ Fox. This situation definitely poses a hard challenge for Seneca because it creates false expectations, and it implicates very complicated mind games. Norma picks her up from a bus station to keep her company for some days as an escort. As Norma explains, “[it is] something confidential . . . nothing illegal, of course . . . I want somebody not from around here. I hope five hundred is enough. I could go a little higher for a really intelligent girl” (136). In this way, Seneca gets involved in the tumultuous relationship with Norma, in which she experiences both the pleasures of life and the degradation of prostitution:⁵⁴ “the front door was never locked and she could leave any time she wanted to. She didn’t have to stay there, moving from peacock feathers to abject humiliation; from coddling to playful abuse; from caviar tartlets to filth. But the pain framed the pleasure, gave it edge. The humiliation made surrender deep, tender. Long-lasting” (137). At last, the affair with Norma Keene Fox ends up in a fiasco, which builds up in the desolation and loneliness that Seneca feels. She understands that, like the stray puppy that she is, once Norma gets tired of playing with her, she will return her “to [her] own habitat” (138). After a short time, Seneca finds herself in the middle of the street with five hundred dollars and struggling to survive.

⁵³ Once again, Morrison uses names to imply irony. If one pays attention to the last name of Norma Keene, one might think immediately of kinship, blood ties, or family connections. However, Norma Keene turns out to be exactly the opposite for Seneca. She is just one more of those who use her and then desert her.

⁵⁴ Although Morrison does not deal with homosexual relationships in her novels often, this episode of Norma Keene and Seneca is one of the rare examples. Here, Seneca, like Gigi, incarnates the patriarchal controlling image of the jezebel, which assigns “out of the norm” (notice the pun on the name!) qualities to black female sexuality. Norma insists that she wants a girl “not from here,” an outsider, and as has been stated in black feminist thought premises, black women represent the ultimate “outsider.” From a patriarchal point of view, the Norma-Seneca relationship transgresses the boundaries of race, class, and gender expectations. In this sense, Seneca personifies another form of modern Jezebel.

However, after hitchhiking for a while, Seneca makes the one resolute decision that will change her life: She decides to follow Birdie Goodroe: “when she found herself among crates in a brand-new ’73 pickup, jumping out of it to follow a coatless woman was the first pointedly uninstructed thing she had ever done” (138). The image of this coatless woman in cold weather who is “sobbing –or was it giggling?” puzzles and moves Seneca. She reacts instantly and decides to cover her and accompany her to a shelter that she saw a few miles back: the Convent. In an interesting turn of events, Seneca stops being the lost child and becomes the protector, the guide, which hints to her soon-to-be spiritual awakening in the Convent. Significantly, she encounters Birdie Goodroe, who has lost her balance under the weight of patriarchal demands, and leaves her sick children behind. On the road to the Convent, the lost child finds a mother, only that the roles invert: Seneca embodies the guiding and protecting figure, while Birdie stands for the confused, clueless, lost child who cries (or laughs?) in despair. The arrival in the Convent brings a significant change for Seneca because she will find real sentimental connections and the sense of family unity that she has always longed for.

The character of Pallas Truelove illustrates other forms of abuse of the outside world. In my opinion, Morrison captures diverse undertones of betrayal, deception, and abandonment in this woman. But most important of all, the author takes on the trauma of sexual abuse, which has always had a huge impact on the life of women and on the life of women of color especially. Pallas, a very young girl, almost a child, demonstrates that the cruelty of the “Out There” against women does not respect age, class, or social status. Pallas, a well-to-do girl, shares the suffering of the other women of the Convent. Yet, unlike Mavis, Gigi or Seneca, she has a safe place. She has money and a lifestyle that might appear fulfilling and satisfactory. However, Pallas has a poor relationship with her father, who remains detached and distant. Perhaps this situation prompts her to look for the approval of

other men. Also, her sentimental relationship with her mother proves shallow and weak. Pallas's life takes a wrong turn when she decides to elope with her much older, clandestine boyfriend Carlos, the janitor of the exclusive school that she attends. In their escape, they decide to visit Pallas's mother Divine, which unfolds a major conflict. Eventually, Carlos realizes that he has more in common with Divine than with her daughter. They are both artists. Their age is similar. They share the same interests: "After all those months, Carlos said, 'This is where I belong,' sighing deeply. 'This is the home I have been looking for.' His face, moon-drenched made Pallas's heart stand. Her mother yawned. 'Of course it is,' said Dee Dee Truelove.' Carlos yawned too, and right then she should have seen it –the simultaneous yawns, the settling-in voices. She should have calculated the arithmetic" (169). Carlos and Divine end up having an affair, which breaks Pallas's heart and which sends her running away again. Pallas has a recurrent image of a homeless woman that she saw in a shopping center the day she ran away with Carlos. This insane woman shocked her intensely: "she didn't understand why the woman with the rouge and gold teeth fascinated her. They had nothing in common . . . Pallas had stumbled off the escalator in a light panic, rushing to the doors, outside which Carlos was waiting for her. The revolting woman's singsong merged with the carols piping throughout the store: 'Here's pussy. Want some pussy, pussy" (164). Definitely, the encounter with the homeless, insane woman foreshadows what the outside world has in store for Pallas. Like her, Pallas will be without a home, family, or friends. The image of the crazy woman continues to haunt Pallas's mind every time she faces a harsh situation, and her disgusting song "Here, pussy. Here" follows her everywhere. I consider that patriarchy reduces Pallas to a sexual object. The constant parallelism to a "pussy" also establishes a very well-known metaphor in which women become a "pussy," or in other words a "vulva." Pallas turns into the crazy woman looking for something or someone that she has lost, going around with no purpose in life, defeated and abandoned.

Losing Carlos, her father, and her mother exposes Pallas to the outside world. While wandering aimlessly, she confronts the common threat for women in the “Out There:” rape. At some point of her journey, she encounters a gang that tries to molest her. From my perspective, Morrison makes a point of how patriarchal society victimizes women as sex objects. Pallas, a young woman traveling by herself, becomes the perfect target for male abuse. I consider that Morrison, like other feminist thinkers, deplors the constant sexual victimization of women under patriarchal rule, which not only instigates this type of abuses but also looks away when they do happen. Pallas’s experience shocks her. She has to hide under water in a lake to escape from the delinquents. She realizes at that moment that she has become the homeless woman, helpless and with none to go to –only a pussy. She combines both traumatic experiences and the mingled scenes come to her mind incessantly: “At night, of course, it would return and she would be back in it –trying not to think about what swam below her neck. It was the top of the water she concentrated on . . . floating over the water, the whispers were closer than their calls. ‘Here pussy. Here, pussy. Kitty, kitty, kitty,’ sounded far away; but ‘Gimme that flash, dickface, izzat her, let go, maybe she drowned, no way,’ slid under the skin behind her ears” (163). After escaping the gang, Pallas has nightmares, and she wakes up “fighting out of a dream of black water” (173). Pallas’s existence crumbles to the ground. She barely survives those experiences, confused and appalled: “The nightmare event that forced her to hide in a lake had displaced for a while the betrayal, the hurt that had driven her from her mother’s house. She had not been able even to whisper it in the darkness of a candlelit room. Her voice had returned, but the words to say the shame clung like polyps in her throat” (179). Eventually, somebody drops her off at the clinic where Billie Delia works, and she takes her to the Convent where she knows the women will look after her. Pallas’s stay at the Convent helps her recover. As Billie Delia tells Pallas when she leaves her at the Convent: “This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me . . . don’t be afraid. I used to be. Afraid of

them, I mean. *Don't see many girls like them out there.*⁵⁵ She laughed then . . . they'll take care of you or leave you alone –whichever way you want it” (175-176 emphasis added).

Pallas's encounter with Connie relieves her of all the pain she has been holding, “Connie was magic. She just stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap, talk-crying at first, then just crying, while Connie said, ‘Drink a little of this,’ and ‘What pretty earrings,’ and ‘Poor little one, poor, poor little one. They hurt my poor little one” (173). In this way, Morrison contrasts the nurturing and caring qualities of the feminine atmosphere of the Convent to the roughness manliness of the “Out There.” Pallas finds real affection and people who care about her. After talking to Connie, she shows a ravenous appetite, which indicates that she has overcome her initial shock and that she is now ready to move on.

According to my interpretation, Morrison explores the significance of love through the names of the characters of Divine Truelove and Pallas Truelove. The chapter “Divine” begins with the dramatic scene of Arnette's and K.D.'s wedding and reverend Misner trying to figure out the real meaning of love. He concludes that “love is divine only and difficult always” (141). Thus, Morrison appropriates this idea and depicts it in Pallas's quest to find true love. She learns that the Outside World makes love a difficult and elusive sentiment: parents go away, lovers cheat, people hurt. The definition of true love remains obscure. Pallas's mother, who one would expect incarnates divine and true love, breaks her heart. Where can someone find true love then? Pallas learns the hard way that certainly not “Out There.” As Misner points out in his sermon, “love is not a gift. It is a diploma” (141). Pallas has earned the right to find true love by confronting the outside world. She earns her diploma when she arrives at the Convent. She finally finds what she has been looking for: safety, affection, and support. The

⁵⁵Notice the pun this time in Billie Delia's phrase: “Don't see many girls like them out there.” Morrison makes evident that the women who live in the Convent do not have a place “out there.” The strict control of patriarchal rule marginalizes this kind of women. Yet, she emphasizes that these women are special and unique and, for that reason, they need a place of their own, like the Convent, to thrive.

healing power of Connie's words reveals the essence of divine true love. The disinterested help of Billie Delia and of the other women of the Convent contrasts sharply with the cruelty of the outside world. Love as a gift, or as Misner puts it, "[as] a diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it" (141) can only exist in a womanist milieu like the Convent. Thus, Morrison affirms that Divine love needs the force and compassion which, in the case of Pallas, only the women of the Convent can provide. Pallas comes to full understanding of that: "In fact, as they climbed the stairs, images of a grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice soothed her. The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here –an unbridled, authentic self, but which she thought of as a 'cool' self- in one of this house's many rooms" (177). Pallas feels safe and protected from the Outside World once she experiences true love in the Convent, which also marks her first step in a journey of emotional growth.

THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD

One characteristic of Morrison's writing relies on the use of uncanny elements that give a touch of the supernatural.⁵⁶ In this way, she assigns a special quality of indeterminacy to her writing that sets it apart from the rest of mainstream writing. Elements of magic, aspects of the realm of the spiritual, and hints of the supernatural help to create a special atmosphere in Morrison's novels. Morrison wants to emphasize this "incantory" quality that she considers so particular to black writing. As Taylor-Guthrie asserts in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Morrison declares that to authenticate a piece of writing as "black" it must have some requirements, among which the "acknowledgement of a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery, and the body" (x) corresponds to important characteristics. Therefore, elements of the supernatural not only have an aesthetic purpose but also an ideological function in Morrison's writing. In the specific case of *Paradise*, the touch of the supernatural acts as a conductive thread in the narrative. "Magic" and "mystery" appear in different forms and have diverse functions throughout the novel. Thus, the "Out there" serves as the first locale to examine the influence of the supernatural in Morrison's narrative.

It is my thesis that Morrison uses extended irony in the treatment of the supernatural in the outside world. Actually, one important feature of the "out there" relies on the absence of magic and mystery. The novel presents the outside world as a barren and deserted place.

⁵⁶ In *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Colette Dowling asserts that "there is an atmosphere of exoticism, honed at times to the intensity of magic, that gives much of Toni Morrison's work a surreal quality: It also contributes to occasional controversy over what the writer is about" (57). Morrison herself believes that this quality of the supernatural defines black literature. As she explains in her interview to Anne Koenen: "When people talk about black writing, that's what I think it is. I don't think it's the language, the dropping g's, I think it's something so much more earthbound than that, much more in touch with the magic and the mystery and things of the body" (78).

The outside world's sterility denies all possibilities of "exoticism" and "surrealism."⁵⁷ People in the "Out There" are pragmatic and almost brutal, which denies the existence of a "broader cosmology." In this sense, the "Out There" limits the connections of black literature and the supernatural. Moreover, the "Out There" stands for a cruel reality within the context of the novel. The appalling forces of class, race, and gender domination, which prevail in the "Out There," do not leave space for magic, the spiritual, or the supernatural. Patriarchal rule governs the outside world and, as Mary Daly points out, patriarchal rule's "necrophilic" aspect instigates war incessantly. Hence, the emblematic violence of the patriarchal model contrasts with the world of magical elements and the supernatural. As a matter of fact, the omnipresent war-like condition of the outside world that involves race, gender and class issues repels the spiritual world. I consider that Morrison denounces the inadequacy of patriarchal rule by criticizing the overwhelming presence of hostility, violence and death, which usually targets black people. She shares Daly's views about the patriarchal tendency to brutality and censures the generalized presence of conflict in the outside world. Actual war remains a main concern, which she denounces in the novel repeatedly. The different dimensions of war mirror the sterility of patriarchal practices, which convey disease and death. For instance, when Mavis runs away from her mother's house, she steals the money of the war pension that she receives for the death of one of her sons: "she took all she could find . . . the checks in two brown government envelopes propped against the photograph of one of her killed-in-action brothers" (32). In this short sentence, Morrison comments on the double moral of a patriarchal system that compensates the loss of a son with money. What is more, war becomes an all-pervading presence in the novel. Soane Morgan never recovers

⁵⁷ Betty Fussell agrees with Dowling as she sees the same "exotic" and "surreal" characteristics in Morrison's writing. As Fussell declares, "with warmth, humor, flamboyance and passion, [Morrison] grabs your imagination and hauls you into her mythic world, where the supernatural is common and the ordinary strange, where the earthly and unearthly meet in city streets and country pastures and hearts of darkness" (*Conversations with Toni Morrison*, 281).

from the death of her two sons: “[the air] had started thinning out, as if from too much wear, not when Scout was killed but two weeks later –even before Scout’s body had been shipped– when they informed that Easter was dead too. Babies. One nineteen, the other twenty-one” (100). From my perspective, Morrison reveals the hypocrisy of a *status quo* which ostracizes Mavis for the accidental death of her twins but justifies the indiscriminate killing of innocent people in order to support the patriarchal order and the killing of black people for white people’s wars. As Soane remembers with a broken heart: “How proud and happy she was when they enlisted; she had actively encouraged them to do so. Their father had served in the forties. Uncles too. Jeff Fleetwood was back from Vietnam none the worse. And although he did seem a little shook up, Menus Jury got back alive” (100). Furthermore, Morrison creates awareness of the double peril for colored people since they have to face war as white hegemonic patriarchal imposition and at the same time they have to face the “other war,” the war against blacks, which transforms American cities into battle fields. Soane understands the double catch:

Like a fool she believed her sons would be safe [in the war]. Safer than anywhere in Oklahoma outside Ruby. Safer in the army than in Chicago, where Easter wanted to go. Safer than Birmingham, than Montgomery, Selma, than Watts. Safer than Money, Mississippi, in 1955 and Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963. Safer than Newark, Detroit, Washington, D.C. She had thought war was safer than any city in the United States (100-101).

Like Sethe in *Beloved*,⁵⁸ Soane believes that sacrificing her own sons to war could be a better option than seeing them fall prey to the cruelty of racialized abuse: “her sweet colored boys

⁵⁸ In this novel, Morrison tells the story of Sethe (based on the real case of Margaret Garner), an ex-slave who facing the imminent reclaim of her infant child by slave owners decides to kill her in order to liberate her from the cruelty of slavery. Both in *Beloved* and in *Paradise* Morrison makes a powerful statement on the unjust

unshot, unlynched, unmolested, unimprisoned. 'Prayer Works!' she shouted when they piled out of the car. It was the last time she had seen them whole" (101). Thus, Morrison parallels the patriarchal institution of war with the brutal fight that colored people have to face every day to overcome oppression. In fact, Morrison proposed *War* as working title for her novel,⁵⁹ which she eventually changes to *Paradise*.

The emblematic violence of the patriarchal model inhibits the world of magical elements and the supernatural. War stands in direct opposition with the supernatural. It is utterly difficult to see or experience the supernatural in a world plagued by violence. Actually, war annuls any possibility of the existence of magical elements. I consider that Morrison depicts the outside world as a place filled with hostility and aggressiveness, in which colored people bear the heavy burden of subjugation. Elder Morgan experiences the impotence to restrain violence. The first thing that he sees when he gets off the train upon his return from the war is two white men physically abusing a black woman:

[Elder] saw two men arguing with a woman. From her clothes, Elder said, he guessed she was a streetwalking woman, and registering contempt for her trade, he felt at first a connection with the shouting men. Suddenly one of the men smashed the woman in her face with his fist. She fell . . . the two white men turned away from the unconscious Negro woman sprawled on the pavement. Before Elder could think, one of them changed his mind and came back to kick her in the stomach. Elder did not know he was running until he got there and pulled the man away. He had been running and

choices that colored women have to make: expose their children to abuse or surrender them to a deadly war. Unfortunately, either choice results in victimization.

⁵⁹ Morrison declares that her trilogy of novels *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* deal with different kinds of love, or the absence of it. Clearly, the absence of love becomes tangible in *Paradise*. For this reason, it is only natural that Morrison thought of *War* as working title for this piece, in which she would delve into the many forms that lack of love might take. War only exists as a result of love deprivation. Thus, this novel deals with the different kinds of war in the form of race, gender, or class confrontation.

fighting for ten straight months, still unweaned from spontaneous violence. Elder hit the whitemen in the jaw and kept hitting until attacked by the second man. Nobody won. All were bruised. (94)

The outside world reminds colored people of imminent cruelty against them constantly. Elder always remembers the shocking experience: "he never got the sight of the white man's fist in that colored woman's face out of his mind" (94). For this reason, he decides to keep his torn army uniform unmended, as a warning that a persistent war menaces people of color in the U.S. He never forgets that woman, who symbolizes all the victims of racialized violence, and he "prayed for her till the end of his life" (94-95). In the end, "Elder was buried as he demanded to be: in the uniform with its rips on display. He didn't excuse himself for running, abandoning the woman, and didn't expect God to cut him any slack for it" (95). Elder's reaction to the abuse of this woman reflects the fear and isolation which black people face. He runs away scared and unable to establish any emotional contact with the hurt woman. His first reaction to defend her obeys to his macho instinct to "protect" the needy as well as the patriarchal edict that men must react in an aggressive manner. However, his running away denotes indifference and coldness. He does not show genuine concern for this person because according to his patriarchal values, she belongs at the bottom of the moral scale: she is a woman of color and a sex worker. He runs away to mask his lack of interest and his incapacity to control this embarrassing situation, which he will remember until the end of his days. From my perspective, Morrison's final remark of this episode: "Nobody won. All were bruised" reinforces on the futility of using patriarchal anger and violence to respond to other patriarchal forms of aggression, which equates to fighting fire with fire. In the end, nobody wins and violence perpetuates the cycle of abuse. The unbearable reality of the outside world forces the people of Ruby, like Elder, to retreat and construct a place where they find refuge and solace from violence and abuse.

Thus, it is my thesis that Morrison emphasizes the absence of magic and the supernatural associated to the outside world by exposing the cruelty of reality through irony. Even what people might consider an eminent encounter with the force of the supernatural, turns out to be something else, more like common superstition, as in the case of the presence of buzzards outside Ruby: "People were already nervous about [K.D.'s] wedding because buzzards had been seen flying north over the town. The question in their minds was whether that was an omen for harm (they circled the town) or for good (none landed). Simpletons, [Misner] thought. If this marriage was doomed, it had nothing to do with birds" (147). Eventually, the story reveals that the buzzards are not an omen, but rather a sign of a very sad reality. They circle over the place in which the white family that refused to shelter in Ruby to escape from the blizzard died, prey of their own racial prejudice. The death of these people shows how racism cuts both ways: it destroys the victim and the victimizer. In the outside world, magic or supernatural omens simply do not occur because violence and hate take their place.

The presence of the Supernatural in the Out There seems almost imperceptible. It is my interpretation that Morrison omits any reference to magic work or the Supernatural in the outside world deliberately. She displays a barren place of hate and barbarism instead. One may read this *absence* of magic as a metaphor of black literary production. The absence of magic in the outside world points out that black feminist literary productions do not have a prominent space in mainstream literature.⁶⁰ As writer, editor, and literary critic, Morrison

⁶⁰ In *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins asserts: "the grudging incorporation of work on Black women into curricular offerings of historically white colleges and universities, coupled with the creation of a critical mass of African-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor within these institutional locations, means that Black women intellectuals can now find employment within academia. Black women's history and Black feminist literary criticism constitute two focal points of this renaissance in Black women's intellectual work" (40-41). As a black woman writer and intellectual, Morrison is capable to access the academia, the Out There of cultural production, where the invisibility of black female writers remains the norm.

remains a rare example of black feminist thought in the literary canon. Black feminist thought, magic realism, radical feminism, all of which influence and inform Morrison's novels, do not have a center stage location in literary production. Thus, the *invisibility* of the Supernatural in the *Out There*, also represents the *invisibility* of black female authors in the literary canon. Throughout the novel, magic work occurs at home, in close-knit communities, or in the safe space of the family. Hence, for Morrison family, home, and community are key elements. Those spaces propitiate magic. That is where the transformative power of words take place: not in the arid milieu of the outside world, but in the safety of home.

Black feminist literature, as an expression of home offers the possibility of community, of belonging, of identity. In black feminist thought, I consider that Morrison creates a safe haven, a Paradise for those in search of a refuge, for those in search of meaning, for those in search of identity. One should understand this Paradise as a metaphor of belonging. It provides the safe place that the *Out There* denies. Therefore, black feminist literature as an expression of a subjugated class, acts as a bastion, a place of resistance.⁶¹ The connection of magic, the spiritual, and the supernatural becomes relevant as it sets apart the voice of the oppressed from the voice of the oppressor. While patriarchal discourse relies on violence, separation, and discrimination, the voice of the marginalized groups center their discourse in unity, inclusion, and the spiritual work. Therefore, Morrison voices the experience of the women who exist in the margins by giving them a significant connection with the spirit world,

⁶¹ bell hooks explains in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* that "it is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and makes use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony" (16). In this sense, the narrative of Toni Morrison complies with hook's call for action on the part of black women. Moreover, she points out: "I am suggesting that we have a central role to play in the making of feminist theory and a contribution to offer that is unique and valuable. The formation of a liberatory feminist theory and praxis is a collective responsibility, one that must be shared" (16-17). In *Paradise*, through the use of magic and spirit work, Morrison offers a revolutionary perspective of literature. She creates a new space, one that opposes the "official" hegemonic literary canon. As hook recommends, she creates a "counter-hegemony," with a different vision. Therefore, magic work and the Supernatural cannot exist in the *Out There* because it belongs to the "marginal" spaces of counter-hegemonic literature.

the world of magic. For this reason, recognizing the supernatural in the Out There is almost impossible, since the Out There represents the center of hegemonic society. The literature of the oppressed –the voice of the oppressed, has a powerful element that makes it different and unique. Through the experience of the supernatural, Morrison reclaims power for the dispossessed.

Consequently, the Out There as a symbolic representation of patriarchal discourse does not give any credit to the supernatural. As a matter of fact, patriarchy denies or belittles any possible connection with the supernatural. Morrison subverts patriarchal discourse and ideals by making the supernatural one of the pillars of her literary production. The supernatural does not exist in the Out There simply because it echoes of the voice of the oppressed. Thus, finding examples of the supernatural acting out in *Paradise* is very difficult, or even to prove its presence, as patriarchal modes blur, minimize, or deny its effects. Besides, one may read this absence of magic as a clear sign of silencing of the minorities. Male-centered discourse has excluded the voice of colored women systematically. As the novel evolves, Morrison grants the subordinated characters the power of magic, which acts as a transformative essence that will lead them to a dramatically different reality. This transformation takes places sometimes in Ruby, but mainly in the Convent, the other two locales of the novel. In contrast, the Out There rarely allows growth or transformation. Thus, in my opinion Morrison makes a powerful statement on the sterility of a patriarchal discourse that smothers and suffocates. The absence of magic and the Supernatural makes the Out There a dead place. Black feminist literature, as a liberating force, cannot exist in the Out There. The interpretation of the Supernatural as a prominent feature of the discourse of minorities helps to explain and understand why it does not exist in the Out There. Clearly, the hegemonic group has silenced it methodically.

Race, gender, and elements of the supernatural have special connotations when related to the Out There. The black/white opposition defines the way in which race relations function. The white supremacist rule imposes the boundaries that delimit the “out there,” and at the same time establishes a pattern of domination that controls and subjugates people of color in the U.S. This pattern of supremacy often permeates all-black communities, in which aspects such as class, gender, and skin tone serve, as well, as indicators of status and as sources of discrimination. As in the case of race, the outside world imposes the limits in terms of gender relationships. Women in general -and women of color specifically- play the role of the “other” in the male-oriented system of the outside world. Victims of systematic abuse, objectification, and discrimination, colored women in the U.S. face double marginalization in terms of race and gender. The outside world entails hard conditions for women of minority groups who struggle to accommodate to patriarchal standards and to the impositions of gender and class rules. The patriarchal system makes of the outside world a battlefield, which is particularly tough for minorities. In the outside world, magic and the supernatural as forms of expression of alternative realities have no validity. Patriarchy rules with deadly zeal promoting an order based on violence. For colored people living in the U.S. race, gender, and the supernatural have decisive implications. As a minority, they develop a consciousness based on the limits imposed upon them. In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, bell hooks explains that this constant struggle of black people to confront the outside world elicits a particular awareness among them:

We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a

necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view –a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors- that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (xvi)

It is my interpretation that Morrison's writing, specifically in the case of *Paradise*, focuses on this impact of the "Out There" on the lives of colored people. The author has the same idea as bell hooks: that the outside world defines and delimits the perspectives of all-black communities. In the novel, she shows both faces of this awareness. The impact of the outside world can bring out the best or the worst of colored people, functioning either as a creative force or as a destructive force that corrodes the sense of community. In either case, I think that Morrison gives black people the power to decide. She does not decide for them. She grants them the power to either honor their past and look into the future with hope and faith or to perpetuate the old inadequate patriarchal system. Although for some readers the tone of the novel might be gloomy and full of repressed anger, violence, and death, Morrison opens up the possibility for change. She makes it clear that the new generations have the task to transform all that negativity that the outside world imposes and create a real sense of community, a true paradise in which black people can live in a safe and nurturing environment characterized by mutual understanding, peace, and love.

CHAPTER III. RUBY

Ruby symbolizes the realm of patriarchal power. The cruelty of the outside world forces the people of Ruby to look for a place where they can establish themselves and grow as a community. The influence of race, gender, and class oppression deprives them of the opportunity to even join any of the existing prosperous black communities, let alone come close to the white villages. The “Disallowance” and the continual fear of the menaces of the outside world inspire the people of Ruby to construct an isolated and autonomous all-black community of their own. Nevertheless, the zeal to create and protect this community involves an unquestionably patriarchal authoritarianism.⁶² The origin of Ruby as a town suggests an almost mythical foundation. In many ways, their pilgrimage resembles the journey of the people of Israel through the desert to find the Promised Land.⁶³ In both cases, they are destitute people. Both Israelites and the “Old Fathers” of Ruby are former slaves in search of better life conditions,⁶⁴ and they try to find a place in which they can start over. In both cases a patriarchal hand guides, rules, and commands the journey. Women do not play a significant role in this journey. Men rarely acknowledge their presence, and when they do, it is to portray them as a valuable patriarchal possession that they have to protect. In other words, Ruby’s foundation obeys a patriarchal inspiration. Excerpts of the story reveal the wanderings of the

⁶² Mary Daly explains in *Gyn/Ecology* that “patriarchy is the homeland of males; it is Father Land; and men are its agents” (28). In the case of *Paradise*, the phallogocentric discourse of the Old Fathers influences the ideological and physical construction of Ruby as a patriarchal establishment.

⁶³ According to Judeo-Christian tradition, the people of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years before arriving to the land that God had promised to them after being liberated from the harsh conditions that they endured as slaves in Egypt. The book of Exodus in the Old Testament of the Bible renders the account of this mythical journey.

⁶⁴ Marni Gauthier locates the foundation of Ruby within the historical context of American society. As she points out, “Founded by descendants of southern blacks who were effectively re-enslaved during the post Reconstruction era through the sharecropping system and adamant white determination to block them from economic and political enfranchisement by means legal and illegal, Ruby is a paradise for its inhabitants that is also established on the principle of exclusivity” (396).

people of Ruby, which much resembles the perils that the people of Israel had to face, such as extreme poverty, total dispossession and starvation:

On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built. The headline of a feature in the *Herald*, "Come Prepared or Not at All," could not mean them, could it? Smart, strong and eager to work their own land, they believed they were more than prepared –they were destined (13-14).

Evidently, the rhetoric of this account centers on phallogocentric ideals. After their long journey, the first town that the "Old Fathers" found is Haven, whose very name conveys a direct allusion to "paradise" and also to their yearning to find an ideal sanctuary that would provide refuge and shelter. In the first chapter of the novel Morrison tells the story of the creation of Haven and how strongly patriarchy influences the process. Two of the leading men of Ruby, the Morgan twins, have a prodigious memory, and they remember every detail of the story of the foundation of Haven, which eventually paves the way to the creation of Ruby: "They have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather –the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13). Like the people of Israel, they assume that a superior force has invested them (men) with the divine duty to accomplish this mission: "at supper-time, when it was too dark for any work except that which could be done by firelight, the "Old Fathers" recited the stories of that journey: the signs God gave to guide them" (14). In general, as a distinguishing feature of her narrative, I think that Morrison reflects on the

importance of storytelling as a way to create a sense of community, transmit knowledge, and perpetuate ideology. However, she criticizes how this particular account revolves exclusively around men. Daly shows a similar concern in *Gyn/Ecology* when she declares that: “Patriarchal expropriation of “the past” and memory is accomplished by many means in addition to the media. Not only ‘history’ but all academic fields erase and reverse women’s history” (349). Since her early days as a writer, Morrison has pointed out that one of her main goals consists in acknowledging the presence of black women that patriarchy has obliterated on purpose. For this reason, in my opinion Morrison confronts and questions the construction of this “paradise”⁶⁵ as an exclusively male enterprise in the novel. Thus, consistently with her willingness to unveil the unspoken history of black women, Morrison introduces different examples in which women play a central role, create, and have power and control in *Paradise*. For instance, the nuns of the Convent manage to provide for themselves long after the subvention of the Church stops, demonstrating complete control of the situation and the capability to administrate their community. These women are agents of their own “herstory” – no men involved. Also, the creative power of women runs consistently through the novel. For this reason, Morrison names each chapter after a female character to signify the prominence of women “hersotry.” In each chapter she presents strong female characters struggling to create their own reality. These “sparkling” amazons fight patriarchal oppression consistently to reclaim a place in the world and to find their own path. Patricia Best exemplifies the women who make and influence history. The teacher becomes a real historian, investigating the roots of Ruby and its adamant patriarchal tradition. When Patricia discovers the sickening plots that plague the history of Ruby, she decides to burn her manuscripts and stop her research.

⁶⁵ In *The American Dream Refashioned*, Peter Widdowson quotes Missy Dehn Kubitschek, acknowledging that “in its critique of Ruby, *Paradise* confronts one of African American culture’s most sacred cows, the myth of unity and perfection in black society relieved of white oppression” (325). Critics see this fact as a myth because, as Morrison corroborates, being relieved of the oppression of the hegemonic group does not guarantee that all-black communities will not fall prey to other forms of subjugation that exist in their own communities like race, gender, and class discrimination.

Patricia refuses to write a book that glorifies the history of men because she realizes that the history of Ruby consists of a compound of male plots to assert their power. Therefore, Patricia's act of rebellion mirrors Morrison's willingness to center-stage the role of women in the construction of community and to bring to light the untold stories of all those anonymous amazons that defy patriarchy every day. Thus, within the patriarchal historical account of Ruby, Morrison manages to infiltrate the importance of the participation of women in the creation of communal historiography through the "herstory" of the women in the novel. The construction of this "paradise" was not a male task exclusively.

After many years of prosperous life, Haven's imminent decay due to outside menaces forces the men of the town to decide to move to a different location, where they establish Ruby:

But the lesson had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks even before they took apart their own beds. Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved out of Haven –headed not for Muskogee or California as some had, or Saint Louis, Houston , Langston or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the gravel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made (16).

Ruby bears a special significance, as it shows the way in which the people of Haven respond to dangerous external forces. Ruby also symbolizes the determination of men to create a "Paradise" in which they can project their dream community. At first, they call the community New Haven but in an unexpected twist of events, they change the name to Ruby. Interestingly enough, the women of the town suggest the new name: "For three years New Haven had been the name most agreed to although a few were loud in suggesting other names –names that did not speak, they said, of failure new or repeated" (16). Ruby's death

reminds everyone in town of the reasons that they have to isolate and protect themselves. Thus, naming the town Ruby seems only logical: “the women had no firm opinion until [Ruby] died. Her funeral –the town’s first- stopped the schedule of discussion and its necessity. They named their town after one of their own and the men did not gainsay them. All right. Well. Ruby. Young Ruby” (17). Ruby stands for a place of survival for black people and also for an opportunity to reconstruct black identity. The woman-chosen name proves relevant because it stirs bitter memories of pain, hate, and oppression. They choose the name Ruby to remind everybody of the latent peril of racial discrimination, and at the same time, to imply that in this “new haven” such things will never happen. However, I think that Morrison warns about the dangers of a community that remains isolated and self-contained. In this sense she points out a very common problematic of black communities in modern America. They have to protect themselves from racialized abuse and preserve their identity but, at the same time, they need to relate efficiently to the rest of the world.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, she criticizes the overtones of apartheid, racism, sexism, and class division that the community of Ruby conveys. Reverend Misner sees Ruby’s reality with a critical view and untangles the most important issues concerning this community:

What was it about this town, these people, that enraged him? They were different from the other communities in only a couple of ways: beauty and isolation. All of them were handsome, some exceptionally so. Except for three or four, they were coal black, athletic, with non-committal eyes. All of them maintained an icy suspicion of outsiders. Otherwise they were like all small black communities: protective, God-loving, thrifty but not miserly. They saved and spent; liked money in the bank and nice things too.

⁶⁶ In *Conversations with Toni Morrison* Betty Fussell highlights the importance of community for Morrison as a writer: “Morrison has good memories of her childhood in Lorain, where she reveled in the rhythms and metaphors that knit communities together, in the ghost stories her parents told, and in the dream book her grandmother kept and played the numbers by” (284). This perception of the dream-like community of the author’s childhood contrasts sharply with the community that the patriarchs of Ruby have created in the novel.

When he arrived he thought their flaws were normal; their disagreements ordinary. They were pleased by the accomplishments of their neighbors and their mockery of the lazy and the loose was full of laughter. Or used to be. Now, it seemed, the glacial wariness they once confined to strangers more and more was directed toward each other (160-161).

The problem that Misner perceives implies that the male-centered totalitarian rule of Ruby inevitably makes the citizens turn against each other. The hate, judgment, and superiority that fuel this system provokes tensions and creates conflicts that endanger the very life of Ruby as a community. As Misner notes, the ruling elite starts “importing” the contempt that they had for outsiders and direct it towards members of their community who they consider “unworthy” because of gender, class, or race. In this way, Morrison conveys the challenges of all-black communities in America, which need to claim a space in society, but at the same time, risk perpetuating the abuse that they have endured. From my perspective, Morrison points out that the main issue has to do with the totalitarian system of patriarchy, a system which has no respect for differences, and which judges and condemns severely. Hence, this all-black community has to face the perils of perishing under the weight of a self-determinism that replicates the patterns of discrimination and abuse of the ruling group because a system that discriminates outside itself will end up turning on itself. The very strength of Ruby as a community becomes its biggest weakness. Peter Widdowson analyzes the different implications of the dynamics of race and gender, which play a significant role in determining how Ruby becomes a failed version of Paradise as a result of patriarchal impositions.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Peter Widdowson explains the significance of Ruby in the novel: “What the town of Ruby seems to represent, then, is a distillation of all the abuses and failures of the American democratic experiment in respect of its black population: it is at once the extreme of an enforced siege or ghetto mentality and the extreme of a cherished racial separatism. In this respect, Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America (the failures of the Declaration, Reconstruction, twentieth-century reforms), and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honour (a triumph of the Exoduster spirit). But the latter, as reflexes of the former, come with a price, too. Morrison’s explorations of the American experience, black and white, are never without their ambivalences.

RACE IN RUBY

It is my thesis that Toni Morrison addresses race from an innovative perspective in *Paradise*.⁶⁸ Although she deals with the traditional binary of black/white opposition, she takes the discussion of racism one step further to discover its implications in an all-black community. As a matter of fact, literary critic Linden Peach asserts that “Morrison’s work does not only focus on black experience of white racism. There is a recurrent interest in black people who have acquired social status through accommodating themselves to the white society and by appropriating white values” (3). In the case of *Paradise*, I consider that Morrison actually criticizes this appropriation of white “values,” (read male, white, upper-class (mis)conceptions) which in fact victimize minorities. In this way, the author forces readers to think outside traditional binary oppositions and realize how far and how deep the harmful spectrum of racialized misconceptions reaches. In an interview with Judith Wilson, Morrison declares that “racism hurts in a very personal way. Because of it people do all sorts of things in their personal lives and love relationships based on differences in values and class and

Indeed, we might note in passing that, while whites are the determining context of Ruby, they are by and large a determinate *absence* (represented only by the phrase ‘Out There’) . . . Instead, the focus is exclusively on black experience, on black racism (the ‘Disallowing’ the intolerant purity of the elite families), on black (especially patriarchal) prejudice” (324). Ruby as a social experiment, or ideal community, fails because it endorses the errors of the hegemonic group in different ways. As Misner criticizes, the self-absorption and single-mindedness of the iron fist patriarchal rule threatens the very life of the community. Morrison warns that any system that fails to recognize and acknowledge differences will destroy itself.

⁶⁸ For literary critic Linden Peach, “this novel interlocks with a further aspect of Faulkner’s fiction –along with Virginia Woolf’s work the subject of dissertation for Morrison’s Master’s degree –its depiction of the old South as ruined by its suicidal social order and by antebellum planters who could not cope with the modern world. It is particularly ironic that Ruby is in part destroyed by its social order which is based on skin colour and by men who refuse to recognize that in the wider world the old antagonistic binarisms are being eroded in more complex interracial relationships” (157). Hence, Morrison favors plurality and diversity of race, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices. Once again, Morrison links the “suicidal order” of phallogratic societies to the annihilation of the community. The Faulknerian trope of the town that consumes itself and the Woolfian implications of suicide interact in the plot of the novel as a warning. Ruby, like any other white phallogratic community that turns its back to diversity and change, runs the risk of destroying itself in a “suicidal” venture. Morrison sees transformation as the promising future for all communities. The chance of revolution, as opposed to static tradition, would guarantee the survival of the community.

education and their conception of what it means to be Black in this society” (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 135). Clearly, Morrison depicts this type of racialized oppression in *Paradise*, which transcends the limits of social groups and permeates the communities and the personal lives of the characters. Patricia Hill Collins shares a similar preoccupation. In *Black Feminist Thought* she discusses the way in which black people have “adopted” racism, as evidenced in *Paradise*. Even though Hill Collins refers specifically to aesthetic expectations for black women, this shows how black people internalize racism and how it operates:

The division of African-Americans into two categories –the “Brights” and the “Lesser Blacks” –affects dark-skinned and light-skinned women differently. Darker women face being judged inferior, and receiving the treatment afforded “too-big Negro girls with nappy hair.” Institutions controlled by Whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject White images of beauty. . . African-American women who are members of the “Brights” fare little better, for they too receive special treatment because of their skin color and hair texture. (91)

However, Collins’s conceptualization of internalized racism takes a new turn in *Paradise* where the opposite seems to be true. People with darker skin definitely fare better in Ruby. I think that Morrison reverses the traditional race roles, only to demonstrate that all forms of self-righteousness imprison. Yet the oppressive aspect of racism, in whatever direction it operates, has the same damaging effect. In the community of Ruby, it operates as internalized racism, which usually manifests as colorism. The “light skinned” people of Ruby suffer as much discrimination in their own town as the “8-rocks” have suffered in the “Out There.” Oppression knows no boundaries and the reaffirmation of this type of binary system of oppositions only engenders exclusion. For instance, the Morgan brothers have a prominent

economic position in Ruby. They own the city bank, and they have an important influence concerning money-related issues. Besides, they impose their voice in all decision-making processes of the town. They command the elite group of 8-rock families. They marry to 8-rock women, and they will inherit their state to K.D., their 8-rock nephew, to protect their status. They even make sure that K.D. marries an 8-rock woman so that they will have 8-rock descendants. Patricia, Roger Best's daughter, uncovers this racialized plot of power and greed when doing research for her history project: "The more money, the fewer children; the fewer children, the more money to give the fewer children. Assuming you amassed enough of it, which was why the richest ones -Deek and Steward- were so kin on the issue of K.D.'s marriage. Or so Pat supposed" (193). Thus, race, class, and power combine in Ruby to guarantee that 8-rock families maintain a prominent position.

On the contrary, those who violate the race purity rule have a difficult time in Ruby. Such is the case of Roger Best. He married a white lady and he has a mixed-race daughter Patricia, and a light-skinned granddaughter, Billie Delia. Consequently, Roger Best's businesses fail abruptly. The elite of Ruby sabotages all his efforts to emerge as a prominent citizen. He loans money from the Morgan brothers to survive, and he turns to heavy drinking to alleviate his frustrations. Everything he does is doomed to perish, and the main reason for this relates to the "affront" he has made to the town by marrying a white woman and having mixed-raced children. Pat reflects on the situation of her family as his father proposes a new business, a gas station, for which he will have to ask the Morgans for money:

Patricia nodded. A very good idea, she thought, like all of his ideas. His veterinary practice (illegal –he had no license- but who knew or cared enough to drive a hundred miles to help Wisdom Poole yank on a foal stuck in its mother?); his butcher business (bring him the slaughtered steer –he'd skin, butcher, carve and refrigerate it for you); and of course the ambulance/mortuary business. Because he had wanted to be,

studied to be, a doctor, most of his enterprises had to do with operating on the sick or dead. (187)

Roger Best's menial jobs and unsuccessful trade keep him and his family in a precarious economic situation. He, "who was the first to violate the blood rule. The one nobody admitted existed" (195) suffers the consequences. Eventually Patricia tries to help out to make ends meet working as a school teacher. The people of Ruby condemn Roger's behavior and punish him accordingly. In this sense, he stands in direct opposition to the Morgan brothers. He has no money, no power, and no influence in the town. According to the racialized perspective of Rubyites, Roger Best personifies failure. As Patricia suggests, "they think Daddy deserves rebuke because he broke the blood rule first, and I wouldn't put it past them to refuse to die just to keep Daddy from success" (199). Clearly the punishment that the town inflicts upon the Best family has its origin in racial oppression.

Other critics like bell hooks also deal with the impact of racism on black communities and how it affects women particularly. As she explains in *Ain't I a Woman*:

In the black community the fair-skinned black woman who most nearly resembled white women was seen as the "lady" and placed on a pedestal while darker-skinned black women were seen as bitches and whores. Black men have shown the same obsessive lust and contempt for female sexuality that is encouraged throughout society. Because they, like white men, see black women as inherently more sexual and morally depraved than other groups of women, they have felt the greatest contempt toward her. (110)

Like Collins, hooks analyzes the impact of internalized racism on black people and especially on black women. hooks also relates skin color to the sexuality of the person. As she points out, darker women tend to have an "animalistic" behavior according to the dominant white

group. In *Paradise*, on the other hand, it is my interpretation that Morrison reverses this situation. People with light skin, or those who have tampered with the blood purity that the 8-rocks proclaim (especially women), show a negative “sexualized” behavior. For instance, the whole community ostracizes Billie Delia and labels her as a “loose” and “rebel” woman. Billie Delia, the daughter of Patricia Best, has the “light” skin color of her mother, which reminds the 8-rocks of racial tampering and the “dishonor” of their racial purity code. As Marni Gauthier explains, “the town’s sole-surviving light-skinned resident, Pat is a target of Ruby disapprobation, and treated largely as an outsider. This subjectivity drives her to examine the town’s stories as objects. However, since the practices of racial exclusion central to the town’s history apply to her, she is also the object of that history” (399). Thus, deep down, the real contempt of the community relies on the fact that Billie Delia, like her mother, has mixed blood and she looks different from the others. The people of Ruby take every opportunity to discredit Billie Delia and look down on her. Even her own mother, at some point has a violent reaction against her and she realizes that she acts just like the other people of Ruby: “Pat realized that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like. Was it that business of pulling down her panties in the street? Billie Delia was only three then” (203). Pat discovers that the hostility of the community has deeper roots when she remembers the incident of the horse race: “Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was –only an innocent child would have done that, surely” (203). However, I think that Morrison endows Billie Delia’s character with bravery and determination as if she wants to convey that people who face discrimination can develop the necessary skills to stand up against racism and survive. Billie Delia faces her aggressors. Actually, she leaves Ruby to find independence and to pursue a career. In doing so, she sets an example of empowerment and determination for the young people of Ruby. Billie Delia, despite the suffering and oppression that she goes

through, becomes an agent of change. Billie Delia becomes an independent young woman with opinions of her own and she behaves accordingly. As Patricia points out, “she won’t listen to me. Not one word. She works in Demby at a clinic . . . I don’t know how she lives. I mean she has a room, she says, in the house of a nice family. I don’t believe it. Not all of it anyway. One of those Poole boys –both of them , probably- is visiting her” (202). Billie Delia has a free spirit and she identifies and connects immediately with the Convent women since she has a lot in common with them. Patricia reflects on Billie Delia’s actions lately:

She hadn’t missed a thing since she had a perfect view of the goings-on at the Oven with those girls from the Convent, she saw them. She saw those Poole boys. And she saw Billie Delia sit down and talk to one of the girls like they were old friends. She saw Reverend Pulliam and Steward Morgan argue with the girls, and when they drove off she saw Billie Delia throw her bouquet in Anna’s trash can before she strolled off, Apollo and Brood Poole in tow. Billie Delia left the next day in her very own car and never said a word to her about the wedding, the reception, the Convent girl or anything. (203)

As a liberal and independent woman, Billie Delia speaks her mind and walks her talk. Ruby has no place for such a woman. Thus, in my opinion Morrison presents the two ends of the spectrum of internalized racism to prove that it always devastates both the community and the individual. At the same time, through the character of Billie Delia, Morrison demonstrates that every individual has a choice: either they let hatred and oppression destroy them, or they use that negative force as a turning point to look for a better life.

Audre Lorde also explains the implications of racism for women of the black community: “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism” (42). Lorde

discovers that “even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for the very visibility which renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness” (42). These critical reviews roughly present the racialized panorama in American society, which polarizes around skin color, a society that, as Lorde denounces, annihilates black people: “for to survive in this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson –that [black people] were never meant to survive” (42). Nevertheless, Morrison subverts all the “traditional” approaches of racism in *Paradise* and presents a new perspective of race relations within the all-black community of Ruby.

Marni Gauthier explains the inference of race in the founding process of Ruby as well as its link to gender: “the founding families of Ruby are distinguished by their impeccable dark skin, evidence that they have not been corrupted by ‘racial tampering’” (396). Here, it is my interpretation that Morrison makes a clear statement on the “incorporation” of the concept of “racial tampering” within the black community. As Gauthier elaborates, “the grandfathers of Ruby’s citizens –always referred to by the community as the ‘Old Fathers’ –fled the white terrorism of the South, only to be rejected by prosperous settlement of light-skinned blacks, appropriately called ‘Fairly.’ This rebuff, known as the ‘Disallowing’ by the townspeople, is the historical moment that provides the impetus for migrating westward to found the township of Haven, and later, for moving ‘farther westward’ (194) to found Ruby” (396). Thus, race and gender function as determinant aspects in the conception of Ruby as a community. As a matter of fact, I consider that Morrison reverses racialized ideas and forces the reader to think outside the binary opposition of black and white. The novel portrays an ironic treatment of racial oppression, in which people who have suffered racism internalize, reproduce, and promote all sorts of racialized practices. The trigger for this situation is the “disallowance” period, in which prosperous black communities look down on the founding fathers because they are too poor and too dark-skinned. In his essay *Furrowing All the Brows*, Philip Page

indicates that “the Disallowing, as it came righteously to be called, justified the exclusionary dogma of Ruby and of the eight-rock families within Ruby. As Patricia Storace puts it, the Disallowing becomes ‘a sacred experience’ in which ‘the disallowed become elite disallowers’” (643). From my perspective, Morrison infuses *Paradise* with this type of “out of the box” approach that compels the reader to reinterpret dogmatic assumptions about race. Besides, she hints at the double catch in discrimination processes where both parts, the ones who discriminate and the ones who undergo discrimination, suffer. Steward Morgan reflects on all the hardships that the people of Ruby have endured in order to have a safe haven. He also sees how a hint of change in the way of thinking of the new generations challenges that safety: “[Steward] was disgusted. ‘Cut me some slack.’ That was the slogan those young simpletons wanted to paint on the Oven. Like his nephew, K.D., they had no notion of what it took to build this town. What they were protected from. What humiliations they did not have to face” (93). Ironically, the safety and peace that Steward proclaims originate from discrimination, self-righteousness, and exclusion that comes from the constant abuse that their forefathers suffered. The traumatic experience of the “disallowing” scars the people of Ruby and makes them react aggressively: “it was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones” (95). The people of Ruby justify their adamant rules on the premises of their previous suffering. Yet, Morrison disapproves of the way in which the people of Ruby react to the “disallowing.” In other words, discriminatory practices like the “disallowing” do not have any possible positive outcome. In the end, the people of Ruby develop a mechanism of defense against racialized assumptions, which paradoxically ends up endorsing internalized racism in their all-black community Peter Widdowson elaborates on the problematic involving racial purity in Ruby by saying:

The purity, exclusivity, intolerance and isolation of Ruby is a kind of living death . . .

This appears to be the principal position the novel takes up: whatever the cost, separatism is not a solution –for blacks or whites; and Civil Rights must mean the political negotiation of a full place within mainstream society. But Ruby, ‘immortally’ frozen in its own stasis, has no politics because the very conception of change is a contradiction in terms: the town is ideal because it cannot change, and it cannot change because it is ideal (329).

Therefore, as a way to oppose what takes place “Out There,” the people of Ruby favor those with darker skin. In this way, Morrison exposes the dilemma of colorism in all-black communities since the ruling group of the town reproduces the patterns of abuse of the white elite. Race relations in Ruby have a significant impact because they determine diverse aspects of a persons’ life, such as social status, class privileges, and moral credibility, among many others. Consequently, Ruby’s ruling group has a strict control of racial purity. They give paramount importance to the blood line associated with the eight-rocks and the nine original families that started the trip to Oklahoma, which all belonged to this group. In the chapter “Patricia,” while doing research for the historiography of the town, Patricia Best finds out the meaning and importance of eight-rocks in Ruby: “all of them, however, each and every one of the intact nine families, had the little mark she had chosen to put after their names: 8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (193). They transform their skin color, which meant so much suffering and pain for them, into their distinguishing feature and use it to discriminate against others: “they must have suspected yet dared not to say that their misfortune’s misfortune was due to the one and only feature that distinguished them from their Negro peers. Eight-rock. In 1890 they have been in the country for one hundred and twenty years” (193). This special feature also allows Ruby’s people to trace a direct line back to their African roots, which also explains their

obsession with preserving racial purity.⁶⁹ Eight-rocks have a strong connection with their ancestry: “descendants of those who have been in Louisiana Territory when it was French, when it was Spanish, when it was French again, when it was sold to Jefferson and when it became a state in 1812. Who spoke patois part Spanish, part French, part English, and all their own. Descendants of those who, after the Civil War, had defied or hidden from whites” (193). They believe they have a “worthiness so endemic [that] it got three of their children elected to rule in the state legislatures and county offices” (193). Thus, being an eight-rock in Ruby has a connotation of racial purity and implies strong connections to social status and gender privileges.

I consider that Morrison firmly criticizes this defensiveness of the people of Ruby and the way in which the elite class of the town uses skin color to reaffirm power and discriminate other people within the same community. Actually, this “appropriated” form of racism constitutes one of the central topics of the novel. Morrison speaks metaphorically through the people of Ruby to the rest of American society (and all societies in general) warning them about the pernicious consequences of internalized racism. What seems to be the unconscious adoption of the subjugating role of race has a tremendous impact in Ruby:

This time the clarity was clear; for ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not stuck them

⁶⁹ Marni Gauthier offers an interesting historical approach to blood purity in Ruby. She declares that “as in her critical monograph *Playing in the Dark* (1990), in *Paradise* Morrison is keenly attuned to the contested conceptual territory of America, and she uses African American history to critique it. Thus, the black skin of Ruby’s citizens, termed ‘8-rock’ . . . inverts the historical landmark of Plymouth Rock; Ruby’s Old Fathers are avatars of none other than the founding fathers of the United States . . . [Besides] the biblical language that Morrison recreates for her story further evokes Puritan America. Like the early English immigrants, the 8-rocks create a harbor from persecution that is maintained by geographic and cultural isolation, and, when needed, violence against violence . . . While the 8-rocks seek to build a haven that will allow them to pursue their ideals in freedom, it is a freedom maintained by enforcing their own disallowings” (397). As a matter of fact, the 8-rocks are as violent and hateful as the puritans.

before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves.

(194)

It is my interpretation that Morrison confronts the pervading idea of using race as a qualifying characteristic of a person in the novel. She incisively critiques the importance that the people of Ruby ascribe to skin tone.⁷⁰ Also, she disapproves of how black people themselves use race as a status marker: “[consequences were] serious enough that their daughters would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last; that colored men would be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters. The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain” (194). Unable to conquer racial prejudice, the fathers of Ruby adopt it and use it in their own way. Thus, skin color has diverse implications in this town, as Patricia Best discovers when she realizes that the families which have infringed the racial purity rule do not participate in the Christmas play. She finds out that the reason why some families have no representation in the pageant “was skin color . . . the way people get chosen and ranked in this town” (216). Significantly, as an outsider, Reverend Misner perceives the pattern of racial disparity in the town. Actually, he alerts Patricia about the two missing original families in the Christmas play. Reverend Misner has a clearer perspective of racialized practices because he has not been part of Ruby’s systematic indoctrination regarding blood purity. Only then does Pat realize that “all that nonsense she had grown up with seemed to her like an excuse to be hateful” (214), which demonstrates the real purpose operating behind racial classification: to endorse the power of the elite group, to alienate people who are different from them, and to preserve social status. In this way, Morrison makes a powerful statement

⁷⁰ In *Toni Morrison*, Linden Peach explains how racialized conventions function in Ruby: “in establishing a community in which African-Americans with black skin are ranked higher than African-Americans with light skin they have supplanted one form of racial tyranny by another” (169).

about colorism as a way to classify, denigrate and dominate people. Regardless of the source of racism, it will always work as a weapon to alienate, oppress, and discriminate.

Consequently, the blood rule, as a part of the overall patriarchal structure, has an important impact within the ideology that dominates Ruby. The “purity” of blood guarantees that an elite group has control over the town. This systematic control also extends to gender and class aspects. The Morgan brothers stand as prominent figures of the town because they belong to the select group of wealthy, eight-rock men of Ruby. Another aspect that evidences the importance of the blood rule relies on the fact that the Morgan brothers fight desperately to protect the *status quo* and also do whatever they consider necessary to pass on their intact legacy to their only successor, K.D. The patriarchs aim to control women’s bodies as reproductive vessels, which demonstrates that race, gender, and sexual control and “procreation” control, since they want specific babies to be born, all serve the purposes of the hegemonic group. Hence, I consider that Morrison demonstrates that patriarchal hunger for power and control knows no limits. The patriarchs of Ruby impose and promote the blood rule rigorously. Breaking these unspoken rules has serious consequences, and Patricia Best and her daughter Billie Delia face racial attacks in Ruby constantly. As Rob Davidson explains in his essay *Racial Stock and 8-Rocks*, “for Patricia, it follows that [the realization that there could be a color line in the black community] becomes the foundation of the town’s isolationism and its desire to keep family lines and racial stock ‘pure.’ In a world where both lighter-skinned blacks and whites despise the darker-skinned blacks, the 8-rocks never feel safe” (364). Patricia discovers the insane plot of racial oppression in the town while doing research for a personal project to write the history of Ruby. She confronts the inflexible response of the community, which refuses to share family history and personal information. Patricia must recur to various informal sources like bibles and conversations with the local residents to map the family lines. In the end, race permeates every aspect of the life of the

people in Ruby. The town that emerged as a safe haven to protect its people from racial abuse transforms itself into a site of strict racialized control.

Although patriarchal rule sanctions contradicting the “official” version of the founding fathers, “Patricia is obviously at the edge of dome revelation: she has discovered –and even dared to articulate- the town’s racism” (Davidson 367). In my opinion, Morrison shows the two sides of racism in the character of Patricia Best Cato because she discovers the unspoken rules of bloodline in Ruby and, at the same time, she suffers this discrimination directly. Roger Best, Patricia’s father “was the first to violate the blood rule. The one nobody admitted existed” (195). He married “a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (197). Patricia Best comes from a mixed-blood marriage. In fact, this might be one of the main reasons why people do not want to share their family history with her. They judge her unworthy of recuperating the history of Ruby. As Patricia admits, “they hate us because [my mother] looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like [my father], like them, I passed the skin on to my daughter . . . as everybody knew I would” (196). The bloodline prejudice runs so deep in the 8-rocks’s minds that they even sacrifice their people on its behalf. Patricia bitterly remembers that in a display of proud indifference the men of the town let her mother and baby sister die during a complicated child birth: “[father] doesn’t agree with me that those 8-rock men didn’t want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn’t want to drive out to a white’s house begging for help; or else they just despised your pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go” (198). The death of Patricia’s mother mirrors Ruby’s death. Ironically, in both cases, the women die victims of the indifference of the racialized misconceptions of men. These women are two sides of the same coin: overt racism. I think that Morrison also points out the reversal of roles and how the victims become victimizers. Yet, prejudice and alienation involve death and

annihilation in both cases. From my perspective, Morrison gives another important warning since prejudice ravishes the most vulnerable members of patriarchal society such as women and children. Pat sarcastically remarks “that except for [my mother] and K.D.’s mother, nobody in Ruby has ever died” (199). These two women fall victim to racial prejudice, intolerance, and oppression. Significantly, racial prejudice brings about the only two losses that the town counts so far, and it also foreshadows more tragedies to come as long as the narrow-mindedness prevails. Patricia even tries to accommodate Ruby’s rigid blood line control and marries Billy Cato: “I married Billy Cato because he was beautiful, partly because he made me laugh, and partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Catos and the Blackhorses, along with that Blackhorse feature of stick-straight hair” (198). But her effort fails, as her daughter inherits her light skin. Patricia’s marriage ends shortly after Billy dies. People in town call her by her father’s name, Best, as if unworthy to bear her late husband’s name Cato. A widow, Patricia goes back to her father’s home where they all face the consequences of going against the blood rule. Thus, Morrison argues that the evil of Race discrimination has no limits. It infected Ruby as a community victimizing people, which is the case of the Best family.

The people of Ruby do not tolerate violations to the 8-rock canon. Roger Best’s mortuary business -and any other business he might try- does not succeed because the controlling elite, which the Morgan brothers proudly represent, sabotages his efforts. They ostracize Roger Best and his family. As Patricia sardonically remarks: “[8-rocks] think Daddy deserves rebuke because he broke the blood rule first, and I wouldn’t put it past them to refuse to die just to keep Daddy from success” (199). Since blood purity indicates a status marker, it goes along with economic success. For this reason, the Morgan brothers make sure that the Best family barely has the necessary economic means to survive, and keep them in debt, as an exemplary reprimand for breaking the rules. As Patricia suggests: “I work

hard to convince [Daddy] that the money the town pays me for teaching is just household money and he doesn't have to borrow any more on his shares in Deek's bank and should forget gasoline stations and what all" (199).

The town's banishment of the Best family has deeper consequences. Billie Delia carries both the light skin of her mother and the "guilt" of interfering with the blood rule. Billie Delia earns the people's disdain because she wanted to ride a horse with no panties on when she was a child. The people of Ruby interpret this innocent act as a sign of depraved behavior. From that moment on, they label her as a loose girl and demonstrate a generalized roughness towards her. For instance, in Arnette's wedding, Billie Delia "was bridesmaid and maid of honor both, since Arnette would not have anybody else, and no other girl wanted the honor anyway if it meant walking down the aisle with Billie Delia" (203). The reaction of the people of Ruby towards Billie Delia has a misogynistic origin, which also shows a clear fear of and contempt for female sexuality. The child's action indicates an innocent impulse, which does not indicate a sexualized behavior like having intercourse or getting pregnant. The double moral of the town surfaces in the different way they treat Billie Delia and Arnette, for example. They censure Billie Delia for a childish game, while they try to "cover" and "dignify" Arnette's pregnancy with an arranged marriage. Yet, in both cases patriarchy shows an open disdain towards female sexuality. In addition, the 8-rocks dislike Billie Delia's attitude, which in fact relates to the fact that they dislike her skin tone. The people of Ruby hold a similar grudge against the Convent women, who they perceive as vain and lustful. Coincidentally, they associate Billie Delia with them, as they perceive that she has a free spirit. Thus, people ostracize the women who enjoy their sexuality freely and, by extension, those women who enjoy any type of freedom or self-assertion. Actually, Patricia sadly admits that she herself feels some sort of masked contempt for her "lightish but not whiteish" daughter. Their relationship becomes so tense that she even tries to attack her daughter with a pressing iron.

Trying to repress the feelings of contempt that the system of Ruby imposes, Patricia abuses her own daughter: “she, the gentlest of souls, missed killing her own daughter by inches. She who loved children and protected them not only from each other but from too stern parents lunged after her own daughter” (203). But Patricia understands that something else makes the people of Ruby overreact to her daughter: the blood rule. In the end Patricia wonders if she has acted with Billie Delia in just the same way as the rest of the people of Ruby: “Have I missed something? Was there something else? But the question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her” (203). Billie Delia leaves town and Patricia decides to burn her manuscripts. The burning of the papers represents Patricia’s silent revenge on the people of Ruby for mistreating her and her daughter: she destroys their history. She turns their legacy of hate, rancor, and indifference into ashes.

It is my thesis that Phallocracy holds women as solely responsible for reproduction matters and, in the case of Ruby, as carriers of racial purity, which reflects the misogyny of this society. In the novel, all mix-bloods or non-black characters are women: Roger Best’s wife, Menus’ wife, Patricia Best, and Billie Delia. This fact intensifies the fear that the patriarchal rule feels for women. Patricia finally makes the connection: “Suddenly Pat thought she knew all of it. Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their ideal. For immortality. Pat’s smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women” (217). Patricia’s role as Ruby’s historian contrasts with the constant abuse that she and her family suffer. Remarkably, she discovers the plot of abuse that pure blood 8-rocks sustain and make evident during the “Disallowance” scene in the Christmas play. Reverend Misner, who is also a “stranger,” an outsider, and who does not completely understand or accept the racial code of Ruby asks Patricia to give him a clue to understand what is going on: “Well

help me figure this place out. I know I'm an outsider, but I'm not an enemy.' 'No, you are not. But in this town those two words mean the same thing" (212). Yet, Pure Bloods consider Patricia Best and Billie Delia "strangers" in their own town because they do not belong to the select group of "midnight skin" families. The epiphany that takes place during the Christmas play forces Patricia to come to terms with the real magnitude of racial prejudice in her town. In this moment, she clearly sees that putting together the history of Ruby does not deserve her efforts. She develops a critical view of the patriarchal institution of racial classification and fully realizes its absurdity. As Davidson asserts, "the men of Ruby believe unfailingly – dogmatically- in their own construction of history; but the moral basis of this belief has eroded, and the elders now cling to it less for moral reasons (though they freely employ the rhetoric of morality) than for a brute desire to preserve their powerful position at any cost" (361). Thus, Patricia understands that writing the "official" version of Ruby's history implies accepting and supporting patriarchal tradition. Davidson points out that "if the patriarchs of Ruby are overly rigid in their adherence to their version of history, the women are not. *Paradise* complicates every version of history that it presents, continually urging broader contexts that undermine and problematize the conservative approach of the men" (361). This insight, along with the deception of the racial caste system that operates in Ruby, makes Patricia refuse to adhere to the patriarchal tradition. As Davidson explains, "history is obviously gendered in *Paradise*. Not surprisingly, then, women frequently construct competing versions of Ruby's history, though they hide them from men" (361). What occurs next reaffirms Patricia's decision to create her own version of "herstory" and forget about the traditional history: She cuts her project short: "Dear God,' she murmured. 'Dear, dear God. I burned the papers" (217). Patricia's smile while doing so reveals her willingness to challenge a racialized patriarchal system that has abused her and her loved ones continuously. In contrast to the men, who fight desperately to preserve the *status quo*, the women in *Paradise* learn, grow and regenerate through purifying fire.

GENDER IN RUBY

Ruby is patriarchally dominated. The male-oriented idiosyncrasy of the town's people reflects the appropriation of the traditional gender roles of the ruling group. Although both men and women have suffered constant abuse from the institutionalized patriarchal model, the people of Ruby –particularly men, accept and validate phallocracy.⁷¹ Thus, gender remains the main aspect of discrimination and separation in the town. Gender roles mark the direction of the town, and, in this sense, men lead the way. Although race might appear as the prevailing force that controls Ruby, gender, in fact, has a more aggressive impact on the life of Ruby since it determines separation even within people of the same race and class status. From my standpoint, Morrison provides ample references of patriarchal supremacy in Ruby. As a matter of fact, the town exemplifies what Mary Daly calls in *Pure Lust* a “sadosociety.” Basically, this term refers to societies where patriarchy prevails, and which she describes as follows: “The sadosociety is the sum of places/times where the beliefs and practices of sadomasochism are The Rule. It is formed/framed by statutes of studs, decrees of drones, canons of cocks, fixations of fixers, precepts of pricklers, regulations of rakes and rippers. It is bore-ocracy” (35). Morrison, like Daly, strongly believes that patriarchal rule conveys subjugation and oppression, not only of women, but of all those who do not belong to the dominant group, like racial minorities or children.

⁷¹ As Peter Widdowson points out, “For above all, Ruby is a patriarchy. While racial exclusion is responsible for bringing the town into being, and while the events of early July 1976 are indeed an indictment of the ‘failures’ of white American democracy, they are overdetermined by a sexual ideology which is not circumscribed by race. Hence the telling subtlety of that opening line of the novel: ‘They shoot the white girl first,’ where the emphasis falls not, as might be expected, on the word ‘white’ –but on ‘first.’ This suggests that while the men do indeed distinguish the women by colour, it is not colour which is their true animus –since ‘first’ implies that they are going to shoot other women who are not white. Rather, it is that they are all *women* . . . That the identity of the white girl in *Paradise* remains a mystery merely emphasizes that here it is gender rather than race which is the key defining characteristic and the crucial potential source of destabilizing change” (329).

One of the most important aspects that Morrison explores deals with the very origin of the town. During the invasion of the Convent, the Morgan brothers remember that “the mansion-turned-Convent was there long before the town, and the last boarding Arapaho girls had already gone when the fifteen families arrived. That was twenty-five years ago, when all their dreams outstretched the men who had them” (10). This memory explains that Ruby (as an expression of “paradise”) originates on this male fantasy of a place in which they can exercise power at their own will. Ruby becomes their “dream” place. Consequently, the founding fathers create Ruby as an exclusive haven for men to exercise the power that white men have denied them. In this sense, I consider that Morrison explores the notion of “paradise” as a male construct. Men impose and support strict forms of control⁷² to protect their creation, and they simultaneously attack any possible threat to their stability. As Phillip Page explains, “the attempt to enforce an overly rigid community harmony is not only deadening but can easily disrupt the desired harmony. Unity that is too tight only precipitates the dissolution it is designed to prevent” (644). This explains the outcome of the severe patriarchal control that the men exercise in Ruby: different forms of death and disintegration. Their protective shield becomes so “effective” that it suffocates, kills, and destroys even those under its “protection.”

⁷² Mary Daly discusses the issue of patriarchal control in *Pure Lust* extensively. The women of Ruby, who live in a strict patriarchal regime, have what Mary Daly calls “fear of becoming out of control” (410). Sweetie Fleetwood running back from the Convent to the “protection” of her husband in Ruby exemplifies how the fear of losing control that patriarchy installs in women operates. Daly asserts that patriarchy programs women to fear getting away from male control. As she declares, “the problem is that such fear-full women, filled with embedded fears, are too much under control, phallographic control. This is control by role” (410). The other women of Ruby: Soane, Patricia, Arnette, Anna, Dovey also embrace this “fear-full” disposition. Daly explains that “women who are under control in Patriarchy are reduced to the state of duplicates/registers/recordings of the official or approved man-made feminine role. By staying under control, [women] verify this role as the right role. Thus the gynocidal machine continues to roll, running us over, running us down” (410).

Patricia Best disentangles the complicated rules of this patriarchal society, which involve not only male supremacy but also racial purity and favoritism related to social status. For instance, she remembers with a painful heart all the suffering that she and her family have endured for breaking the blood rules of the town. As she recalls, the men in charge react aggressively to any threat to the established order.⁷³ When her father brought her light-skinned mother to town, “only Steward had the gall to say out loud, “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (201). The women of Ruby, who show a different attitude, react sensitively when they see this injustice and raise their voice for the oppressed: “Dovey shushed him. Soane too. But Fairy DuPres cursed him, saying, ‘God don’t love ugly ways. Watch out He don’t deny you what you love too.’ A remark Dovey must have thought about a lot until 1964 when the curse was completed” (201). However, in my viewpoint, Morrison emphasizes the feeble position of women in a “sadosociety” like Ruby that limits their agency: “But they were just women, *and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise*” (201-201 emphasis added). In this sense, Morrison reveals that women have a marginal position in Ruby while men have control. Besides, she acknowledges that Ruby, as a version of “Paradise,” exists as a justification of the necessity of men to dominate. Accordingly, the “brave” men of Ruby would do anything to preserve and protect their creation, and they easily disregard, suppress, and silence the women around them.

⁷³ Regarding patriarchal control, Daly observes: “It is quite understandable that males in power should fear ‘losing control.’ It may seem less comprehensible, at first, that women should experience terror of ‘getting out of control.’ However, adherence to ‘the role’ for women has been equated with safety, shelter, and –most serious of all– sanity. Women of the Right and women of the Left as well as women of the middle/muddle road have more to dread than abandonment by their male ‘protectors.’ The patriarchally embedded fears have made women terrified of our Selves, our Souls, our Sanity. Succumbing to these terrors would mean settling for insanity” (*Pure Lust*, 410).

Reverend Misner sees the problematic creation of "Paradise" from a different perspective as well. He can perceive all the flaws in this man-made secluded refuge, flaws which the people of Ruby pretend to ignore. He questions the patriarchal rule of the town as an outsider of the community. Misner speculates about the rigid *status quo* of Ruby and about the fact that men have to fight constantly to preserve their dominion. He argues with Patricia during the Christmas play: "But can't you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get" (213). Misner's remark summarizes the problematic of the concept of "paradise" according to patriarchal views, which involves seclusion, violence and enduring struggle. By criticizing Ruby, Misner imagines what it would be like to have a "real home:" "Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home" (213). He condemns the millenarian practice of phallocracy that destroys whatever comes in the way of their "dream." He criticizes the patriarchal zeal to build a "paradise" based on alienation, terror, and destruction. In contrast, the place that the Reverend envisions, the "real home" that he talks about resembles more the Convent, a community which always has the doors open for those who need refuge. Misner's words would prove prophetic eventually when the men of Ruby defend their "paradise" and invade the Convent at gunpoint. They attack the women living there claiming that they must protect their town: "Before those heifers came to town this was a *peaceable kingdom*. The others before them at least had some religion. These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either. They don't need *men and they don't need God*" (276 emphasis added), and *this* is the ultimate crime. Thus, the men of Ruby not only have a good "excuse" to control the women, but they also have the sacred duty to impose order and protect their "peaceable kingdom." As a matter of fact, the element of punishment has an important

connotation. Deep down lays the anger of the men of Ruby because these women do not need men. The Convent women contradict every patriarchal assumption that the Ruby men have so faithfully constructed. They need to penalize the daring of these women to live without male control with the capital punishment. In the portrayal of the attack of the Convent women, Morrison denounces the habitual scapegoating that women suffer in phallocracy. Thus, as seen in the attack of the Convent, the men of Ruby use the protection of their town only as a vain excuse to project their misogyny.

It is my interpretation that Morrison shows different ways in which patriarchy establishes power and control in the novel. Marriage serves as a good example. Patriarchal alliances seek to preserve power with race, gender and class in mind as relevant aspects. Arnette and K.D.'s wedding illustrates how the elite group wants to preserve racial purity, male domination, and class status and how the three are deeply connected. When K.D.'s uncles and Arnette's father and brother meet to discuss the physical abuse that Arnette is victim of (in an attack of rage, K.D. hits Arnette because she confronts him for his lustful behavior when he sees Gigi at the Oven) and to negotiate a possible wedding because she is carrying K.D.'s baby, they practically sell this woman as livestock to compensate for some unpaid debt that Arnette's family owes the Morgans. Also, the fact that Arnette is pregnant calls for an immediate solution. In a patriarchal society like Ruby, a wedding works as the easiest way to solve this type of "inconvenient." As Daly explains in *Pure Lust*, "patriarchal women long to be 'appropriate,' 'to be in a proper, rightful, or fitting place,' and 'to be the property of a person or thing,' for example the institution of marriage . . . women are afflicted with potted longings to 'become attached or bound' to male-ordered society, and with potted desires to be 'properly classified'"(318). Arnette has interiorized the ideology of patriarchy and, as Daly suggests, she feels the urge to fit in a "proper" place within patriarchal society. She longs to be owned as she consciously (or unconsciously) acquiesces to this union/trade

that the men disguise as marriage. Besides, offering Arnette to the Morgan household solves the problem of the unwanted pregnancy and the debt of the Fleetwoods. The Fleetwood patriarchs sacrifice their female child to meet the standards of phallocracy. In “sado-societies” like Ruby, the patriarchs view women as a commodity that they can and do use and abuse to meet their goals. Morrison does not present Arnette’s father and brothers as loving and caring individuals preoccupied with the future of this girl. They rather appear as business men completing a transaction that will benefit (the men of) both parts. Arnette’s wedding “transaction” stands as a clear example of the objectification of women in Ruby.

At some point, the meeting to negotiate the marriage turns into a cockfight. The men of each family want to demonstrate their power and domination. The scene becomes very tense because of the difficult situation in the Fleetwood household. Jeff, Arnette’s brother, has four sick children. I consider that Morrison emphasizes the role of women as caretakers in patriarchal society: “The men sat on spotless upholstery waiting for Reverend Misner to finish seeing the women *who were nowhere in sight*. Both of the Mrs. Fleetwoods spent all their energy, time and affection on the four children still alive –so far. Fleet and Jeff, grateful for but infuriated by that devotion, turned their shame sideways” (58 emphasis added). While men “discuss” and “negotiate,” women “take care” of the household and the sick. Morrison also acknowledges the invisibility of women in patriarchal society as they remain “nowhere in sight” while men decide their future. In the awkward silences that occur during the discussion of K.D.’s Physical abuse of Arnette and how they will “solve” it, as if the violence of patriarchy could be “solved,” the absence of women becomes evident: “. . . they could hear above their heads the light click of heels: the women pacing, servicing, fetching, feeding –whatever it took to save the children who could not save themselves” (60). The episode also shows the complete disregard for women’s lives, bodies, and babies. In this case, women must provide not only for the children who cannot provide for themselves but also for the men who actually

steal women's time and energy,⁷⁴ which serves as a metaphor of the role of women in the patriarchal order. Compliant with patriarchy, Arnette has no opinion or inference in the men's decision and she cannot give her views on the violence that she has suffered. Her father and brother decide for her. Although Arnette is a well-educated girl and will pursue a career in college, she cannot make decisions on her own: "When that school start up, Fleet?" Steward cocked his head. 'August, I believe.' 'She be ready then?' 'What do you mean?' 'Well,' Steward Answered. 'August's a long way off. This here is May. She might change her mind. Decide to stay on.' *'I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind.'* 'Right,' said Steward" (emphasis added 61). Whether she goes to college or stays in Ruby will be her father's decision. Ruby's men also give a false impression of women's participation in decision making. At one point of the discussion, Fleet says that he will consult his decision with his wife Mable since she has the final answer: "Have to ask her mother. She's hit by this too, you know. Hit worse'n I am, maybe . . . Like I say. Have to talk to her mother . . . She's the key. My wife's the key. Deek smiled outright for the first time that evening. 'Women always the key, God Bless'em" (61). It is my interpretation that Morrison reveals the double morality of patriarchal society in this passage. Clearly, women have no inference whatsoever in the decision making-process, even when it affects their lives directly. However, men claim that women make the final decision and that they are the "key." This contradictory patriarchal discourse only serves to confuse women and to give them a false idea of problem-solving power because in reality, as

⁷⁴ Daly asserts that "patriarchy is designed not only to possess women but to prepossess/preoccupy [them], that is, to inspire women with false selves which anesthetize the Self . . . [This] freezing of be-ing into fragmented being is the necessary condition for maintaining the [patriarchal] State of Possession" (*Gyn/Ecology* 322). The women of the Fleetwood family illustrate how patriarchy assigns roles of "care givers" to women that eventually shatter their "Self." Actually, Birdie's break down under the heavy task of "nursing" demonstrates how patriarchal impositions affect women. Eventually, Birdie succumbs to the pressure of being a care giver and runs away from home. She ends up in the Convent, where she finds this group of amazing women who willingly take care of her. The women of the Convent are not care-givers, they are care-sharers. They help and nourish each other, and this makes a big difference. The care-sharing that the Convent women practice is natural, spontaneous, and fulfilling.

Fleet himself states boldly, he will “arrange” the mind of his daughter and no doubt he will “arrange” the mind of his wife as well.⁷⁵ The men of Ruby make their women literally invisible as they keep them behind the scenes during important moments like this one: “[The men] bowed their heads and listened obediently to Misner’s beautifully put words and the tippy-tap steps of women who were nowhere in sight” (61). One more time, I think that Morrison emphasizes the opposition center/margin that the patriarchy of Ruby reinforces. Men take charge of decision making processes while women submissively tend to their needs. Besides, giving the false idea of female empowerment actually “pre/occupies” women’s minds, as Daly would put it, with a fake idea of supremacy, which is a very common misconception in patriarchal societies. The Fleetwood men boast that women play an important role within their family. Yet, the Fleetwood women do not have any power most of the time, and when they do act, they accept patriarchal rule like Arnette “accepting” her arranged marriage with K.D., or Sweetie, who longs to return to the “safety” of her home and to her husband after a brief stay at the Convent. They live a life full of what Daly calls “potted passions”⁷⁶ because their lives revolve around their fathers, husbands, lovers, and children, and most of the time they forget their own Self. Thus, the Fleetwood women do not have any agency. These women only act and react according to patriarchal standards of the ideal behavior of women.

⁷⁵ In his essay *Racial Stock and 8-rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison’s Paradise*, Rob Davidson explains that “when Jeff Fleetwood vows to arrange his daughter’s mind, the suggestion may be that he will get her out of town in time to spare the town any disgrace. The exchange in the Fleetwood house exemplifies how things work in Ruby: the town elders negotiate on behalf of the younger men and all the women. Deals are cut in the back room, and a blind eye is turned toward unfortunate accidents like Arnette’s pregnancy. Above all else, the 8-rocks want to preserve the town’s stability, and, of all elders, the Morgans are more interested in preserving the status quo” (357-358).

⁷⁶ Daly defines “potted passions” in *Pure Lust* as “feelings that fragment and distort the psyche [of women]. In the cockocratic state women are intimidated, tracked, and trained to love, desire, and rejoice in the wrong things, hate, have aversion to, and be sad over the wrong things, fear and dare the wrong things, be angry over the wrong things.” (206) Both Arnette and Sweetie show a disposition towards “potted desires,” in which they prioritize the needs of men over their own well-being. They favor the status quo regardless of their personal needs.

In the end, K.D. and Arnette's wedding fulfills all patriarchal expectations. This marriage helps to perpetuate the patriarchal institutions in Ruby and also helps to secure the economic and political status of the families. Besides, Morgans and Fleetwoods may now have the certainty that the 8-rock pure blood line will continue: "But more than joy and children high on wedding cake, they were looking forward to the union of two families and an end to the animus that had soaked the members and friends of those families for four years. Animus that centered on the maybe-baby the bride had not acknowledged, announced or delivered" (144). Marriage, as a patriarchal device, serves the purpose of men. Once again, Misner's powerful insight unveils what lurks beneath this matrimony. Misner harshly criticizes the sermon of Reverend Pulliam during the ceremony, which he uses to spread male-oriented ideology:

What would Augustine say as anodyne to the poison Pulliam had just sprayed over everything? Over the heads of men finding it so hard to fight their instincts to control what they could and crunch what they could not; in the hearts of women tirelessly taming the predator; in the faces of children not yet recovered from the blow to their esteem upon learning that adults would not regard them as humans until they mated; of the bride and the groom frozen there, desperate for this public bonding to dilute the private shame ... He knew also that a public secret about a never-born baby poked through the grounds of the quarrel like a fang (145).

K.D. and Arnette's wedding makes the ambitions of the men of Ruby clear. The arrangements for the wedding, the situations involved with it, and the ceremony itself, endorse the patriarchal ideology that governs the people of this town. However, Reverend Misner perceives the castrating effects of phallocracy. Infuriated by these circumstances, he decides to take a stand and embraces a wooden cross during the duration of the ceremony: ". . . Unmotivated respect. All of which testified not to a peevish Lord who was His own love

but to one who enabled human love . . . So he stood there and let the minutes tick by as he held the crossed oak in his hands, urging to say what he could not: that not only is God interested in you; He *is* you” (146-147). The pastor wants to make clear that love, understanding, and compromise must unite people. Misner’s silent act of rebellion shocks the community as he tries to demonstrate the real meaning of love.

From my perspective, indoctrination plays an important role in the preservation of male authority and of gender issues. Consequently, men rule and the teachings of the Old Fathers serve the purposes of the elite group to sustain their power. Besides history and tradition, the ruling class of Ruby uses other elements to maintain its ideology.⁷⁷ The Oven, for instance, stands as one of the most emblematic symbols of phallocracy in the town. The Oven represents the power and authority of men. They craft the Oven, like Ruby, to meet their paradigms. The communal center of the town, the Oven concentrates the essence of Ruby. The forefathers build the Oven to work as the backbone of the town, that is, the same as their ideology. Besides the simple functional aspects, the Oven serves as a space where the community shares important events. In Haven, the Oven had the special power of bringing the people together:

Those were the days of slow cooking . . . Haven people brought the kill to the Oven and stayed sometimes to fuss and quarrel with the Morgan family about seasonings and the proper test for ‘done.’ They stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shades of the eaves. And any child in earshot was subject

⁷⁷ Philip Page explains in his essay *Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison’s Paradise* that “[there] is a refusal by the ruling fathers to tolerate divergent interpretations of the town’s past. The men seek to preserve the town’s identity by freezing its past, allowing only their own official reading of the treks, the Disallowing, and the establishment of the town. As Storace argues, they ‘claim the perpetual overarching authority of the creator at the moment of creation.’ In this formulation, *creator* can be taken in the sense of author as well as divine creator, for the townsmen are convinced that their past and their single interpretation of the past have divine sanction, and, unlike Morrison, they ‘want to stop the life of their work at the moment of writing’”(644).

to being ordered to fan flies, haul wood, clean the worktable or beat the earth with a tamping block (15).

Thus, the Oven epitomizes the zeal of Ruby's men to preserve "their" tradition. The bucolic scene of the Oven back in Haven, the "good old days," captures the essence of the idyllic "paradise" that the new fathers want to establish in Ruby. The melancholic reminiscence of the past has a connotation of better days gone-by, when the Oven was the true heart of the town, and that heart definitely has a patriarchal beat to it. In this way, the new fathers of Ruby justify their dominant position: "as new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers who had outfoxed it; who had not let danger or natural evil keep them from cutting Haven out of mud and who knew enough to seal their triumph with a priority. An Oven. Round as a head, deep as desire" (6). From my standpoint, Morrison shows in these lines that the goal of Ruby's men consists not only in preserving the legacy of the Old Fathers but also in taking their "desire" to construct a "paradise" of their own one step further. They want to surpass the ambitions of their forefathers and build a city that reflects their drive: "living in or near their wagons, boiling meal in the open, cutting sod and mesquite for shelter, the Old Fathers did that first: put most of their strength into constructing the huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (6-7). In fact, the Oven stands as a monument to their cocks, finally free from the white cocks. This explains the respect, zeal and devotion that Ruby's patriarchs show to this phallic symbol.⁷⁸ However, the Oven acquires a negative connotation in Ruby. It becomes

⁷⁸ Agustin Fuentes explains in his essay *The Phallus Fallacy* that "our society often associates the penis with social power, and worth" (1). The Oven stands as a phallic symbol of the town of Ruby, which explains the obsessive care with which the men of the town take of it. The Oven represents not only the old rule of the founding fathers but also the need of the current hegemonic group to assert their dominion. Fuentes argues that "there are a range of cultures, including our own, where humans use symbolic imagery and material items to enhance or depict the 'phallus' as a component in ritual and social interactions. In many cases the phallus is represented as a symbol of power (social, political, and/or reproductive). It is not always directly connected to 'maleness' but as males are the ones with penises, specific social attention to it can set up or reinforce a divergent perception of sexual and gender roles, and worth"(1). The examples of phallic symbols in society

the place where important conflicts take place, like K.D. and Arnette's fight, and the meeting place of the revolutionary young people who paint a black fist on it,⁷⁹ and the headquarter of the group of men who plan the invasion to the Convent. Interestingly, all these gatherings have a common denominator: they trigger violence. The Oven has lost its primary attribute of uniting the people of Ruby and has become a center of division and conspiracy, which signals that Ruby, as a community, faces serious social issues.

It is my interpretation that a sharp contrast exists between what has become of the Oven in Ruby and the kitchen in the Convent. Although both share the same principle of common space for sharing and nurturing, the Oven in Ruby has lost this attribute under male-oriented influence, becoming a spot that serves only patriarchal hostility. As the narrator points out, ". . . what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed" (11). The Convents' kitchen, on the contrary, maintains the quality of a magic space where the women meet to cook and share their experiences, to eat and have long conversations, to be in contact and share with each other. A real community center, the Convent kitchen is fundamental in the healing process of these women. However, the men of Ruby interpret this atmosphere as a serious menace to their power. Obviously, healed women are a threat. In a passage of the book, one of the Morgan twins remembers when the Old Fathers moved because Haven, as a city, had no future. The image of snakes taking the place of the Oven

abound: guns, cigars, automobiles, space rockets, towers, obelisks, among many others. All of them have a direct connection to the display of male power and domination. To see how the Oven works as a phallic symbol, one only has to replace it with a tower, or an obelisk, and the effect remains the same (the Oven even has its own inscription, as many monuments do). As Fuentes concludes, "if the focus on the penis is not effectively explained by evolutionary pressures or basic biology, then it's likely related to humans' other favorite pastimes: politics and power."(1) The fathers of Ruby erect the oven as a token of their dominion. The Oven as the center of Ruby epitomizes the centralization of male power in other aspects of social life.

⁷⁹ Although Ruby stands in an isolated spot, new technologies like the radio fill the gap between the young people of the town and the world outside. Actually, some of them sympathize with the black liberation movements taking place at that moment. The fact that someone paints a black fist, symbol of the Black Panthers—a well-known revolutionary cell that operated during the social upheaval in the 1960's and 1970's, points out that they are aware of the reality beyond the boundaries of the town (they just do not care).

triggers the alarm for their defensive views: “where the Oven had been, small green snakes slept in the sun. Who could have imagined that twenty-five years later in a brand-new town a Convent would beat out the snakes, the Depression, the taxman and the railroad for sheer destructive power?” (17) The connection between the snakes and the Convent women justifies, to the eyes of the men of Ruby, their need to protect their town because they do not want to lose their place to a “bunch of snakes” again. The connection between women, the snake, and the devil has a long patriarchal tradition. In Judeo-Christian mythology the snake seduces the woman (Eve) to tempt the man (Adam) to rebel in an act of disobedience against God, which eventually ends up in their expulsion from Paradise.⁸⁰ Thus, the woman and the snake conspire to provoke man’s fall from the grace of God. In this sense, the woman and the serpent appear as the same manifestation of evil and the cause of all man’s suffering. The reference that the men of Ruby make to a “bunch of snakes” has a strong biblical connotation, which also serves to reveal the antagonism between the Oven and the Convent’s kitchen.

The Oven has an inscription in its mouth, which serves as a patriarchal decree and warning sentence:

When it was finished . . . the ironmonger did his work. From barrel staves and busted axles, from kettles and bent nails, he fashioned an iron plate five feet by two and set it to the base of the Oven’s mouth. It is still not clear where the words came from . . .

⁸⁰ In her book *Women and Evil* Nel Noddings explores the ancient connection of the woman, the snake, and the devil in the myth of the Fall. She concludes that this myth has serious consequences to the detriment of women. As she explains, “to some people –even some feminists- time and space given to an ancient and discredited myth could be better devoted to current problems such as job discrimination, poverty and abortion. In view of the history we have been considering, this dismissal seems wrong, and those who make such statements overlook the enormous influence of the myth. According to Mary Daly . . . ‘the myth has in fact affected doctrines and laws that concern women’s status in society and it has contributed to the mindset of those who continue to grind out biased, male-centered ethical theories... the myth undergirds destructive patterns in the fabric of our culture’”(52). Therefore, the myth of the Fall has a strong influence in phallogocentric societies of Judeo-Christian tradition, which Ruby represents in the novel. Thus, when the fathers of Ruby talk of the women of the Convent as a “bunch of snakes,” they refer to the “devil” that they have to defeat.

who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged. Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally to announce they had lost. (7)

According to the traditional version of the ruling group, the words read: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (86-87). This strong statement serves as a caution to the people of Ruby to observe God’s commands. Yet, this proclamation has a double function because it presents the word of God and, at the same time, it accommodates the purposes of patriarchy. The warning urges the citizens to obey God’s law and to comply with the rules of men. Beware the Furrow of “His” Brow acts as a statement of power that instigates fear among the people of the town reminded them, as well, to follow the orders of an all-powerful avenging Father. However, controversy arises, as missing letters make the motto undecipherable, giving space for different and new interpretations like the ones that the young people have. This dissociation between the words and the meaning eventually crack open the nutshell on which Ruby rests. The new interpretations of the motto give a voice to the new generations, to the foreigners, and to the repressed, which jeopardizes the patriarchal rule of the town. Morrison reinforces the idea, one more time, that the power of words might change the *status quo* and that language prevails as a militant force. The Oven stands as a twofold symbol, which shelters tradition but can promote change as well.

I consider that Morrison uses the discussion regarding the words in the Oven to question patriarchal authority. She confronts the old, institutionalized rule with the emerging power of the new generations.⁸¹ The author emphasizes that one of the most important

⁸¹ Melanie R. Anderson argues that “in a move similar to the instance on controlling the meaning of the cross, blood purity, and history, the conflict over the meaning of the fading words on the communal Oven illustrates the rigidity of Ruby. From the original settlers of Haven through the next generation in Ruby, the families have shared a communal Oven, and Steward and Deacon’s grandfather welded a statement in the front of it that has since faded . . . the older generation believes that the sentence was a warning . . . [they] believe that the statement is a sacred command, while the younger generation aware of the civil rights movement outside of Ruby’s limits, wishes to change it to reflect a more cooperative stance with God. Just like their control over the

challenges for all-black communities in America resides in the capacity to preserve their roots, and also to project to the outside world. From my perspective, Morrison claims that totalitarian social models, like the one imposed in Ruby, hinders the projection of black communities into the future of America. As a matter of fact, Philip Page argues that Ruby's "[patriarchal ideology] . . . has become a means of repressing meaningful change, a club by which the ruling generation of men silences the views of the new generation and of the town's women" (644). Accordingly, this critic also sees how patriarchy boycotts the growth of Ruby as a healthy community: "Seeking to possess a space and therefore find a viable place in American space and time, the town is still dispossessed, living in its past with a stagnant present and no vision for the future. The ruling men have become narrow-minded as the whites and light-skinned blacks who excluded them and their fathers" (644). Thus, the oven symbolizes the word of men engraved in iron –fixed and rigid. Patriarchy writes edicts for eternity to preserve their power: unable to change and unwilling to change.

It is my interpretation that past, present and future collide when the ruling fathers impose rigidity in the community. The confrontations within the all-black community reveal the inadequacy of patriarchal authoritarian rule. The heated debate over the inscription on the Oven's mouth tackles the citizens of Ruby:⁸² "opinions were varied, confusing, even incoherent because feelings ran so high over the matter. Also because some young people,

blood lines and Ruby's 'official' history, Deacon and Steward publicly swear to protect, with violence if necessary, the Oven's command" (313-314). Once again, Morrison makes a strong case on the power of language as the fading words of the Oven provoke the discussion and debate of old and new ideas.

⁸² Widdowson explains the debate over the words in the Oven's mouth as follows: "the elders, who want to retain the past-determined status quo, read it as a static command: 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow'; the young, who want to grasp the power for change, as active injunction: 'Be the Furrow of his Brow'. Deacon claims that the young cannot know or respect the meaning of the Oven in the way that the descendants of the ex-slaves who originally made it do . . . what is at issue here is a theme Morrison had centered *Beloved* on: not just the *fact* of being freed from slavery, but what one does with the 'freed self': simultaneously, of not forgetting one's history and not being imprisoned by it in a way that blocks the future . . . the realist in Morrison does not resolve the dispute about the Oven's words, since both positions obtain in Ruby in the 1970's – the 'deafening roar' of the past and the future 'panting at the gate' locked in tense conflict" (327-328).

by snickering at Miss Esther's finger memory, had insulted entire generations preceding them" (83). From my perspective, Morrison presents a new generation that yearns for change and is passionate about it: "It would have been better for everyone if the young people had spoken softly, acknowledged their upbringing as they presented their views. But they didn't want to discuss; they wanted to instruct" (84). The new generations make their point as they try to gain recognition from the ruling men. They do not agree with the iron fist that rules in Ruby. They want a more understanding and caring type of ruling, one that admits changes and diversity of opinions. As the Beauchamp's sons assert, "no ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To 'beware' God. To always be ducking and diving, trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something us, keep us down" (84). Of course, the discussion transcends the literal meaning of the words, and they no longer discuss "God" as the ruling figure. They refer to the appropriation of the patriarchal rule of that "Divine" figure to impose their will and to decide over every single aspect of the life of the people of Ruby. The fathers of Ruby see themselves as being "God" on earth. Therefore, they react immediately to this affront: "You say 'sir' when you speak to men," said Sargeant Person. Sorry sir. But what kind of message is that? No ex-slave who had the guts to his own way, build a town out of nothing, could think like that. No ex-slave-" (84). Morrison presents young people who think for themselves, and who have a voice, and want to be heard. However, the fathers of Ruby will not allow anyone to contradict them: "Deacon Morgan cut him off. 'That's my grandfather you're talking about. Quit calling him an ex-slave like that's all he was. He was also an ex-lieutenant governor, an ex-banker, an ex-deacon and a whole lot of exes, and he wasn't making his own way; he was part of a group making their own way'" (84). The patriarchs see a threat to their stability because if the new generations exercise their voice and have different ideas from the ones that patriarchy supports, the ruling class has to step aside and give up their privileged position. They lose power and, most importantly, they lose control of their hard-won "Paradise." As Reverend Pulliam points out,

“we have a problem here. You, me. Everybody. The problem is with the way some of us talk. The grown-ups, of course, should use proper language. But the young people –what they say is more backtalk than talk” (85). The ruling fathers want to reduce the demands of the young ones to a mere temper tantrum, but their response shocks everybody: “Royal Beauchamp actually interrupted him, the Reverend! ‘What is talk if it’s not ‘back’? You all just don’t want us to talk at all. Any talk is ‘backtalk’ if you don’t agree with what’s being said . . . Sir.’ Everybody was so stunned by the boy’s brazenness, they hardly heard what he said” (85). Again, Reverend Misner serves as a moderator and he presents a more conciliatory view, trying to bring together the different points of view without ceding to the demands of the ruling group: “Pulliam, dismissing the possibility that Roy’s parents –Luther and Helen Beauchamp – were there, turned slowly to Misner. ‘Reverend, can’t you keep that boy still?’ Why would I want to?’ asked Misner. ‘We are here not just to talk but to listen too” (85). However, the hasty response of Deek Morgan shows how things work in Ruby:

Well, sir, I have listened, and I believe I have heard as much as I needed to. Now you all listen to me. Real close. Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built . . . so understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew. Act short with me all you want, you in long trouble if you think you can disrespect a row you never hoed. (85-86)

Moreover, Misner tries to validate the position of the young people and how they care, trying to contribute to the construction of the intangible patrimony of the community: “Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it. It’s because they do know the Oven’s value they want to give it new life” (86). But the fathers fail to recognize any possibility of change: “They don’t want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change it into something they made up” (86).

Consequently, the young people try to reclaim a space in the community. As Roy Beauchamp asserts, "it's our history too, sir. Not just yours" (86). However, Deek's response favors the old rule: "Then act like it. That Oven already has a history. It doesn't need you to fix it" (86).

Misner, through a more balanced point of view, supports the new generations since they do not want to "beware," or fear the authority that "God" stands for in Ruby. They want to take action. They want to be part of it. They believe in transforming that authoritarian power and making it more inclusive and participative. As Destry, one of the young men, questions during the discussion: "Excuse me, sir. What's wrong about 'Be the Furrow'? 'Be the Furrow of His Brow'? 'You can't be God, boy.' Nathan DuPres spoke kindly as he shook his head. 'It's not being Him, sir; it's being His instrument, His justice. As a race-" (87) However, the model of ruling in Ruby requires unconditional obedience and not questioning the establishment. The fathers, as rightful recipients of the power of God, possess the authority that they will not yield to those that they consider inferior like young people, women, foreigners, or people of different skin color:

"God's justice is His alone. How you going to be His instrument if you don't do what He says?" asked Reverend Pulliam. "You have to Obey Him."

"Yes, sir, but *we are* obeying Him," said Destry. "If we follow His commandments, we'll be His voice, His retribution. As a people-"

Harper Jury silenced him. "It says 'Beware.' Not 'Be.' Beware means 'Look out. The power is mine. Get used to it.'"

" 'Be' means you putting Him aside and you the power," said Sargeant.

"*We are* the power if we just-"

“See what I mean? See what I mean? Listen to that! You hear that Reverend? The boy needs a strap. Blasphemy!” (87)

I consider that this passage illustrates how the vertical patriarchal imposition of power structures operates in Ruby, and by extension, in all societies that follow the patriarchal model. Essentially, people must “get used to” seeing that in patriarchy, men (in power) have absolute power. If the motto on the Oven changes from “Beware” to “Be,” as the young people suggest, the center of power will dissolve because “Be the Furrow of His Brow” includes young people, women, and anyone who wants to follow His command, not just men. Consequently, the power elite see this intrusion as a “blasphemy,” which they condemn at once. The fathers even command a “strap” to restrain the menace to their authority. In the end, the patriarchs resolve the discussion in the same way that they do everything in Ruby: by imposing force and brutality. They silence the young people and “put them on a leash,” as Sargeant orders. They do not tolerate threats to their authority: “As could have been predicted, Steward had the last word –or at least the words they all remembered as last because they broke the meeting up. ‘Listen here,’ he said ... ‘if anyone of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake” (87). Patriarchs always have the final word. They have the power to silence everybody else and dismiss the congregation. They impose their voice once again, violently. Moreover, Steward’s threat to the young people foreshadows their attack to the women in the Convent. They will do anything to preserve their power. The Oven and the words in it describe the politics and power relationships in Ruby: A patriarchal system that has full command of the town and fights back against any possibility of change by silencing the voices of those who they consider “inferior,” who ironically they fear because they are important enough to be threat.

The fathers of Ruby oppose change. They obviously worry. The discussion of the Oven's motto and the events that have affected the community destabilize the center of control. The imminent collapse of the Oven and what it represents preoccupies the Morgan brothers: ". . . the Oven . . . no longer the meeting place to report on what done or what needed; on illness, births, deaths, comings and goings. The Oven that had witnessed the baptized entering sanctified life was now reduced to watching the lazy young" (111). The old generation does not approve of the way in which the new generations see the world: "The Oven whose every brick had heard live chords praising His name was now subject to radio music, record music –music already dead when it filtered through a black wire trailing from Anna's store to the Oven like a snake" (111). Again, Morrison uses the biblical reference to the connection between snake, sin, and corruption, and the evil that emerges from a feminine source. As Noddings points out, the myth of the Fall causes serious damage to the situation of women in general, yet patriarchal society promotes the myth and scarcely ever questions or contradicts it: "[the myth of the Fall] has contributed to a mind-set and to patterns in our culture, it should be the focus of intensive educational criticism. It has played an enormous role in the subordination of women and thus in shaping the present status of women" (52). By referring recurrently to the patriarchal image of the snake as evil doer and, by association, to women as evil doers, I think that Morrison challenges the myth with implicit irony because the real evil doers in Ruby are not women. Men are the ones who cheat, steal, rape, and kill. Yet they have the gall to accuse women (and those they deem inferior, like the young) of being evil and to cowardly scape-goat them to relieve their guilt. The fathers of Ruby know that they have to subjugate the new generations, otherwise they will bring about changes that will "corrupt" their "Paradise." The confrontation of old versus new, tradition versus innovation, rigidity versus change, preoccupies Morrison. Although the old rule sees change and modernity as a (female) "snake" that threatens to poison their lives, Morrison warns about the real dangers of patriarchal inflexibility. A society that suffocates new ideas and does not

evolve seems destined to perish. However, I consider that Morrison opens up the possibility for a new era. At the end of the novel, people realize that something has happened to the Oven: “. . . the citizens of Ruby arrive at the Oven. The rain is slowing . . . rain cascading off the Oven’s head meets mud speckle with grout flakes washed away from bricks. The oven shifts, just slightly, on one side. The impacted ground on which it rests is undermined” (287). Morrison hints to the undermined ground that succumbs to the force of steady rain. Ruby’s patriarchal foundations, the same as the Oven’s foundations, yield a little to persistent change. Young people have a feminized position in a patriarchal society like Ruby. They must obey and comply with the ruling elite of the town. Yet, the positive force of young people who want a change for their community will debase the *status quo* slowly but incessantly, like rain. The Oven, as a metaphor of patriarchal institution and as a symbol of a man-made “paradise” begins to fall apart.

Observing the concept of “womanhood” according to patriarchal standards and the role that these women play in a male-centered society reveals important aspects of female oppression when analyzing gender issues in Ruby. Like the male-oriented conception of a “paradise” that suits the need of power of men, the idea of “womanhood” must meet patriarchal expectations. Women function as a commodity in Ruby. The Fathers consider women fancy ornaments to decorate “their creation.” Flawless and perfect to the eyes of men, the “plastic” women of Ruby sacrifice their selfhood to serve the purposes of patriarchy. As Daly asserts in *Pure Lust*, “On the foreground level women and the elements are possessed, domesticated, deprived of our Elemental Divine Daughterhood. Animals, plants, minerals are possessed. The Sublimers intend that all be relegated to the role of breeders, vessels, vehicles of the repetitive discharges that produce phallic culture” (122). Like Daly, Morrison recognizes that phallocracy produces a specific image of woman that functions within its scheme. Thus, Ruby women, obedient, hard working, submissive, invisible, always please

every need of men. The passage of the “summer ladies” illustrates what the men of Ruby expect from women. On one occasion, Deacon and Steward Morgan travel to a neighboring all-black town with their father. While he attends to some business, the twins see a group of women getting ready to have a picture taken in the stairs of the town’s hall. The image engraves in their mind as a memory that will define their ideal of woman:

In one of the prosperous [towns] he and Steward watched nineteen Negro ladies arrange themselves on the steps of the town hall. They wore summer dresses of material the lightness, the delicacy of which neither of them had ever seen. Most of the dresses were white, but two were lemon yellow and one a salmon color. They wore small, pale hats of beige, dusty rose, powdery blue: hats that called attention to the wide sparkly eyes of the wearers. Their waists were not much bigger than their necks. Laughing and teasing they preened for a photographer . . . Following a successful pose, the ladies broke apart in small groups, bending their tiny waists with rippling laughter, walking arm in arm. One adjusted another’s brooch; one exchanged her pocketbook with another. Slender feet turned and tipped in thin leather shoes. Their skin, creamy and luminous in the afternoon sun, took away his breath . . . A few of the younger ones crossed the street and walked past the rail fence, close, so close, to where he and Steward sat . . . Deek heard musical voices, low, full of delight and secret information, and in their tow a gust of verbena. (109)

Hence, the sensual recollection of these “picture perfect” women will set the standards for the image of the woman that the patriarchs of Ruby have. The summer ladies inspire their ideal immaculate dream of womanhood: beautiful, sensual, slender women in tiny shoes and tight clothes, fragile, always laughing, incorruptible, ready to inspire a man’s fancies but in an acceptable, lady-like way, not like “whores.” Consequently, the women of Ruby possess many of these characteristics. They make wonderful companions for men. Deek and Steward

try to call the ladies' attention. They fall off the railing and end up fighting on the ground, ruining their clothes. The women laugh. They have achieved their goal. Although they are only boys, they know that they need a display of bravado to capture the women's attention. Patriarchs do exactly the same in *Ruby*. They show that they have force, physical or otherwise, to secure women's attention. Thus, I consider that Morrison tackles the issue of womanhood in *Paradise* from a different perspective. She shows both the "ideal" type of women according to patriarchal expectations, whose main goal consists of pleasing the needs of the fathers and fulfilling their needs, and the real type of women who battle to survive in a society that routinely denies their very existence, like the women who seek shelter at the Convent. They are real women with real problems, dreams, and aspirations, not some ghost memory of a patriarchal illusion. The Convent women oppose the summer ladies directly in different ways. They are not "picture perfect," but they have bravery and strength to fight. Instead of the "summer lady" prototype that the phallographic system encourages, the Convent women have an amazonian force that carries them through.

Moreover, the people of *Ruby* see those women who do not accept or obey patriarchal views as carriers of sin and sources of perdition. For example, Arnette has to deal with the issue of her pregnancy by herself and to the eyes of the community she has the responsibility for the "sin" that she has committed: "[K.D.] had left his future bride pregnant and on her own, knowing that it was the un-married mother-to-be (not the father-to-be) who would have to ask her church's forgiveness" (152). Men feel free to evade the moral laws that they themselves have implemented. Still, women must obey those laws, and if anyone breaks the law (man or woman) they bear the responsibility for it and have to ask for "forgiveness" and suffer the consequences. This grim panorama forces Arnette to look for help at the Convent, and the novel implies that she had an abortion there. This illustrates how patriarchy traps women because, no matter what they do, they will always end up being responsible for

their “sins” and also the “sins” of men and eventually, they will have to repent and ask for the clemency of the community. Arnette ends up accepting an arranged marriage that fits perfectly in the patriarchal scheme of the “perfect” family and the “perfect” community. Another good example of how the people of Ruby see women who deviate from patriarchal standards as sinful occurs when the women of the Convent crash Arnette’s wedding party. They scandalize the residents with their “improper” behavior: “The Convent girls are dancing; throwing their arms over their heads, they do this and that and then the other. They grin and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies. The local girls look over their shoulders and snort” (157). Everything about them bothers the people of the town: the clothes they wear, their behavior, their physical appearance, dancing for themselves only, especially. The Convent women, as “carriers of sin,” stand in direct opposition to the women of Ruby, who, as a matter of fact, condemn them: “Have you ever in your life seen such a carrying on?’ Bet you can’t locate one brassiere in the whole bunch.’ Alice held the crown of her hat in the breeze. ‘Why’re you all smiling? I don’t think this is the least bit funny . . . ‘This is a wedding, remember?’ . . . ‘How would you like to have someone dancing nasty at your wedding?’ . . . ‘I’m going to have to get Pastor himself to stop this,’ Alice said . . .” (158-159). It is my interpretation that Morrison elaborates on the duality of the madonna/whore expectation that women face. Women only have two options: they either comply with the rules of men, and behave as pure, lady-like, virginal creatures, or they disobey and become the opposite, embodying the image of the “whore.” This duality confronts women with a lose-lose situation. Patriarchal society penalizes them either way: if women comply with the standards of the madonna model, they basically give their essence away to become an object of men’s desires but if women dare to rebel, they have to confront the fury of the patriarchs and of the “respectable” women as well and face the consequences of being a “whore.” Actually, in *Paradise*, the acts of freedom of the Convent women trigger the attack that they suffer. The sin of disregarding patriarchal standards condemns them, “whatever else, thought Anna, the

Convent women have saved the day. Nothing like other folk's sins for distraction. The young people were wrong. Be the Furrow of *Her Brow*" (159). Clearly, the people of Ruby use the Convent women as scapegoats to cover their own faults. Men use them as an excuse to carry on their insatiable thirst of power and control by killing them instead of their own children. This also shows the urgency of the Fathers to stop the Convent women since, on top of the young people's rebellion, they challenge and contradict their views and jeopardize the stability of their "paradise" because they have their own moral codes, they are free, they heal each other, and above all, they do not need men.

The women of Ruby occupy a peripheral position. Patriarchy dispossesses women of their selfhood until they become specters, like Soane Morgan and Dovey Morgan, who orbit around powerful patriarchal figures, or Arnette, who has to accept an arranged marriage to save the honor of her family, or Sweetie Fleetwood who has to bear sick children just to satisfy the rule of procreation, or Patricia Best who faces numerous limitations to her talents. As Daly explains, patriarchy oppresses women with "potted desires" that distract them and rob them of their inner force. The patriarchal rulers of Ruby make women believe that they should emulate the "summer ladies" and become perfect companions for men. Like the image of a photograph, Ruby women only exist in terms of patriarchal assumptions. They have lost their essence, which has been supplanted with the "potted desires" of being obedient wives, devout mothers, pristine daughters, and sexual nothings. Thus, the roles of these women obey patriarchal expectations and transform Ruby into a "paradise" for men. As one of the Morgan brothers points out, "unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from this town . . . Certainly there wasn't a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town and the reasons, he thought, were clear. From the beginning its people were free and protected" (8). They are *that* delusional. From my perspective, Morrison plays with irony by emphasizing how men in their

effort to “protect” and “free” *their* women actually enslave them. As a matter of fact, the men of Ruby have a pathological need to keep women “safe” and under control. Therefore people, and especially women, are not as free as intended. Actually, it is a farce, and men are really free to enslave women. But they enjoy some flexibility within the limits of the town as far as they please the patriarchs: “A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear . . . nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey” (8). Women pay the prize of that safety with their own liberty: “She could stroll as slowly as she liked, think of food preparations, war, of family things, or lift her eyes to stars and think of nothing at all. Lamp less and without fear she could make her way” (8). The subjects that preoccupy women are either vague or vain. The ideal is “nothing.” She wanders aimlessly without a purpose around town. The sleepless creature only needs to know that she is safe from rape or sexual assault, or any other peril that fancies the mind of men as if the price for not being raped was exchanging their freedom. She is “safe” under the wing of men as they know they have only one owner: their husband.

I consider that the obsession of Ruby men with power suffocates women, and leads them to find different outlets to get rid of the tension. Ruby women must fulfill all patriarchal expectations, and this inevitably requires self-denial and the de-centering of their needs and interests. Patriarchal rule forces them to think about men first, forgetting about their own selves. Consequently, the women of Ruby often see themselves exposed to physical and psychological collapse. The ideal “paradise” for men becomes a golden cage that asphyxiates women. Several examples reveal how the women of Ruby, who have accepted patriarchal roles, let go of the anger and impotence that they suffer from. For instance, Soane Morgan, Deacon Morgan’s wife, faces the huge imposition of being the spouse of one of the prominent figures of the town. She must adhere strictly to the most rigorous patriarchal

standards. She must be a model figure of “womanhood,” a modern replica of the Victorian ideal of the “angel in the house.”⁸³ Soane finds a functional way to let go of her frustration, immersed in the desolation of sexist impositions. As K.D. recalls, “aunt Soane worked thread like a prisoner: daily, methodically, for free, producing more lace than could ever be practical” (53). Although knitting may appear to be an innocent activity that Soane “chooses” to have some distraction, it implies an escape from oppression. Patriarchy allows these types of “distractions” for women because they sedate them. The realistic image that K.D. has of her aunt as a “prisoner” illustrates the position of the women of Ruby in general. They only take menial tasks like threading lace or gardening, which keep them occupied, or “pre-occupied,” as Daly points out because the fathers empty their minds of all important and useful knowledge and fill their lives with superficial labor. A woman who sews and plants makes an excellent wife because she fulfills patriarchal roles and provides for her family at the same time. However, she has little time to cultivate her intellect, which fits the purposes of men perfectly. Soane threading lace endlessly evokes the image of a dedicated Penelope, waiting for her husband, eternally, suspended in time, an alien to her own self, until Ulysses

⁸³ The concept of the “Angel in the House” comes from Coventry Patmore’s poem celebrating domestic bliss. The poem illustrates the situation of women in England during the nineteenth century, which not surprisingly resembles the current situation of women around the world in many respects. Several writers have elaborated on the issue of the representation of women as the “Angel in the House” and the serious implications that this concept has. For instance, Virginia Woolf in her essay “Professions for Women” borrows the concept from that poem to criticize severely the lack of opportunities for women in general. She describes the “Angel in the House” as follows: “she [is] intensely sympathetic. She [is] immensely charming. She [is] utterly unselfish. She excel[s] in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrifice[s] herself daily . . . she never [has] a mind or a wish of her own, but prefer[s] to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all –I need not to say- she [is] pure. In those days . . . every house had its Angel” (2). Woolf explains how the very existence of this model of “womanhood” interferes with the expression of selfhood. For this reason, she considers that the only way for women to achieve success in their careers, or in any other aspect in life is to “kill” the “Angel in the House.” As a matter of fact, she points out that “killing the Angel in the House [is] part of the occupation of a woman writer” (3). Like other writers, Morrison introduces the concept of the “Angel in the House” as a parody of womanhood. Male “paradise” is incomplete without its “angels,” and for that purpose, Morrison endows the women of Ruby with the characteristics of the “Angel in the House.” Like Woolf, Morrison despises this false male construction of “womanhood” and calls for critical understanding of the role of women in society. In a twist of irony so characteristic of her writing, the “Angel of the House” survives while the women of free spirit die both physically and in some cases figuratively in *Paradise*, which proves the inadequacy and cruelty of patriarchal rule.

comes and gives meaning to her life. The image of the “Angel in the House” comes alive in Ruby, where women exist as abnegated, pure, and perfect pedestals to support the ambitions of men in the construction of their “paradise.”

Like her sister Soane, Dovey Morgan confronts the state of “boredom” that patriarchy imposes on women. As the wife of the prominent Steward Morgan, she must have an impeccable conduct. Dovey tries hard to please her husband in every aspect, as men expect in patriarchal societies. However, women fall short most of the time, even when patriarchy absorbs their energy. As she wonders, “Maybe Soane felt what Dovey did –the weight of having two husbands, not one” (90) because she and her sister have to satisfy both twins. Dovey remembers the frustration of the early years of her marriage: “When they got married, Dovey was sure she could never cook well enough to suit the twin known to be pickier than his brother, Deek. Back from the war, both men were hungry for down-home food” (81). She wonders if she will ever meet her husband’s needs: “I don’t expect he’ll be satisfied at table,” Dovey told her sister. ‘Why not?’ ‘I don’t know. He compliments my cooking, then suggests how to improve it next time’ . . . ‘Deek doesn’t do that to you, does he?’ ‘No that. He’s picky other ways. But I wouldn’t worry about it if I was you. If he’s satisfied in bed, the table won’t mean a thing” (82). Dovey’s concerns uncover the subordination of women in patriarchy, in which they function as sexual objects and the servants of men. They have the obligation to satisfy the sensual appetites of men. But satisfying Steward Morgan is not easy. He loses his taste for food when he loses the love and affection of his wife as their marriage wears out. Only the Convent’s red hot peppers add spice to his life. As Dovey reflects, “when [she] thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost . . . Contrary to his (and all Ruby’s) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his loses . . . small losses that culminated with the big one . . . they learned neither could ever have children” (82). Thus, Dovey “fails” as a woman both in the kitchen and the bedroom. The heavy burden of

these failures breaks her spirit. Dovey's incapacity to have children has very painful implications because the race and gender orientations of Ruby's way of thinking see women only as the vehicles to perpetuate race and status. The Morgan dynasty will not have heirs. Dovey cannot play the roles that patriarchy has reserved for her. The relationship with Steward, based on patriarchal conventions and assumptions, erodes because of her "impotence." Consequently, she tries to evade her cruel reality. She has a mysterious friend.

Dovey finds a life companion who substitutes her absentee husband. She waits for his periodical visits anxiously: "Something was scratching on the pane. Again. Dovey turned over on her stomach, refusing to look out of the window each time she heard it. He wasn't there. He never came at night. Deliberately she drove her mind onto everyday things. What would she fix for supper tomorrow?" (81) Although she only has fast encounters with this anonymous person, these fill her otherwise dull existence. She retires to a place of her own, "the little house on St. Matthew Street . . . was becoming more and more home to Dovey. It was close to her sister, to Mount Calvary, the Women's Club. It was also where her Friend chose to pay his calls. Dovey seeks refuges in this secluded place where she can hear her own voice, and experiment with the thrill of adventure. The mysterious man comes along with a band of butterflies "Orangy red . . . pumpkin color" (91) that fly away like Dovey's desires. She meets this unknown person who listens attentively: "Thing was, when he came, she talked nonsense. Things she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said. By a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again" (92). Dovey craves the attention that she receives from this man, and she loves to express herself freely. Unlike her husband, who always has an excuse to run away, the mysterious man gives her the place that she deserves. Dovey finds a true friend: "More and more frequently she found reasons to remain on St. Matthew Street. Not hoping or looking for

him, but content he had and would come by there –for a chat, a bite, cool water on a parched afternoon. Her only fear was that someone else would mention him, appear in his company, or announce a prior claim to his friendship. No one did. He seemed hers alone” (92). Dovey discovers what patriarchy has denied her in the company of her new friend: a room of her own, the power of her inner voice, and the real meaning of friendship. Dovey can be authentic with this man, without impositions. She finds in her friend the escape route of the state of “boredom” that the repressive society of Ruby imposes on her. Through this friendship, hers and hers alone, she recovers her identity and discovers a reason to carry on. The unexpected visits of her friend add the spice that her life has lost. However, the fact of whether Dovey’s friend exists or not in real life remains obscure in the novel. Knowing the repressive nature of Ruby and the strict control of the patriarchal system, it seems unlikely that a foreigner or stranger may visit the town without anyone noticing. Also, “visitations” are a common aspect in African American literary practice, which hints that Dovey’s friend might be a visitor from a different reality, or a creation of her imagination. The fact that Dovey emphasizes repeatedly that her friend belongs to her and her alone strongly suggests the he exists only in her mind. The imaginary friend functions as a perfect psychological scape from the patriarchal impositions of the hegemonic group.

I consider that the roles that patriarchy imposes on women as caregivers stifle them. Sweetie Fleetwood’s situation portrays the reality of many women. The image of the “perfect” wife and mother who takes care of the family usually implies self-denial and self-abandonment for women. They interpose the needs of others before their own needs, which provokes precarious physical health, low self-esteem, and poor psychological conditions. More often than not, women collapse under the heavy weight of patriarchal impositions, and they blame them for being “weak,” or “unfit” to fulfill their roles. In other words, women have few opportunities to escape the double catch of sexism. Sweetie has to deal with a lot of

pressure. Along with her mother-in-law, she takes care of her household and her sick children, all born with birth defects.⁸⁴ Patriarchy always blames women for birth-related defects. After all, women carry the babies and give birth. Besides, according to these patriarchal views, since they give birth to defective children, they have to take care of them. They have that responsibility. They also must bear the stigma of being “defective” mothers unable to “produce” healthy children. Women have to deal with all the pain that society inflicts on them, and at the same time remain calm, silent, and composed while looking after the sick. No complaints. No drama. Otherwise, they would appear as failed women in the eyes of men: all women make good nurses. Women must *take care of, nurture, and raise*. This patriarchal mentality creates a state of dependence that steals the energy of women and traps them. Sweetie realizes how patriarchal expectations entangle women, and she decides to walk away from it all. She needs time to re-connect with her-self. The long time of watching over the sick children has taken its toll. She promises her mother-in-law, “Be back in a minute, Miss Mable” (125). Sweetie becomes a fugitive of patriarchal justice: “Downstairs, she put the cup and saucer on the dining table, then, unwashed, coatless and with uncombed hair, she opened the front door and left. Quickly” (125). Like Mavis, Seneca, Gigi, and many other women in the novel, Sweetie feels the urge to break free from the chains that hold her back: “she was not hoping to walk until she dropped or fainted or froze and then slipped into nothingness for a while . . . The only way to change the order, she thought, was not to do something differently but to do a different thing. Only one possibility arose –to leave the house and step into a street she had not entered in six years” (125). Sweetie begins her journey of self-liberation and for that purpose she takes the open road “north of Ruby . . . her

⁸⁴ Although nobody refers to this issue in the novel directly, Morrison suggests that the birth defects that affect the Fleetwood family may result from the strict blood rules of the town, and the product of inbreeding since they have to marry among themselves. This also serves as a metaphor to sustain Morrison’s thesis that inward societies like Ruby that do not admit change or evolution may perish victims of “cultural” inbreeding. Also, that women must bear the burden of children even if “defective.”

legs were doing brilliantly. So was her skin, for she didn't feel the cold. The fresh outside air, to which she was unaccustomed, hurt her nostrils, and she set her face to bear it. She did not know she was smiling . . ." (125-126). Being outside for the first time in six years brings a promise of change for Sweetie. However, she might not be prepared to face freedom because patriarchy has clipped her wings. She does not know how to fly anymore even though she wants it, and the damage may be irreversible. Like the other women of the town, Sweetie *yearns* the "safety" of the golden cage that Ruby represents for them.

Therefore, Sweetie's emotions during her escape show ambivalence. When Seneca approaches her, she does not know if Sweetie smiles or cries, or both. This confusion of sentiments parallels the state of mind of women in patriarchy. They feel guilty when they assert their selfhood. Every time women feel "liberated," patriarchy chastises them with sentiments of anxiety and fear. Seneca can sense Sweetie's suffering and she tries to comfort her: "Sweetie flailed her hands until she understood that she was being warmed, not prevented. Not once, while the wool cloth was being wrapped around her shoulders, did she stop walking. She kept on moving, chuckling –or was it sobbing?" (128) Seneca understands Sweetie's pain and tries to help: "Eyes like those were not uncommon. In hospitals they belonged to patients who paced day and night; on the road, unconfined, people with eyes like that would walk forever"(128). Seneca decides to walk with Sweetie and lead her to the Convent. The narrator expresses how Sweetie responds to her travel companion: "Sweetie heard what she said and, for the first time since she'd left the house, stumbled as she turned her smiling –or crying –face toward the uninvited companion. Sin she thought. I am walking next to sin and wrapped in its cloak. 'Have mercy,' she murmured, and gave a little laugh –or whimper" (129). However, the way in which Sweetie reacts to Seneca's company exposes how patriarchy has implanted oppression in her successfully. Instead of a liberating experience, this is a walk of shame for Sweetie, and she does not know whether to be happy

or sad. Nevertheless, she knows that breaking patriarchal rules brings about evil, an evil that Seneca personifies. Thus, Sweetie's experience in the Convent differs from the experience that the other women have there. Although they offer her a helping hand, Sweetie interprets her journey and everything that goes on in the Convent as sin. As the narrator explains: "They seemed like birds, hawks, to Sweetie. Pecking at her, flapping. They made her sweat. Had she been stronger, not so tired from the night shift of tending her babies, she would have fought them off. As it was, other than pray, there was nothing she could do . . . she prayed for deliverance . . . they left her alone" (129). Unquestionably, the deeply-rooted patriarchal mentality in Sweetie makes her believe that escaping oppression and finding a warm, loving, and comforting place represents a transgression. After all, she is a "sweetheart." Again, I think that Morrison plays with the character's names to round up their personality. Sweetie embodies perfection according to patriarchal expectations because she is the "sweetest thing:" obedient, abnegate, malleable. In contrast, Sweetie interprets the Convent women as the devil: "Sweetie's teeth were rattling when one of the hawks, with a blood-red mouth, came into the room . . . It spoke to her in the sweetest voice, the way a demon would, but Sweetie called on her Savior, and it left" (129). In the end, Sweetie does not connect with the women of the Convent. As Daly would say, patriarchy has implanted "potted desires" in her, like domesticity, sacrifice, and self-denial. Probably, patriarchal impositions have damaged her selfhood beyond repair. Even when it might have been the fever speaking, or her disturbed state of mind, she fails to establish any bonds with the other women and she shows an uncontrollable anxiety to return to the source of oppression:

It was patience, and blocking out every sound except the admonitions of her Lord, that got her out of there. First into a rusty red car that stalled in the snow at the foot of the driveway, and finally, praise, praise His holy name, into her husband's arms . . . Sweetie literally fell into Jeff's arms. "What you doing way out there? We couldn't get

through all night. Where is your mind?" Lord, girl. Sweetheart. What happened?"

"They made me, snatched me," Sweetie cried. "Oh God, take me home. I'm sick . . . and I have to look after the babies." (130)

From my perspective, patriarchy confuses and "snatches" the reasoning of women. Sweetie does not see the origin of her oppression. She prays to the "Lord" for deliverance from evil when, indeed, she *returns* to the source of evil. Patriarchy has implanted the idea in her mind that her place belongs at home fulfilling the wishes of the lords. According to Daly, Sweetie behaves as a "token woman." In *Gyn/ecology* Daly explains that "any woman acts –or non acts when action is required –in such complicity . . . she *is* and *is not* functioning as a woman" (317). Sweetie's lack of action coalesces with patriarchal authority. As Daly points out, she functions as a woman from the patriarchal point of view, but she does not function as a *complete* woman since she has silenced her true Self. In other words, she has interiorized patriarchal rules and she serves the purposes of male domination. Conversely, Sweetie sees the Convent women, who actually save her life, as the "enemy." "Token women" like Sweetie exist in all patriarchal cultures and they exemplify not only the extent of male control over women, but also the fact that patriarchs brainwash women into seeing each other as potential threats. This appropriation of patriarchal standards on the part of women proves so effective that, in most cases, women carry out patriarchal oppression without even knowing that they are doing so. "Token women" like Sweetie, who favor male supremacy, thrive in phallogocentric societies, supporting, endorsing, and transmitting oppression.

However, from my standpoint Morrison demonstrates that women fight to preserve their essence even in a smothering society like Ruby. For instance, Patricia Best, as we have discussed before, who keeps the historical records of the town, and who interprets and exposes the racism and classism that exist in Ruby as well as the male-centered authoritarianism, decides to destroy the files as a way to protest against the abuse that

women suffer continuously. She herself has been a victim of racial prejudice and male domination. Patricia Best will not publish a rendition of history that glorifies the endeavors of men because Ruby's history has its basis in patriarchal mythologies and racist views. Patricia does not accept this interpretation of reality that victimizes those who do not belong into the elite group. Thus, burning the papers –the history of men – implies an act of rebellion against the Fathers. She rejects and censures the political views of Ruby. Billie Delia also disregards patriarchal rule. Like her mother, she has been the victim of the racist and sexist slurs of the town. People of Ruby consider both Patricia and Billie Delia “strangers” in their own hometown because women, *per se*, have a lower status in the social ladder and also because they do not have “pure blood.” Billie Delia confronts all the stigmas that the people of Ruby have constructed around her since she was a young child. People see her as a “fast woman” with an attitude and as someone who does not follow the rules. Even when absent, her “attitude” remains in Ruby, as Dovey Morgan points out: “Billie Delia used to be her helper [in the garden], which was surprising since boys dominated her brain otherwise. But something was wrong there too. No one had seen her for some time and the girl's mother Pat Best foreclosed all questions. Still angry, thought Dovey, at the town's treatment of her father” (93). Dovey reflects not only on what the people of town think of Billie Delia, who label her as “easy” and about her escape of the oppressive atmosphere of Ruby but also, and most importantly, about Billie Delia's defiant attitude: “Although Billie Delia was not at the meeting [to discuss the scripture on the Oven], her attitude was” (93). Dovey recognizes Billie Delia as an agent of change and she sees some of her challenging attitude in the other young people of town. Dovey remembers that “even as a little girl, with that odd rosy-tan skin and wayward brown hair, she pushed her lips at everything –everything but gardening. Dovey missed her and wondered what Billie Delia thought of changing the Oven's message” (93). Dovey points out two important characteristics of Billie Delia that make her a true Amazon. First, a strong connection to the Wild force of Nature in women represented in her love for gardening, which

in this case does not stand for a simple “wifely” duty but stands for an intimate relationship with the earth, nurturing and creation. Second, Billie Delia shows a constant disregard of patriarchal impositions and “potted desires.” Dovey actually misses Billie Delia’s female Spark and values her opinion on the ongoing discussion about the Oven’s inscription as she knows that it would shatter the patriarchal code of Ruby. Peter Widdowson points out that “Billie is the young woman who seeks independence in society at large; and most surely represent[s] Morrison’s view of where the future lies” (333). Billie Delia, rebellious and defensive, confronts the patriarchs and leaves the town eventually when she understands that she does not belong in this man-made “paradise.”

According to my reading of the novel, Soane Morgan also defies Ruby’s male impositions. She visits the Convent regularly. She has been friends with Connie for a long time. She goes to the Convent for remedies and for advice and also to buy the red peppers that her husband loves so much. Tacitly, Soane contradicts male rule because she decides to be close to these women that patriarchy has relegated to the margins. Soane even takes the risk of inviting them to town to Arnette’s wedding reception even when her dead sons tried to warn her in a dream, “having misread the warning she was about to hostess one of the biggest messes Ruby had ever seen” (154). Soane’s innocent cordiality ignites the patriarchal fury that destroys the women of the Convent. Her dead children try to warn her in her dreams that the Convent women should not visit Ruby: “That’s no place for them, you know.’ The strange feathers she had invited did not belong in her house” (155). The Convent women do not belong in Ruby or anywhere near. These exotic free birds of “strange feather” do not belong in this “paradise.” When the men of Ruby see the display of their true colors, they feel the urge to scare them away, hunt them down, and eventually, eliminate them. The patriarchal house has no place for free birds of strange feathers like the Convent women. Their annihilation is eminent because nothing must disturb the “dream” of men. Soane does

the unthinkable. Bringing such “strange feathers” to town disrupts the established order. Unknowingly, Soane challenges the Fathers, inciting their rage.

THE SUPERNATURAL IN RUBY

It is my interpretation that Morrison uses an interesting juxtaposition in her novel, in which she combines official patriarchal religion and aspects of the supernatural. The juxtaposition reinforces the idea that patriarchal ideology governs in Ruby. I consider that Morrison includes a different approach of the supernatural in this part of the novel only to prove how patriarchal discourse appropriates the supernatural to serve its purposes. Morrison’s narrative has a myriad of references to the Bible. However, the purpose of those references changes according to the text and the interpretation. In *Paradise*, those allusions acquire especial significance and have a direct impact on the reader. As Shirley Stave explains:

Densely interwoven and richly textured with literary and cultural allusions, Toni Morrison’s novels reveal a dazzling vision and critique of contemporary society, underwritten by narrative authority, wit, and eloquence. Referencing texts as divergent as the film *Imitation of Life* and the heroic epic *The Odyssey*, alluding to personages as various as Roman emperors and postmodern cultural theorists, Morrison’s work requires, if one approaches it as seriously as it deserves, knowledge of the multiplicity of literary and cultural confluences that constitute American identity. Among the encyclopedia of source material Morrison engages, one text appears consistently throughout her works: the Bible. (1)

Ruby, as the realm of patriarchy, accepts the supernatural only if it agrees with patriarchal views. As a matter of fact, the ruling elite favors a mythology that supports and endorses its

ideas.⁸⁵ The benefit of doing so relies on the fact that it gives patriarchy an ultimate form of power, a power that comes from beyond and remains, in this way, unquestionable and irrefutable. For instance, the very foundation of the town has a supernatural origin because the Old Fathers follow the mythical figure of the “walking man.” They decide where to build their “paradise” following the steps of the divine wanderer. This man reveals the exact spot by giving clues, which brings to mind the mythic foundation of other man-made “paradises” like Rome or Tenochtitlan. Both ancient civilizations have myths about their foundation. Romulus and Remus, twin brothers and central characters of Rome’s foundation myth, who were abandoned in the forest, and suckled by a she-wolf, would become the fathers of the great Roman Empire. On the other hand, Aztec tradition narrates the foundation of their capital city: “after they were forced out of Chapultepec, the Aztecs wandered for weeks searching for a place to settle. Huitzilopochtli appeared to the Mexica leaders and indicated a place where a great eagle was perched on a cactus killing a snake. This place, smack dab in the middle of a marsh with no proper ground at all, was where the Mexica founded their capital, Tenochtitlan”(Maestri 1). The parallelisms between these ancient myths and the supernatural foundation of Ruby prove striking. Elements of ancient mythologies like the twins, the wandering people, and divine visitations combine to give a supernatural touch to the founding of Ruby. The town of Ruby must offer specific conditions to sustain the type of regime that the men want. For instance, the town needs to be in a remote location. Isolation is very important. Ruby stands thirteen miles away from the nearest settlement: the abandoned Convent. This physical separation from the rest of the world will eventually serve the purpose of creating a

⁸⁵ People of Ruby hold strong religious views, traditions, and superstitions. Actually, patriarchal religion has an eminent presence in the lives of the town’s people. Traditional religion veils the manifestations of the supernatural that take place in Ruby. These manifestations become “adaptations” from Christian traditions. In other words, the patriarchs of Ruby use religion to back up and support their domination system. Therefore, in some way, the patriarchs supplant the supernatural, which loses its vitalizing force, with Christian superstition, to meet their ideals. Thus, two versions of the supernatural coexist: one is the supernatural in its clear, pure form, and the other is the supernatural tainted with patriarchal beliefs, as in the case of Ruby.

place that contains their race and their power, unaltered. Thus, the very idea of the “walking man” signaling the exact place where men should construct their “paradise” mirrors the theme of male supremacy. For this reason, Ruby’s patriarchal rule concedes a lot of importance to oral tradition and to the stories of the supernatural that endorse their power.

As a matter of fact, it is my interpretation that patriarchal conventions serve to create, preserve and protect the ideology that permeates every single aspect of life in Ruby concerning race, gender and class. Patriarchy utilizes the supernatural combined with religious discourse to manifest its power. The hegemonic group manipulates religious doctrine to meet its ends. For instance, Christians reinforce the use of different passages of the Bible to justify the superiority of men over women, and the domination men exercise while leaving out other passages that talk about equality, love, and harmony. This happens in Ruby, where the group in control uses the Bible and religious and supernatural discourse to back up their superiority. They see themselves as the *chosen ones*, a recurrent idea in Judeo-Christian ideology. Actually, the pastors of the different churches in Ruby use the pulpit to pass on what they believe is their truth. During K.D. and Arnette’s wedding, Reverend Pulliam takes advantage of religious discourse to convey his ideas:

Some of the amens that accompanied and followed Reverend Senior Pulliam’s words were loud, others withholding; some people did not open their mouths at all. The question, thought Anna, was not why but who. Who was Pulliam blasting? Was he directing his remarks to the young people, warning them to shape up their selfish lives? Or was he aiming the parents for allowing the juvenile restlessness and defiance that has been rankling him even before that fist appeared on the Oven? Most likely, she thought, he was bringing the weight of his large and long Methodist education to bear down on Richard. A stone to crush his colleague’s message of God as a permanent interior engine that, once ignited, roared, purred, and moved you to

do your own work as well as His –but if idle, immobilizing the soul like a frozen clutch.

That must be it, she thought. Pulliam was targeting Misner. (142)

It is my interpretation that Morrison presents two contrasting views of how to use religious discourse in this passage. On one hand, Reverend Pulliam uses religious discourse to chastise and frighten people. He imposes his views and uses his power in the pulpit to exercise his power and crush his “enemies.” He even starts a masked battle with Misner, who has a different view. This is a clear example of how patriarchs manipulate the manifestations of the supernatural. Reverend Misner, on the other hand, possesses a more generous view of God’s love, which contrasts with the traditional perception. According to him, God affirms your inner power, the force in you. For this reason, his generous religious discourse attracts much criticism. Misner’s perception of the supernatural power of love aligns with his constructive vision of reality. Pulliam does not intend to teach about God’s love during the ceremony, but to attack and discredit Misner. Thus, Morrison discredits the use of a religious discourse that supports patriarchal power, and she favors the supernatural that Misner conveys, as a form to enrich and elevate the spirit. Morrison discredits rigid creeds and supports a flowing spirituality that allows all humans to grow and heal.

I also consider that relating male-centered tradition to supernatural forces monumentalizes the deeds of men. As Page explains, Morrison presents two ways in which the characters interpret the communal history of the town in her novel: “These two modes of interpretation –Patricia’s logical deductions and the other characters’ intuitions –are versions of a dichotomy deeply rooted in Western culture” (643). Yet, Page agrees that the “official” version of history and tradition favors and validates the views of the Fathers of the town:

The history of Ruby is replete with both kinds of knowing: the methodic attempts to find a safe refuge and the careful building and protecting of that supposed haven, as well as the transcendent intuition of following the walking man. But by 1975, the older

generation in Ruby –particularly the ruling men- have not only limited themselves to the first form of knowing, but they have also gutted it by forbidding all but their official interpretations. They have locked into the need to preserve the status quo, which is based on a rigid adherence to the past. (643)

The foundation of Ruby involves the “transcendent intuition” that Page mentions. After roaming for a long time, tired and weary, the people of Ruby find the ideal place to raise their town. Big Papa follows the “walking man,” a mysterious figure that only him and other few men, and sometimes children (not women), can see. The “walking man” becomes the inspiration and force for their journey. As Zechariah claims: “He is with us . . . he is leading the way” (97). The “walking man” can be the personification of an ancient prophet or the promised savior, like Jesus. People, on the edge of despair, sometimes ask how long would it take until the “walking man” will show them to the exact place where they will start their lives afresh. Big Papa’s determined answer clarifies their doubts: “This is God’s time . . . You can’t start it and you can’t stop it. And another thing: He is not going to do your work for you, so step lively” (98). I consider that Morrison emphasizes the fact that men lead the journey and women follow. They decide where to erect the new town where the “walking man” indicates. This type of behavior hints to a collective hallucination,⁸⁶ which usually relates to aspects of the supernatural. Visions, apparitions and visitations occur in moments of extreme trouble and despair. They help people to get through tough times and for these outcasts, peril is the norm. Thus, collective hallucination and the supernatural converge to offer hope and a light at

⁸⁶ According to Robert Todd Carroll in his book *Skeptic’s Dictionary*, “a collective hallucination is a sensory hallucination induced by the power of suggestion to a group of people. It generally occurs in heightened emotional situations, especially among the religiously devoted. The expectancy and hope of bearing witness to a miracle, combined with long hours of staring at an object or place, makes certain religious persons susceptible to seeing such things . . . those witnessing the ‘miracle’ agree in their hallucinatory accounts because they have the same preconceptions and expectations” (1). Supernatural events related to Ruby pose a genuine dilemma because the reader has to differentiate between patriarchal manipulation and the supernatural *per se*. For instance, the account of the “walking man” is a way the patriarchs use to make people believe in the “sanctity” of the Old Fathers and, therefore, in their divine right to administrate power.

the end of the tunnel for these people. However, it always has a man-controlled aspect about it. Besides, the founding fathers also involve the will of God in their decision-making. By giving Ruby a mythical foundation inspired by the “intuitions” of men, they secure a divine connection between their precepts and the sacred world. Hence, anything that they decide will be “God’s word,” impregnated with supernatural force. In this sense, I think that Morrison unveils the recurrent patriarchal idea that male-oriented history and tradition have a divine source. Therefore, men deserve obedience and unquestioning respect, which implies seeing the supernatural through a patriarchal lens. The chronicle of how they find the right spot to create their town exudes maleness. As Philip Page suggests: “The walking man reinforces the Old Father’s sense of their divine mission, and, like their sense of God, he is aloof, mysterious, and powerful” (646). The connection between the Old fathers of Ruby and the Old Testament figures validates the patriarchal origins of the town. Besides, the presence of the supernatural supports the idea of male divine power. As Page suggests, “the presence of this series of semi-divine men is reinforced by similarly ambiguous presences of other figures who blur the usual boundary between human and divine” (646). The walking man emerges as a dominant patriarchal guide:

The walking man was still there, removing items from his satchel and putting others back. Even as they watched, the man began to fade. When he was completely dissolved, they heard footsteps again, pounding in a direction they could not determine . . . Then suddenly it was quiet . . . Before [Big Papa and Rector] had gone three yards they heard a trashing in the grass. There in the trap, bait and pull string undisturbed, was a guinea fowl. *Male, with plumage to beat the band* . . . “Here,” he said. “This is our place.” [emphasis added] (98)

From my perspective, the foundation of Ruby connects and foreshadows to the events of the Convent. A bird of beautiful plumage appears in the spot where they (men) should build the

town, which relates to Soane's dream of the birds with "strange feathers," which also relates to Morgan's perception of the Convent women as "strange feathers." The guinea fowl also connects to the idea of killing, hunting, and sacrifice. Morrison presents a double metaphor that parallels the double moral of male-oriented thinking. In this case, the image of the beautiful and colorful guinea fowl, the fore Fathers, stands for renewal and reconstruction while any reference to the birds of "strange plumage," that is, the Convent women, relates to death and decay.⁸⁷

In my opinion, Ruby, as a town, comes from the revelations of men and, for this reason, remains the "paradise" of men. Morrison presents the image of a bird with beautiful plumage one more time. But this time it is a "male" bird. This "male" bird signals the exact space where they will build the town. The impact of this appropriation of "maleness" through a bird of beautiful feathers stands in direct opposition to the other birds of "strange" feathers, the women of the Convent, one beautiful, one grotesque. Rebecca Degler explains in her essay "Ritual and 'Other' religions in *The Bluest Eye*" that "throughout her fiction Toni Morrison employs ritual to establish and sustain community (e.g., National Suicide Day in *Sula*, the clearing meetings in *Beloved*, cooking at the Oven in *Paradise*). This lingering preoccupation begins with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which the enactment of ritual sacrifice brings into relief a community's collective identity and the classificatory system of belief, or religion, informing it" (232). *Paradise* continues with this tradition of what Degler denominates a "scapegoating ritual," which, as she considers as "old as society." The killing of the Convent women is the execution of patriarchal punishment which also functions as the

⁸⁷ The theme of the scapegoat has a strong presence in Morrison's narrative. The communal acceptance of an individual's sacrifice to exorcise the demons of the people appear in *Sula*, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. Perhaps Pecola Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye* represents the most appalling example of sacrificial victim. Physically, mentally and sexually abused by her own family and the community, Pecola renders her humanity, even her sanity to ease other people's griefs. She embodies all the suffering of the community, which results in her sacrifice. Similarly, the women of the Convent will become the ideal target to purge the guilt of the people of Ruby.

scapegoating ritual in which the people of Ruby wash their sins. As Degler points out, “the community as a whole effectively rids itself of . . . their appointed figurehead for what they deem nasty or undesirable, in an effort to rid themselves of that undesirability” (232).

Basically through this type of ritual, the men of Ruby not only assert their prominence, but also confirm the values (or anti-values) that inform their community.

According to my interpretation of the novel *Ruby*, indeed, must remain a male-centered domain. Yet, the place that they find has owners. As the narrator declares, “[it] belonged to a family of State Indians, and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear” (98-99). Here Morrison reinforces Misner’s contrasting idea of paradise as a true home, a place that you do not have to snatch from somebody else, a place that you do not have to defend from others. Yet, in the case of *Ruby*, the Old Fathers *do* have to take the land from someone else. Besides, since the very beginning, *Ruby* exists as a patriarchal enclave: “Here freedom was not entertainment, like a carnival or a hoedown that you can count on once a year. Nor was it the table droppings from the entitled. Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that *a man* had to take for himself every day. And if *he* passed enough tests long enough, *he was king*” [emphasis added] (99). In this sense, history and tradition support this “paradise” of men where they *are* kings. Thus, challenging the dominant male-centered perspective proves an arduous task when a supernatural origin endorses male power. The absence of women, or any female-related image, during the foundation of *Ruby* tells a lot about the misogynistic background of this community. The role of women, even as supporters or companions of men, practically disappears from the traditional accounts of the foundation of *Ruby*. This shows the double standard of patriarchal regime. On one hand, they name their town after a beloved female member of their community but, on the other hand, they carefully erase any contributions of women during the foundation period of the town. Thus, the veiled presence of

women, which reminds of invisible slaves, at most, just gives a false idea of belonging and participation. In the end, Ruby remains a mere name that reminds the Fathers of their convulsive past struggles and their need to create their own “paradise.” Thus, the supernatural in Ruby serves patriarchal purposes. The Fathers acknowledge the existence of a superior force only if it befits their purposes.

I consider that male rule favors an official version of religion, which is rigid, static, and systematic. Engraved in iron and stone, like the words in the Oven’s mouth, patriarchal religion, which sometimes acquires the form of superstition, remains inflexible. Thus, elements of the supernatural and patriarchal religion blend to create a powerful combination that sustains the omnipotence of men. Once again, the Oven stands as a symbol of this fusion and of the firmness of patriarchal convictions. In this sense, the Morgan twins remember the need to engrave those convictions in the communal historiography of the town: “[they] believed it was when he [Big Papa] discovered how narrow the path of righteousness could be that their grandfather chose the words for the Oven’s lip. Furniture was held together by wooden dowels because nails were so expensive, but he sacrificed his treasure of three inch by four, bent and straight, to say something important that would last” (14). The words of men last forever, or they should, at least in their own minds, and that power comes from God. He leads the way and grants them their authority:

At supertime, when it was too dark for any work except that which could be done by firelight, the Old Fathers recited the stories of that journey: the signs God gave to guide them – to watering places, to Creek with whom they could barter their labor for wagons, horses and pasture; away from prairie-dog towns fifty miles wide and Satan’s malefactions: abandoned women with no belongings, rumors of riverbed gold. (14)

Thus, from my standpoint the religious views that incorporate the supernatural permeates diverse aspect of the life of Ruby. “Divine” entities act in a partial and biased

manner to support the desires of men. God will “crumble” their enemies (or any man considered as an enemy), and He will lead their way, and He will protect them from any harm. This very particular portrayal of the Divinity as a violent, vengeful, masculine figure reinforces, indeed, the concept of patriarchal oppression. The words in the Oven “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” do nothing but support patriarchal religion, the Divinity, and the supernatural as means to favor patriarchal rule. Accordingly, Reverend Misner criticizes this view of religion that lacks the essence of spirituality: love. As he argues, “remove [love] . . . and Christianity was like any and every religion in the world: a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into the perpetual dark of choicelessness” (146). Patriarchal rule has done exactly that to religion. It has taken away the love, leaving only a set of rules to obey and the “Furrow of His Brow” to be scared of. As Misner points out, “without the [sign of love], the believer’s life was confined to praising God and taking the hits” (146), which reflects, as a matter of fact, patriarchal views on religion, in which God stands as a patriarchal figure himself. Consequently, Ruby’s elite group manipulates the supernatural and fuses it with religion and superstition to accommodate its purposes to their own.

However, it is my thesis that Morrison offers an alternative perspective of the supernatural in Ruby, one that connects with the power of femininity. The author has declared that the supernatural belongs to the lore of black communities in diverse forms. In the specific case of *Paradise*, dreams, visitations and other manifestations of the “world beyond” find their way through the intricacies of the story. Mostly, women have the quality to “see” an ulterior reality that coexists alongside raucous patriarchal oppression. The supernatural in this case stands for a special connection with the spiritual world. The women of Ruby perceive the supernatural as an extension of their everyday reality. They do not see

anything unnatural or awkward in these manifestations. I think that Morrison gives a touch of irony to some of the moments in which the women of Ruby have contact with the supernatural. For instance, the people of Ruby fail to “read” the buzzards that appear during K.D.’s wedding as an omen of further calamity, and as the announcement of the actual tragedy that they announce: the death of the white family in their car. In like manner, Soane “dreams” with her dead sons, and they announce the killing of the Convent women. However, she misinterprets the dream and cannot prevent the murders from happening. Morrison presents this misreading of supernatural events perhaps as a symptom of loss of contact with spirituality. The patriarchal environment in which the women of Ruby live interferes with their connection to the supernatural, which results in pathetic irony of devastating consequences. Men discourage women from cultivating any significant links with the supernatural that might empower them. Daly declares why this contact with the Supernatural might have catastrophic results for patriarchy: “Enspiriting is hearing and following the call of the wild, which is in the self. The call to wild-ize our Selves, to free and unfreeze our Selves is a wild and fantastic calling to transfer our energy to our Selves and to Sister Selves” (343). As women come into contact with the supernatural, they discover the power they have within, and they separate from the dominance of patriarchal power.

Soane also experiences the visits of her “mysterious friend,” preceded by an unusual proliferation of beautiful butterflies. Reality and the supernatural coexist in the life of women since they are the ones who possess the sensibility to connect with “the other side,” and to interpret, or misinterpret other realities. Once again, Morrison plays with ambivalence. She transforms something real and mundane like the visit of Soane’s special friend into a supernatural experience preceded of supernatural manifestations like the sudden apparition of colorful butterflies. This magnifies the sense of the supernatural in the novel, as the reader has to negotiate if these “visitations” are real or imaginary, or if they belong to the tangible

world or the spirit world. This encapsulates the magic of Morrison's work, which has the capacity to erase the lines between material and spiritual. Consequently, women keep the flame of the supernatural burning in Ruby because they still own what Daly calls the "Female Sparking." Mary Daly explains in *Gyn/Ecology* that "it is because women are known to be energy sources that patriarchal males seek to possess and consume us (319) . . . patriarchal males sensing the ultimate threat of Female Sparking, make every effort to put out women's fires whenever we start them" (320). For obvious reasons, the men of Ruby try to occupy the minds of women with superfluous tasks to keep them away from themselves. Also, they show a paralyzing fear for any manifestation of that superior force of women and their immediate response is to eliminate it, or deny it. This might as well be a good reason why Soane keeps the visits of her friend a secret. Perhaps she fears that opening up about this special bond and its supernatural connections to the world will make it disappear.

Lone DuPres serves as a good example for a woman who preserves the "Female Spark." She has access to her inner force and can relate to the supernatural successfully. She sees the big picture beyond patriarchy. She embodies what Pinkola Estés calls *La Loba*: "The old woman, Wild Woman, is *La voz mitológica*. She is the mythical voice who knows the past and our ancient history and keeps it recorded for us in stories" (33). Thus, Lone DuPres impersonates the Wise Old Women (or Men) that appear throughout Morrison's narrative.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Morrison begins the Acceptance Speech of the Nobel Prize sharing a story of Wise Old Woman (or Man, she makes no difference), who tells a cautionary tale and instructs the young people who come to her. Although she is blind, the Wise Old Woman has special powers to see beyond. She remains in touch with the spiritual world and has the ability to restore and heal. Morrison specifies some of the attributes of this Wise Old Woman: "In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement" (1). The character of Lone DuPres in *Paradise* shares many of the attributes of the Wise Old Woman. Yet Morrison problematizes this character as the men of Ruby begin to question her authority and, the new generations start to drift apart from the ancient connections and the source of power. Like in the tale of the Wise Old Woman, they try to outsmart her, without knowing that she possesses wisdom that surpasses their common knowledge.

As one of the oldest citizens of Ruby, Lone has some authority. She is the midwife of the town and she has healing powers. Therefore, Lone DuPres has a special connection with the supernatural. She possesses the outstanding ability to “step inside” people and restore their life energy. As a matter of fact, she recognizes that Connie has a special gift too and helps her to develop her abilities. A true owner of “Female Spark,” Lone remains a figure of authority in the town giving advice, healing, and helping people out. She has an important role in the novel, as she serves as the bridge that connects the women of Ruby and the women of the Convent. She realizes that “only women. Never men” (270) walk between Ruby and the Convent:

For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost... women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. Sweetie Fleetwood had walked it, Billie Delia too. And the girl called Seneca. Another called Mavis. Arnette, too, and more than once. And not just these days. They had walked this road from the very first. Soane Morgan, for instance, and once, when she was young, Connie as well. (270)

Lone’s omniscient vision gives her the capacity to understand fully what goes on with the women that walk between Ruby and the Convent. As a matter of fact, she has the mental clarity to discern the outcome of these errands, and to predict the peril to which these women expose themselves to by trespassing the physical limits of the town and the intangible limits of patriarchal authority.

Moreover, Lone discovers the patriarchal plot to “put out” the “Female Spark” of the Convent women. Although she fails to stop the men in their destructive ride to the Convent, her level of awareness unveils patriarchal oppression. Lone reconstructs the events that took place at the Convent, and she offers an impartial and sincere rendition of what went on there,

unlike the story of the men of Ruby, who try to “justify” themselves and the atrocities that they have perpetrated. Like the Wise Old Woman, Lone sees all and hears all, providing the true account of that fatidic morning. In this way, Lone becomes a local version of Cassandra who foretells the tragedy but whom no one listens to.

The ruling men of Ruby minimize the strong presence of Lone. As an attempt to diminish her power, they begin to spread false rumors blaming her for some of the calamities and deaths of the unborn children that take place. The new Fathers want to make Lone appear as a senile woman whose insidious babbling has no importance, yet deep down they fear her. Besides, they disregard her attributes and her connection to the supernatural. Thus, as part of the strategy of patriarchy to devalue the force of femininity and its essential link to nature and the supernatural, the people of Ruby start to turn their backs on the ancestral power of midwifery even before the murders. As Patricia Best recalls in her memories,

Arnette was insisting on going to the hospital in Demby to give birth. It cut Lone to the quick (she still believed that decent women had their babies at home and saloon women delivered their babies in hospitals), but she knew the Fleetwoods hadn't given up on thinking she was partly responsible for Sweetie and Jeff's children, in spite of the fact she had delivered thirty-two healthy babies to doing-just-fine mothers since the last broken Fleetwood baby was delivered. So she said nothing except that Arnette's time would be March of '75. (190-191)

Interestingly enough, I think that Morrison juxtaposes the role of tradition and the role of modernity again, but this time from a different point of view. The people of Ruby prefer now the “gynocidal” practices of modern patriarchal medicine in hospitals than the homely environment to bring their babies to this world.⁸⁹ In addition, they blame Lone and her

⁸⁹ Modern medicine stole the power from the ancient practice of midwifery. Suzane Arms explains in her book *Immaculate Deception II* that “in the period beginning in the fifteenth century and ending in the seventeenth ...

“antiquated practices” for the birth defects that occur in the Fleetwood family when, in reality, those defects originate from the inbreeding practices that that patriarchy promotes. This constitutes yet another example of female scapegoating on the part of Ruby’s male-oriented regime. Actually, Lone laments her current situation:

Nobody wanted her craft . . . Her patients let her poke and peep, but for the delivery they traveled hours (if they could make it) to the hospital in Demby, for the cool hands of white men. Now, at eighty-six, in spite of her never-fail reputation (which was to say she never lost a mother, as Fairy once had), they refused her their swollen bellies, their shrieks and grabbing hands. (270-271)

Lone discovers why people begin to doubt the power of midwives in Ruby. This witch-hunt seeks to undermine the power of femininity, which relates to the fear that men have of the “Female Spark.” Daly declares in *Pure Lust* that “phallicism, then, inherently tends to the destruction of Elemental female passive potency – our capacity to receive inspiration, truth from the elements of the natural world, the Wild, to which our wild reason corresponds” (169). The men of Ruby react accordingly. In fact, Fairy, Lone’s mentor, explained to her this convulsive animosity of men against the “Wild” powers of women: “Don’t mistake the father’s thanks,’ Fairy had warned her. ‘*Men scared of us, always will be. To them we’re death’s handmaiden standing as between them and the children their wives carry*” (272, emphasis

thousands of women were convicted as witches and murdered throughout Europe and the American colonies ... many of these women mere midwives” (45). Therefore, patriarchy finds the perfect excuse to take away the power of healing from the hands of women and transfer that power to men. As Arms asserts, “the witch-hunts of Europe and the American colonies helped take power away from midwives at the same time that power over women and childbirth was being coopted by the medical profession” (46). Moreover, medicine schools deny midwives any possibility of instruction: “When the first medical schools were established in Europe in the Middle ages, midwives were excluded from the new profession of medicine, [which] was part of a deliberate policy to take control of childbirth away from women. At the same time, the prevailing cultural belief was that it was inappropriate for women to be taught to read. Thus medicine, along with all other forms of higher learning, was considered to be an exclusively male domain” (46). Arms’ account of the decline of midwifery parallels the urge of the men of Ruby to discredit Lone DuPres and steal the power of midwifery from her. The real motive to undermine Lone’s credibility has to do with their need to concentrate all forms of power in their own hands.

added). Even though Lone speaks specifically about the role of midwives in assisting women at childbirth, the “fear” that men have extends far beyond this because they feel vulnerable, powerless, and unable to exercise control. Yet, although they thank the midwife for her services, they secretly envy that connection to the supernatural, and manifest that jealousy by disregarding the power of midwives and transferring that gift to other men in positions of power, like doctors. Besides, Lone DuPres recognizes that she has other qualities that threaten men: “Lone had another liability. It was said she could read minds, a gift from something that, whatever it was, was not God, and which she had used as early as two . . . Lone denied it; she believed everybody knew what other people were thinking. They just avoided the obvious” (272). This type of especial intuition connects women with the supernatural and patriarchy tries to deny it all the time. Lone knows that her “gift” does not come from a patriarchal divinity but from the force of the Wild in every woman. As Pinkola Estés points out:

No matter by which culture a woman is influenced, she understands the words *wild* and *woman* intuitively . . . when women hear those words, an old, old memory is stirred and brought back to life. The memory is of our absolute, undeniable, and irrevocable kinship with the wild feminine, a relationship which may have become ghostly from neglect, buried by over-domestication, outlawed by the surrounding culture, or no longer understood anymore. We may have forgotten her names, we may not answer when she calls ours, but in our bones we know her, we yearn toward her, we know she belongs to us and we to her. (5)

Lone DuPres has the privilege of preserving the connection with the Wild Woman and her “gift” does not correspond to the history or memory of men but originates in Nature and beyond in the supernatural itself: “Yet she did know something more profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best’s history book. She knew what neither memory nor history can say or

record: the 'trick' of life and its 'reason'" (272). Lone's knowledge, primal and ancestral, surpasses, by far, the common knowledge of men. The original wisdom of Lone symbolizes the omniscient presence of the Goddess. Women have direct access to that source of vitality, while men, distracted in their relentless fight to accumulate power, have lost that connection. In the end, this power envy of men provokes the tensions that victimize and marginalize women. In other words, the pathological need of the men of Ruby to exercise power and control over women mirrors the reality of patriarchal societies.

It is my interpretation that Morrison presents two faces of the Supernatural in Ruby. On one hand, she explores the supernatural as an expression of patriarchal decrees. In this case, the supernatural has a rigid and immutable form, engraved in iron and stone, like patriarchal rule. Hence, the patriarchs propitiate the supernatural only as a tool to endorse, support, and comply with their regime. Thus, this patriarchal vision of the supernatural as favorable to their needs and their will becomes weak, superficial, and pastiche. The people of Ruby do include the supernatural but only to back up patriarchal rule; otherwise, they overlook any manifestations of it. As a matter of fact, they chastise people, mainly women, who possess a touch of the Divine and have a primal connection with the power source of the Wild. Lone DuPres and Consolata become victims of the anger of patriarchal power in their fight for supremacy, which has, eventually, fatal consequences. On the other hand, I consider that Morrison provides a view of the supernatural as connected to the origin of life itself and associated to the powers of femininity. In this case, the supernatural has a wild, invigorating, life-giving expression. Unlike patriarchal dogma, it invites change. The power of the "Female Spark" as a manifestation of the supernatural, or that power beyond traditional thinking, finds its full expression in the intuition of the women of Ruby, in the dreams that they have, in the visitations that they witness, and the healing powers that they possess. Even if the men of Ruby try to monopolize the power of the supernatural to serve their own interests, the power

of the Wild resists and finds ways to have an expression. The authoritative voice of the patriarchs deafens the natural intuition of women, but it does not mean that it has disappeared. It exists within and it only needs a little bit of intuition to find its way out. The female “Spark,” and the connection with the Supernatural, offers the possibility of transformation. Although the Fathers impose restrictive controls on women, the winds of change carry out the “Sparks” of the supernatural, which find their way out and ignite the purifying fire, the fire of revolution and change that brings the promise of new life to the town. In this sense, I think that the novel ends in a positive tone because even when tragedy and death predominate, it also signifies that the rigid patriarchal system of Ruby has a fissure, or several fissures, and begins to crack open. As the people of Ruby realize, “something seismic had happened since July” (296). Thus, the new generations, represented by the young people of the town and the rebellious women, like Billie Delia, are getting ready to bring about change in Ruby. During the funeral of Save-Marie she has an epiphany:

Billie Delia was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? . . . She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors –but out there. Which is to say she hoped for a miracle. (308)

Thus, the disappearance of the Convent women signifies something positive all in all. It means the possibility of a miracle, and it hints the promise of change. Billie Delia believes that the Wild Women will return eventually to overturn the patriarchal regime of Ruby.

CHAPTER IV. THE CONVENT

It is my interpretation that the Convent stands in direct opposition to Ruby and to the Out There. Every aspect involved with it contains an aura of mystery and mysticism that makes this place special and unique. Morrison lavishes voluptuousness when describing the building and its surroundings. The Convent becomes a character itself in the novel, not only a mere physical space. This place has a power and an attraction that captures the imagination. The house possesses a quality of sensuality that provokes multiple emotional responses. Some people hate it. Some people love it. The visual effects of the house, the sounds, the smells, everything around it elicits a reaction. The embezzler built this place to impress, and eccentricity remains one of its main attributes. The Convent challenges the concept of normality and traditional expectations. The building itself manifests an affront to traditional morality. The décor, the layout of the house, the very inspiration to build the place contradicts the principles of society. Showing fidelity to the original purpose, this mansion provides a space not only for living, but also for frolic recreation, for ritual, for erotism. The narrator's description of the place evidences its abnormal beauty and complexity:

Then there is the grandeur . . . before it was Convent, this house was an embezzler's folly. A mansion where bisque and rose-tone marble floors segue into teak ones. Isinglass holds yesterday's light and patterns walls that were stripped and whitewashed fifty years ago. The ornate bathroom fixtures, which sickened the nuns, were replaced with good plain spigots, but the princely tubs and sinks, which could not be inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt. The embezzler's joy that could be demolished was, particularly in the dining room, which the nuns converted to a schoolroom, where stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget . . . now armed men search rooms where macramé baskets float next to Flemish candelabra; where Christ and His mother glow in niches trimmed in grapevines. The Sisters of the sacred

Cross chipped away all the nymphs, but curves of their marble hair still strangle grape leaves and tease the fruit. The chill intensifies as the men spread deeper into the mansion, taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast-and-butter smell of rising dough. (3-4)

Above all, I consider that the Convent has an atmosphere of the supernatural and it is female. The house has a wonder “quality” which is difficult to explain, but easily perceptible. This place traps the people in an “out of this world” atmosphere. Thus, the Convent functions as the perfect scenario for the tragic drama that unfolds in *Paradise*. Morrison’s well-known reputation of being wonderful storyteller finds vibrant expression in the literary construction of the Convent. This place haunts both the characters and the readers and transcends the written pages. Geographical isolation proves an important attribute of the Convent. The physical location of this place makes it even more bizarre. It stands in the middle of nowhere, and its nearest neighbors, the people of Ruby, purposely refuse to establish any contact with its inhabitants:

Pity. Once, the Convent had been a true if aloof neighbor, [to the town of Ruby] surrounded by corn, buffalo grass, clover, and approached by a dirt track barely seen from the road. The mansion-turned-Convent was there long before the town, and the last boarding Arapaho girls had already gone when the fifteen families arrived. That was twenty-five years ago, when all their dreams outstretched the men who had them. (10)

This physical separation grants the Convent the gift of seclusion. Isolation provides the perfect environment for introspection and self-assertion. Morrison’s convent stands for a womb-like space, an intimate female place that precedes change or re-birth. Yet, like all Morrison’s metaphors, the Convent has diverse connotations and allegories that intensify its significance and function in the novel. Importantly, the isolation of the Convent works

perfectly with Frye's theory of separatism. The convent provides a safe haven that allows women to stay away from patriarchal abusive communities like the Outside World and Ruby. Both the physical and spiritual separation enable these women to grow and find new perspectives of life, and of themselves, that they did not know were there. Moreover, this separation helps them to challenge patriarchy and to develop a completely new sense of selfhood.

From my perspective, the historical sequence of the occupation of the Convent plays with the idea of degradation/evolution. As successive owners transform and modify the physical building, the purpose and function of the place changes for the best. As Page asserts, "the story of the Convent is in some ways the reverse –from chaotic fragmentation to a liberating fusion. Its history indicates its extreme diversity –first an embezzler's pornographic mansion, Then a Catholic school for Indian girls, last an anarchic commune for wandering young women" (645). Page comments on the "extreme diversity" of the Convent, which reinforces Morrison's thesis of diversity as a positive attribute. Therefore, diversity signals evolution. In the beginning, the majestic house has an unusual grandeur, which is appalling. "The folly of an embezzler," as the narrator points out, a man who stands outside the law, seems to challenge all conventions with the construction of this house. The house mirrors the hedonistic mentality of the owner as a personal refuge. The house has its origins in a very instinctual and raw sensuality, which aims to pursue pleasure. At this point, the mansion blooms in a spectacular beauty that pleases the senses. The house attracts and traps with its magnificence. However, the construction of this house involves, from its origins, something illegal that has a connotation of the forbidden. Although at this moment the house presents its best physical appearance, the purpose of the building proves selfish and suggests perversion.

Eventually, when the owner loses the mansion because of his illegal transactions, the government grants permission to a group of catholic nuns to establish a boarding school for Native girls. In this phase, the nuns strip the building to the bones. They actually want to eliminate all traces of the rich sensual imagery that “plagues” the house and impose, instead, a sober religious ambience. Moreover, the house acquires the emblematic name of the Convent during this period of time, which serves as its identifying feature throughout the novel. The name of the Convent carries a powerful significance relating the place to ideas of abstinence, seclusion, and religious practices. Therefore, the house has a different purpose from now on. Instead of a hideaway of frolic and erotic diversion, the mansion becomes a place for religious devotion and education. Moreover, this phase also marks a period of strict rules, adherence to codes, and blinding obedience. The nuns and the Arapaho girls live under the control of the Catholic Church. The ideals of the nuns stand in a diametrically opposed position to the old spirit of the embezzler’s house. Yet, signs of decay not only in the building itself, but also in the patriarchal establishment that the nuns follow, begin to appear as the church eventually eliminates economic subvention for the Convent. The escape of the last Native girls marks the decline of the Convent as a boarding school and Catholic institution. A new phase begins as the remaining nuns struggle to survive.

From my point of view, the Convent retains its religious name but it becomes something very different to a traditional patriarchal conceived “convent.” The two women living in the house, the Mother Superior and her helper, Connie, transform this place into something exceptional. In this phase, the Convent acquires its brightest expression. During this period, the Supernatural becomes a fixed feature of the Convent. Although the building shows evident signs of decay and tracing the former grandeur can be challenging, the Convent becomes a refuge, a space for healing. The house has evolved into a true shrine of spirituality and now serves as the perfect scenario for change, evolution, and re-birth. The

sensuality, spirituality, and mysticism of the different phases impregnate the Convent with an aura of regenerative energy. The women living there possess this power, and they become healers of the body and the soul. The Convent, thus, serves as a refuge for those who need a helping hand. Anyone escaping from the oppression and abuse of patriarchal society will find a revitalizing space in the Convent. This house acts as a magnet for those women who desire a transformation in their lives. As Widdowson explains, “the one thing that [the Convent women] have in common is mistreatment by a society largely governed by male prerogatives, so that the Convent is truly a *retreat* for them” (330). Thus women, more often than men, come to this place to regenerate and re-organize their ideas and expectations of a fuller existence and to find a deeper meaning in life. The Convent ceases to be a place of superficial sensuality and a place of potted patriarchal desires to transform into an authentic life-giving source and healing space.

I consider that living quarters have a significant connotation in Morrison’s narrative, and the Convent abides by this rule. Houses have a particular quality that transcends reality and gives room for the Supernatural to exist. For example, in *Beloved*, the house on 124 Bluestone Road literally haunts the people who live in it. As Morrison states:

Beginning *Beloved* with numerals rather than spelled out numbers, it was my intention to give the house an identity . . . whatever the risk of confronting the reader with what must be immediately incomprehensible . . . the risk of unsettling him or her, I determined to take... the reader is snatched, yanked . . . just as the slaves were from one place to another . . . a few words have to be read before it is clear that 124 refers to a house (quoted in Stave, 29).

Thus, by giving living spaces special identities Morrison confirms the importance of houses and space in her novels. Houses act as contained space for magic. In the particular case of *Beloved*, the house allows the return of the ghost of Beloved, haunting its occupants. The

house becomes a portal for the Supernatural and, as a matter of fact, the entire novel evolves with the house as its central pillar. In *Paradise*, the Convent has a similar function. This particular location, with its magical overtones, fosters the ultimate spiritual experience of the women who inhabit it. As Anderson points out,

The building in which the five women cross and re-cross the boundaries between life and death and past and present is a perfect space for this process. The Convent is indeed similar to 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved* in that it is a way station, a crossroads, and a meeting place . . . most important, the building becomes a spiritual haven for four young women, each of whom has been damaged, leaving them unable to cope with life outside the Convent. Even though they can leave, they eventually return to stay. (311)

Thus, the Convent, as a liminal space,⁹⁰ remains out of the bounds of the Out There. I consider, in this sense, that the Convent exists as a meeting point where the real and the surreal converge. hooks elaborates on the importance of the theory of “marginalization,” and how this space can function as a battle ground to fight oppression. In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, hooks explains that “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (xvi). Here Morrison shares hooks’ ideas of “marginalization” and applies them to the Convent both in a literal and metaphorical way. The Convent, as a location, exists in the margins of the other towns. Both the Out There and Ruby have placed miles and miles of distance between them and the Convent. As hooks would argue, the

⁹⁰ Melanie R. Anderson refers to the concept of liminality in her essay “What would be on the Other side?': Spectrality and Spirit Work in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” She argues that “in order for the characters of Morrison’s novel to ‘learn to live,’ they must negotiate borders not only between life and death and past and present but between all binaries” (307). In this sense liminality functions in the novel as the invigorating element that allows these women to grow. As Anderson argues: “throughout the novel, Morrison privileges liminality, as the Convent women, erased and negatively ‘ghosted’ by the larger society, find empowerment through their communal spiritual experiences in the Convent, carving out spaces of negotiation that ultimately begin to heal not only the women, but also many citizens of Ruby” (307). Thus, liminality acts as the catalyst for the change and revolution that starts in the Convent.

Convent belongs to the whole but an actual separation puts distance and excludes this place from the “center,” or main body. In a more metaphorical way, the Convent benefits from this privileged position because it exists in the margins of society. In this sense, the Convent stands out of reach and out of the influence of the central structures of power. I interpret this separation of “the main body” as a positive aspect. This alienation gives a chance for freedom, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. Therefore, “marginalization” does not have a negative connotation necessarily. I consider that Morrison rediscovers these positive attributes and uses them to transform “marginal” spaces in places where minorities can find a voice and rebel against oppression. The Convent women endorse “marginalization” and re-create themselves in order to gain visibility in “the main body.” Thus, the “marginal” aspect of the Convent elicits redefinition and self-discovery, which allows these women to grow. This personal journey contrasts with the static situation of other women. This is something that does not happen, for instance, with most women in Ruby or in the Out There. Moreover, the separation from the rest of the world enhances the magical touch of the place. Present and absent at the same time, the Convent and its inhabitants play with reality and transform it.

From my standpoint the Convent, outside the town of Ruby, appears as a distorted image of the latter. Like the distorted reflection on a lake, the image of the Convent diffuses everything that Ruby stands for. The centralized and rigid feature of patriarchal power of the all-black town does not exist in the Convent. The women living there do not have a strict set of religious, moral, or social rules to obey. As a matter of fact, freedom and spirituality seem to be their main goal to achieve. As opposed to the women of Ruby, they enjoy the possibility of coming and going of the Convent whenever they choose to. However, most of the women decide to stay in this place because it gives them the sense of openness and self-affirmation that patriarchal society has denied them routinely. Mavis, for instance decides to stay: “[she] . . . parked [in the Convent], and the Cadillac, dark as bruised blood, stayed there for two

years" (46). The open doors of the Convent allow free will: "Mavis Albright left the Convent off and on, but she always returned, so she was there in 1976" (49). However, in a twist of irony, the "openness" of the Convent becomes a deadly trap for Mavis:

On that July morning she had been aware for months of the sourness between the Convent and the town and she might have anticipated the truckload of men prowling the mist. But she was thinking of other things: tattooed sailors and children bathing in emerald water. And exhausted by the pleasure of the night before, she let herself drift in and out of sleep. An hour later, shooting pullets out of the schoolroom, she smelled cigar smoke and the merest trace of Aqua Velva. (49)

The "reverie" or dreamlike quality that the Convent has for Mavis, and for the other women who live there, makes them unaware of the impending dangers of patriarchy. Only with the smell of cigar smoke and Aqua Velva does Mavis wake up to confront patriarchal cruelty. Even in this extreme situation, the Convent functions as the gateway to the ultimate form of freedom: death, which for the Convent women signals a new beginning and not a dramatic end.

In my opinion, the constant control that the elite group exercises in Ruby does not have an impact in the Convent life. The women living there breathe freedom. Although Connie plays the role of a spiritual guide, she behaves differently from patriarchal leaders. She offers unconditional love and affection and, for this reason, the women look for her advice and her protection. Connie embodies a nurturing maternal figure who allows people to learn and grow by themselves preserving a sacred feeling of freedom. Thus, the women of the Convent do not feel trapped like the women of Ruby. They stay there because they want to and because they have the possibility to embark in a journey of self-discovery. Finally, the abiding thirst of power that obsesses the men of Ruby has no consequence in the Convent. The women living in this house share a profound sense of community. Even though they may

have disagreements and actual physical fights, they acknowledge the importance of common well-being. The Convent succeeds as a healing space only because it works as a community: no domineering figures of authority, or imposition of rules, or exercise of abusive power. The women of the Convent share their experiences and walk together in a path towards self-affirmation helping each other, and healing each other.

The Convent as a marginal space contradicts and subverts oppression. The exotic beauty of the place creates a sensual atmosphere that haunts and, most importantly, this atmosphere has a positive impact on the women living there. The Convent becomes the perfect location for the ongoing transformation of these people. They belong in this place. In the Convent, elements of race, gender, and the supernatural collide to transform the experiences and the lives of the women who live there.

RACE IN THE CONVENT

The issue of Race in the Convent poses one of the biggest challenges for the readers of *Paradise*. I consider that Morrison plays deliberately with all previous misinformation that one may have about racialized assumptions. She challenges our preconceptions. She contradicts dogmas. She changes our views. The Convent serves as the framework to question and redefine our deepest understanding, or misunderstanding, of the problematic of Race. Thus, the Convent as a liminal space: absent and present, real and unreal, brutal and magic fosters the re-invention of racial policies. From my perspective, the Convent crystallizes Morrison's views regarding Race. The theme of Race does not appear explicitly, but it pervades and influences every aspect of the characters' lives. The aspect of Race imitates the spiritual essence of the Convent because although it does not have a direct role in plot, it defines the subsequent events and unleashes the tragic aftermath of the story. Like the ghost of Beloved in *Beloved*, Race haunts and condemns the Convent women: its force shapes their destiny.

I think that from the opening pages of the novel, Morrison confronts the reader with the luscious nature of color in the Convent. For instance, when she depicts the assault on the Convent women, color and therefore race, play a central role:

One of [the men], the youngest, looks back, forcing himself to see how the dream he is in might go. The shot woman, lying uncomfortably on marble, waves her fingers at him – or seems to. So his dream is doing okay, except for its *color*. He has never dreamed in colors such as these: imperial black sporting a wild swipe of red, then thick, feverish yellow. Like the clothes of an easily had woman. (emphasis added, 4)

Morrison describes this macabre scene of murder vividly to rise the reader's awareness of color perception and on the impact colors might have on a specific moment. She literally paints this nightmare, which should be black and white otherwise, to call attention to it. The man having this dream-like adventure enjoys the lurid details and shows sadistic pleasure in getting rid of the women. This man acts the opposite to color blind. He is very much aware of colors and race: "Shooting the first woman (*the white one*) has clarified it like butter: the oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below" (emphasis added, 4). Thus, Morrison clearly sets out color perception, and race, as a focal point of *Paradise*.

From my standpoint, Morrison's vision on Race issues, complex as it may be, acquires special significance in the context of the Convent because she incorporates new ideas about the impact of racism in society. Morrison criticizes the role that Race has played in Western cultures by dismantling all binaries. Besides, she discredits other categorizations like "purity" or "dominant" that so often appear when discussing Race related themes. As a matter of fact, she favors plurality and diversity as valuable attributes in a community. The Convent, in spite of all the turmoil around it, constitutes the most stable community if compared to the Out There or Ruby. I think that Morrison envisions the Convent as an ideal

place. As Beth Benedrix explains in her essay “Intimate Fatality Song of Solomon and the Journey Home:”

In her essay *Home*, Morrison describes the landscape that would reflect a natural consequence of metaphor-made-practice, a space she longs to call home: ‘I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent . . . I want to imagine not the threat of freedom, or its tentative panting fragility, but the concrete thrill of borderlessness’ (9). *A place where race both matters and is rendered impotent*, a place reconfigured such that power and privilege have no dominion over particularity, where *dominion* now implies a dynamic expansion of possibility, a pushing outwards against boundaries, as opposed to consolidation, crystallization, paralysis. (quoted in Stave 102-103)

Thus, Benedrix identifies the fundamental element of community for Morrison: a place where race functions as center and margin, a place where it exists but has no prevalence, a place where race matters but does not determine.

In fact, I strongly believe that this description of what both Morrison and Benedrix identify as “home” fits to the Convent perfectly. First of all, the ambivalence matches the surreal characteristic of the Convent. The very nature of the place symbolizes the ideal space that Morrison longs for. Second, “the metaphor-made-practice” aspect of the Convent proves that such a place may indeed exist. The Convent puts into practice all the attributes of this unique place that Morrison dreams of calling “home.” The Convent becomes indeed a place “clear of racist detritus” a place that embodies the concept of “borderlessness.” When compared to the Out There, or Ruby, it is easier to see clearly that the community of the Convent does not give any significance to binary oppositions like black/white, or to entrapping concepts like “8-rock.” The women of the Convent enjoy the “thrill of borderlessness” in different aspects, not only regarding race. They underestimate all boundaries that patriarchal

society imposes on them, and for this reason, racialized identities have no importance for them. Eye color has a strong significance of identity in Morrison's narrative. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye* Pecola Breedlove believes that having blue eyes will solve all her problems. She considers that changing her eye color will make her beautiful and therefore visible to the community. In *Paradise*, Morrison deconstructs Pecola's yearning for bright eyes:

The woman in the bed laughed lightly. "It's hard, isn't it," she said, "looking in those eyes. When I brought her here they were green as grass."

"And yours was blue," said Connie.

"Still are."

"So you say."

"What color, then?"

"Same as me –old lady wash-out color."

"Hand me a mirror, child,"

"Give her nothing."

"I'm still in charge here."

"Sure. Sure" (47-48)

Eye color loses all significance in the Convent. Mother and Connie have light eyes while the other girls probably have dark eyes. Unlike the determinant feature that eye color signifies for Pecola, the Convent women see eye color as a fluid, changing, non-determinant element – same as race. Mother used to have blue eyes and Connie used to have green eyes but now both have changed to old lady's gray eyes: the most beautiful color of all. The color of

learning, of growing spiritually, and of life-long experience. Moreover, the lack of mirrors in the Convent does not allow comparison or approval. Mother's eyes, Connie's eyes, or Mavis's eyes are not important because of their color but for their ability to see beyond. Their eyes change as they become wiser and wiser.

Therefore, I consider that Morrison's idea of "home" as related to racialized issues has a powerful resonance in the Convent. Besides, as Benedix asserts, it constitutes a place of "dynamic expansion," of pushing the boundaries and challenging the limits. Hence, the Convent becomes the home of these rebel women, these outcasts of society who do not obey traditional standards and who seek to rise above the limits and grow. They live Morrison's dream of a limitless, "borderless" society in which skin color has importance but not transcendence. Sami Ludwig also refers to the idea of "home" as a space for re-creation, and these characteristics reflect the spirit of what the Convent has to offer. In the essay "Toni Morrison's Social Criticism," she argues that "the safety without walls' Morrison envisages is one of interaction between the personal and the public, where the personal may not be primary, but it is priority, a place 'both snug and wide open' – 'home' as a comfortable space of encounter, beyond alienation" (quoted in Tally 136). Definitely, the Convent provides that 'safety without walls' that the women need. Also, it puts women in the first place taking into account their personal history regardless of their race, class, or social status. The Convent acts as a place for encounters, "snug" but "wide open" that despises the typical alienation of male-oriented social conventions, including skin color.

From my perspective, Morrison advocates for a society that supports color blindness in the metaphor of the Convent: a society that overlooks racial prejudices and that does not recognize racial or class distinctions. For this reason, her treatment of race issues and the use of language redefine all previous conceptions. Words, phrases, and sentences have a relevant impact on *Paradise* as "language does not merely 'reflect reality, it constructs it," (29)

as Peach argues. Morrison's preoccupation with language reflects her social agenda. Race prevails as one of the major objects of focus since she has debated constantly that "innocent" language does not exist. Peach explains that "the fact that language can never be ideologically innocent or neutral is one of the subjects of many of Morrison's novels. But they are also concerned with the way in which language enables certain discourses to circulate and achieve priority over others" (29). Thus, the discourse of Race in the context of the Convent remains ambivalent. In my opinion, Morrison's effort to deprioritize Race matches her ideological use of language. The "invisibility" of Race in the Convent parallels Morrison's effort to redefine race status in the American society. As Peach declares, "the discourses that circulate around, for example, gender and race, and which are often institutionalized in, for example, the family, education and the legal system, pass for truth. But they privilege certain groups such as white Anglo-Saxon males and deny the legitimacy of others such as black working-class females" (29). Morrison looks forward to unveiling the "truth" about race and does so by presenting a different approach. She fosters a community in which race loses its importance. I consider that the author opts for a society in which language does not promote difference: a society that is blind to color and that supports harmony, peace, and compassion rather than discrimination, superiority, and hate. The Convent defines, in this sense, Morrison's aspirations of a safe place for all. When Connie consoles Mother in her death-bed, race difference loses power: "All three watched the *brown* fingers gentling the *white* ones. The woman in the bed sighed. 'Look at me. Can't sit up by myself and arrogant to the end. God must be laughing His head off' [emphasis added] (48). The scene shows love and compassion regardless of racial difference. As a matter of fact, this scene contrasts with the opening scene of the novel where the men of Ruby who assault the Convent kill the white woman first. In this case, race signals difference, hatred, and destruction, a clear indication of the way in which patriarchal society addresses race issues. On the contrary, the scene of

Connie and Mavis taking care of Mother shows the open-mindedness of the Convent women and their love and support for each other.

Thus, it is my thesis that the Convent's indeterminacy regarding race issues remains a major trait of the novel. The historic sequence of the inhabitants of the place and their race reflects the amalgamation of racialized identities in American society. First, the owner and founder, the embezzler, reminds of the first European settlers, claiming fraudulently a land that does not belong to them. Then, the nuns who establish the Convent recall the first religious settlers of America, Europeans and descendants of Europeans who seek to impose their ideas and their beliefs. At the same time, the Native girls who attend the Convent/school represent the large populations of native dwellers who lost not only their lands but also their very ideology of life, victims of greed and tyranny. In one scene, Morrison describes the Arapaho girls as silent and quiet. In catholic school, they have to "learn to forget" their past and their cultural background just like their ancestors. The nuns even forbid them to speak in their native tongue as one of the most outrageous ways of coercion. The nuns rend them systematically invisible until they flee and eventually disappear. Finally, the group of outcast women who claim the Convent as their home resemble very much current American society. Although defining the racial identity of each character may prove a daunting task, some clues point to the variety of the spectrum. For instance, the Mother Superior seems to be of European descent, or white American. Connie is probably of Brazilian descent, which implies that she has Latino roots and possibly a mixture of Portuguese, Native American, and Black blood. Mavis is probably a Black woman from the Suburbs, like Gigi and Seneca. Pallas seems to be the child of an interracial marriage. Also, the occasional visitors from Ruby who come to the Convent increment the "racial stock" with their "pure" 8-rock blood. Evidently, Morrison plays with the notions of fixed structures and definitions. To trace back the racial identity of the Convent women results very difficult, if not almost impossible. I believe that

Morrison critiques, in this way, the obsessive patriarchal need to define and classify people according to pre-established and imposed categories like race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and age, among many others. The indeterminacy of the racial identity of the Convent women reflects the reality of American society. To sustain the argument of “blood purity” in America nowadays proves hopeless, as the population resembles the racial mixture of the Convent women. Thus, in my opinion, Morrison directs our attention to plurality and denounces the impossibility of applying a race purity system to a society that obviously does not meet such standards.

In this way, I consider that Morrison demonstrates that, as opposed to common assumptions, “racial purity” does not represent the norm. As a matter of fact, “race purity” is the exception, and imposing harsh racial purity standards results absolutely unfair and contradictory. The Out There, and by extension the patriarchs of Ruby, put into practice this type of irrational classification that goes along with their self-destructive obsession with racial purity. The Convent, on the other hand, stands as an example of balance and harmony regardless of racial background. Morrison argues that the flexibility and openness of the Convent, and not the discrimination of the Out There, or the rigidity of Ruby, assures a nurturing and promising future for society, where love and acceptance of others must prevail. In her essay, “Free Jazz? “Mumbo Jumbo” and “Paradise”: Language and Meaning,” Keren Omry argues that “Morrison’s Convent points to the disintegrating viability of a static, exclusive, and preconceived order –a Christian order, a white order, and a patriarchal or masculine order. However, instead of the imagined result of chaos, “[*Paradise*] offer[s] new types of logic based on process and change, as alternatives to the binaric order-chaos model” (136). From my standpoint, Morrison opens the discussion about racial issues to encompass fresh ideas and different possibilities. She renders obsolete the “old binaric”

order and, as Omry points out, offers the prospect of a new order established in the midst of chaos: a chaos that promotes transformation.

It is my interpretation that the Convent portrays that chaos that goes against the traditional definition of racial purity where indeterminacy rules. Once again, the opening sentence of the novel plays an important role in the story line. Morrison introduces the argument of indeterminacy from the very beginning: "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time" (3). Who is the white girl? Who are the other girls? Why did they choose to execute the white girl first, and not the others? Many questions arise but Morrison, loyal to her vision, makes race central and peripheral, at the same time. She engages the reader and dares her to solve the puzzle; a puzzle in which race may be the last clue. As Omry states:

This opening forms one of the only explicit references to the white girl as such. The reader is never told directly which girl is "the white one." And yet, in a novel where race figures centrally in the process of coming to terms with the trauma of racialized past and finding a productive aesthetic that can create a new way of life for African Americans, the ambiguity of explicit racial identity signifies importance. Instead, what Morrison does is to force the reader to find a new way of understanding race.

Throughout the novel, she strips her language of all conventionally identifiable racial markers and demands that we come to recognize language not simply as the system of signification that relies on its own history but as a rearticulated (and rejuvenated) referent in itself. (137)

I consider that Morrison makes the reader re-define the preconceptions of Race and question their value. Language acts as the instrument with which one can convey innovative meanings. A "rejuvenated" approach to racialized assumptions forces the reader to weigh in the balance the importance of Race. Again, loyal to Morrisonian tradition, multilayered

significance in her writing points to a re-definition of language and its function in the construction of reality. “Home” only exists as a place “free of racist detritus” if language loses its oppressive significance and gains different connections.⁹¹ Morrison demonstrates through the use of language in *Paradise* the possibility of thinking outside tradition and rebelling against impositions. By purging her language from all racial markers, as Omry points out, she shows that one can re-think the conventional and ascribe new meanings. Morrison illustrates through the Convent women that skin color does not need to be an important feature to give and receive love, affection and compassion. From my point of view, Morrison strips her language of racial detritus just like the Convent women succeed in constructing a real “Home” free of the oppression of traditional racial standards.

For instance, Anna Fleetwood comments on one issue related to racial identity that stirs emotions in Ruby “unstraightened hair:”

She was certain the disapproval was mostly because of her unstraightened hair . . . the subject summoned more passions, invited more opinions, solicited more anger than the prostitute Menus brought home from Virginia. She probably would have straightened it again, eventually –it wasn’t a permanent change or statement –except it clarified so much for her in the days she was confused about so much else. Instantly she could identify friends and those who were not; recognize the well-brought-up, the ill-raised, the threatened, the insecure. (119)

⁹¹ Omry argues that “Morrison’s themes are manifest in the language itself. This process dramatically alters the experience of reading: because of its central thematic role in the novel, through its rejection of pre-existing (or external) linguistic structures of race, the language becomes insistently self-reflexive, creating a tension between immediate outside references –or lack thereof –and new system of signification that emerges from within the text... the trauma of human experience becomes both unsayable and implicit in a new system of references. Morrison’s *Paradise* similarly explores ways that language can become the central arena to reconceptualize history” (138). In other words, by depleting language of pre-established associations to race, Morrison reinforces the central role that race issues play in the novel. The author renders language connections to race invisible and peripheral to accentuate its presence.

It is my interpretation that Anna's natural hair brings about and reveals much about race issues in *Ruby* and, by contrast, in *The Convent*. It reveals a whole set of assumptions on how black women are supposed to wear their hair. Hair, as a marker of racial identity, needs control and taming according to patriarchal pre-established rules. Black women with natural hair confront racialized assumptions and people react to it:

Dovey Morgan liked it; Pat Best hated it; Deek and Steward shook their heads; Kate Golightly loved it and helped her keep it shaped; Reverend Pulliam preached a whole sermon about it; K.D. laughed at it; most of the young people admired it, except Arnette. Like a Geiger counter, her hair registered, she believed, tranquility or the intensity of a rumbling, deep-down disorder. (119)

Anna's hair serves as a metaphor for race issues. Something as natural as hair type or skin color becomes a marker of identity, gender, class, and social status. The reaction of people to Anna's hair tells a lot about their prejudiced selves. The Convent women, on the contrary, pay little attention to this type of differences. They despise race markers. Actually, at some point the Convent women shave their heads, demonstrating that the Convent is a place free of racial detritus. Hair as race, gender, or status marker has no significance for them. Also, as a ritual, cutting the hair signifies freedom, new beginnings, and purification. The convent women call for unity and uniformity with the shaving of their heads, instead of difference and separation.

Hence, I think that the Convent contends the farce of racial purity, which contrasts with the reality of American society in different ways. The Convent women, in fact, embody a more realistic view of the wide diversity of racial identities that coexist in this country. According to my reading of the novel, Morrison uses different approaches to question and redefine racial categories. First, she dismantles the white/black opposition and contradicts the myth of a white hegemonic group superiority. By not allowing the reader to know the identity

of the white girl in the first sentence, she testifies that she can be anyone. White/black, or yellow, or brown skin color, or any other binary opposition, does not have any importance. The fact remains that these women, in spite of their race, suffer a terrible act of violence. It could happen to any woman. Not even a “white girl,” who has race privilege, can escape racial violence. Anyone can be a victim. Morrison dares the reader to go colorblind for a while and forget about binary oppositions. She wants to focus on the cruelty and brutality of the moment. She wants to highlight how racialized assumptions have victimized entire groups of people throughout the ages. By not identifying the “white girl,” the author makes the reader question the actual importance of race when a human being faces imminent death. Does it really matter who the white girl is? Not for Morrison apparently, as she minimizes the racial identity of the victims and exposes the lack of love and compassion of the murderers.

Second, Morrison warns about the dangers of narrow-mindedness and questions tradition. The Convent stands as a bastion against the injustice of the Out There and the excluding mindset of the people of Ruby. The Convent women become actual victims of rigid thinking. The Convent proves that a flexible and nurturing environment functions better than an exclusive or extremely restrictive one. The community of the Convent proves by contrast that all-black community projects like Ruby could fail. I believe that Morrison questions one of the most cherished ideas of some African Americans: an all-black community where they can live free of oppression. Morrison reminds us that such a prospect would not function unless complemented with noble sentiments and spirituality. The alienating ideology of Ruby denies the possibility of a true community. They live in a perfect “paradise” but fail to establish significant emotional connections among themselves and, most importantly, with people from different backgrounds. Morrison criticizes this voluntary isolation sharply. The Convent women remind the people of Ruby of the looming collapse of their beloved town. Perhaps this fact triggers the attack to silence them forever. However, Morrison speaks louder and cautions about self-righteousness. A society that relies on isolation and exclusion like Ruby,

racial or otherwise, has very little chances to survive. Third, Morrison offers new possibilities to deal with the reality of racial identities. Actually, diversity stands as the best solution. The Convent women reach a life balance that neither the Out There nor Ruby possess. These women have the secret key to unlock the door to Paradise: love. Morrison has repeated in different occasions that her novels deal with the thematic of love, or the lack of it. Decidedly, in *Paradise*, the lack of love ignites all the conflicts: race, gender, class, religion, age, all of them collide because people do not love each other. On the opposite side, loving all –loving uninterestedly, responds to the wants of those in need. The Convent women embrace diversity successfully, including skin color, and this marks the main difference between them and the rest of the world. Morrison pictures them as the ideal community where harmony, balance, and love coexist.

In my opinion, the issue of Race in the Convent calls for unity, not separation. Morrison confronts the reader with the task of redefining long held assumptions. As a matter of fact, the Convent embodies the ideal space for the re-birth of the social outcasts who live there. This renewal process proves successful because in the Convent people “learn to forget” but in a constructive way. They learn to forget all past pain and disdain, and they learn to re-discover themselves and to re-discover the Other. The women of the Convent teach us that we have to see beyond the external. Skin color, social markers, sexual orientation, and other superficial forms of categorization only hinder spiritual evolution. I think that Morrison wants readers to see clearly, not through the tainted glass of racialized assumptions. She deliberately eliminates racialized language in her novel forcing a complete rethinking of identities. She wants us to see others for what they really are and not for what they appear to be. The women of the Convent have the ability of truly embracing the Other because they have learned to challenge the impositions of the hegemonic society. Thus, love, compassion, and understanding prove the only ways to achieve true spiritual awakening.

GENDER IN THE CONVENT

It is my interpretation that the community of the Convent grants women a prominent position. Unlike the traditional marginal role that women occupy in patriarchal society, they take center stage in the Convent. All eyes are upon them. This centralization of female power is uncustomary in male-oriented cultures. Since the establishment of the religious order in the embezzler's house, the direction of the school for Indian girls becomes a responsibility of the nuns. At some point, they actually resent the neglect and abandonment from patriarchal organizations. However, this lack of interest of the administration marks the separation of the nuns from the rest of the world, and the beginning of the journey that they have ahead of them. These women discover the inner power that resides within them when they have to solve their problems and provide for the Arapaho girls and for themselves. From a religious order of obedience and submission, they transform into a self-sufficient community that is able to subsist and carry on with different projects. Women occupy a prominent place and the total absence of male influences questions the value of conventional gender roles. When the Indian girls run away and the other nuns disappear, only Mary Magna and Consolata stay in the Convent. Indeed, these two women exercise their power to an extent that contradicts all patriarchal expectations. Consolata houses in the Convent other women who have been victims of diverse types of oppression. She even takes in some men, once in a while, to offer them a helping hand. The herstory of the Convent influences the herstory of the women who inhabit it. Indeed, Consolata's disposition to transcend the limits of prescribed gender roles marks the turning point in the lives of the women who come in contact with her. Thus, the convent acts as a space for female empowerment. Morrison utilizes a variety of resources to convey female prominence among which separation of patriarchal influence, reclaiming the physical and spiritual female body, and redefining a new identity have the highest importance.

The physical space of the Convent has a real impact in the novel. In my opinion, Morrison wants to make very clear the separation that exists between this place and the rest of the world through the use of language and other literary resources. Several images reflect the remoteness of the former embezzler's house. From my perspective, the Convent as liminal space defies the logic of the other two important spaces of the novel: the Out There and Ruby. Physical distance also implies ideological disconnection. Marilyn Frye's theory on separatism and power illustrates the need of the Convent women to find their own space. As Frye points out, "most feminists, probably all, practice some separation from males and male-dominated institutions. As separatists practice separation consciously, systematically, and probably more generally than the others, and advocates thorough and 'broad-spectrum' separation as part of the conscious strategy of liberation" (2-3). Indeed, the Convent women act according to Frye's idea of liberation. They find in this old house the perfect quarters to begin their very own revolution against male domination. Frye also indicates that "contrary to the image of the separatist as a cowardly escapist, hers is the life and program which inspires the greatest hostility, disparagement, insult and confrontation and generally she is the one against whom . . . sanctions operate most conclusively" (3). The Convent women live according to their own rules and have their own agenda, which ignites the wrath of the men of the Out There and of Ruby. One of the men who assaults the Convent ruminates his resentment against the freedom of these women:

His saliva is bitter and although he knows [the Convent] is diseased, he is startled by the whip of pity flicking in his chest. What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children? Out here in wide-open space tucked away in a mansion –no one to bother or insult them –they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman

he knew ... Yet here, not twenty miles away from a quiet, orderly community, there were women like none he knew or ever heard tell of. In this place of all places. (8)

The convent women stand against all male expectations and rebel against their impositions. Hence, their voluntary isolation and separation from patriarchal standards provokes the bitterness and rage of men.

Moreover, it is my interpretation that they challenge the power of men by subverting their social values, which brings about the decision of the men of Ruby to “protect” their town against these outcasts: “unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself . . . Certainly there wasn’t a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town and the reasons, he thought, were clear” (8). The men of Ruby, always vigilant of their moral codes and values, resent the separatism of the Convent women. As Frye declares: “the separatism of males on females is, as I see it, demonstrated by the panic, rage and hysteria generated in so many of them by the thought of being abandoned by women” (3-4). The madness that the separation of the Convent women provokes on the men of Ruby has fatal consequences. However, these women are willing to pay a high price for their freedom. Frye asserts that “sometimes the separations are accomplished or maintained easily, or with a sense of relief, or even joy; sometimes they are accomplished or maintained with difficulty, by dint of constant vigilance, or with anxiety, pain or grief” (2). The convent women go through both experiences. First, they experience the initial anxiety of breaking the patriarchal code, leaving their fathers, husbands, lovers behind, and finding their own way. Then, they experience the joy of freedom that they find in the Convent. Separatism serves as the path to freedom and the Convent, as a liminal space, leads to that path.

The founding fathers of Ruby looked for a secluded place where they could construct their paradise on earth. A journey infused of patriarchal mythology led them to find the perfect space to build their dream. Isolation and separation of the Out There were key aspects that

the founding fathers had in mind when looking for this particular space. As K.D. points out, “Unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself . . . from the beginning its people were free and protected” (8). They find this secluded place eventually. The only contact with another community is the seventeen-mile narrow path that connects Ruby and the Convent. One must consider two important aspects: first, the Convent precedes Ruby in time and space, which indicates that this place has a more ancient and richer herstory. Second, both Ruby and the Convent exist in the margins of the Out There. Again, I think that Morrison plays with multi-layered meaning to convey the aspect of seclusion. The spatial and ideological connection, or disconnection, of the Out There, Ruby, and the Convent serves an important purpose because only in this way this place can become a real shelter. If the convent were in the middle of a populated street of a big city or in Ruby’s patriarchal territory, it would lose its Supernatural quality. The convent necessitates limitlessness to function as a healing space. This concept echoes other feminist thinker’s ideas of a secluded space for recovery, healing, and reinvention of the female self. For instance, Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One’s Own* explores the compelling need that women have of finding a space where they can create. Also, she denounces categorically how patriarchal society has denied women such spaces. In her book, the author explores the constant challenges that female artists and creative geniuses have to face, and how these limitations have hindered women’s talents. Woolf recognizes diverse areas in which women have a clear disadvantage such as economic independence, autonomy, and intellectual validation, among many others. *A Room of One’s Own* advocates for a private space, support, and recognition. Woolf’s requests sound incredibly familiar in spite of the distance in time. Women continue to face many similar forms of subjugation. The arguments of this author still apply to many women who struggle with patriarchal oppression. Many of Woolf’s claims remain overwhelmingly valid and current. Women’s situation has not changed drastically for decades. Woolf compares the reality of men and women and she uncovers the vast differences. Yet, when women find that particular

place of their own, creative genius unleashes its power. The diverse backgrounds and herstories of women become alive:

One goes into the room –but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way Illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room. The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers –one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one’s face. (*A Room of One’s Own*, 87)

Woolf not only reclaims a creative space for women but also denounces the long sustained oppression of patriarchy against female artists (or creators of any kind). She regrets the lack of opportunities and the continuous silencing of female voices:

How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must need harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place. (*Ibid* 87)

The issue remains the same: had women had the same opportunities and motivations as men, their herstory and reality would be completely different.

From my perspective, Morrison shares a similar preoccupation as Woolf. However, Woolf focuses more on the creative aspect of female identity, while Morrison shows her

concern on the spiritual sphere. Women need a space where they have the capacity to reinvent themselves and to heal. This space has to be a room of their own, a place detached from the common sphere of patriarchal establishments and their violence. The Convent in *Paradise* serves this function for the women living there. Detached from patriarchal rule both in a physical and ideological way, this community of women enjoys the privacy and independence that Woolf yearns. Also, they have their own economic model that sustains and support them. Besides, the Convent women have their own set of moral values based on love and compassion, and their own system of rules that favors their common well-being. The community of the Convent dramatically contrasts in this, and many other respects, with the Out There and Ruby, whose patriarchal traditional models foster oppression, abuse, and subjugation. Hence, it is my interpretation that Morrison provides the women of the Convent with a space free of patriarchal influences –a room of their own- a place where they can rediscover their true essence and recover their spiritual powers.

The isolation and freedom of the Convent women invites the anger and hate of patriarchal rulers, who interpret this independence as a perversion. This fear of the growing power of femininity triggers the irrational response of the men of Ruby that ends in the tragic raid against the Convent women.⁹² While discussing how to deal with the outcasts, the men of Ruby express much of their concern:

⁹² In her book *Pure Lust*, Daly explains the implications that the behavior of the Convent women has in a patriarchal society like Ruby: “as women roam about without masters, breaking the rules of snools, the statutes of studs, the decrees of drones, the canons of cocks, the precepts of prickers, we are indeed ‘in error: WRONG’ (151). Thus, the men of Ruby react to these women in ‘error’ and seek to correct them accordingly reinforcing patriarchal power. Conversely, Daly adds that “wandering away from ‘a proper or desirable course or development,’ we presentiate our Selves” (151). The Convent women know, as Daly points out, that to re-discover their own identity they must walk away from the patriarchal constraints that limit their healing process. Although according to patriarchal standards the Convent women are “wrong,” according to womanist ideals they have succeeded in their self-discovery journey. Nonetheless, the sadistic and violent reaction of the men of Ruby towards these women exemplifies the typical reaction of patriarchal men.

You think they got powers? I know they got powers. Question is whose power is stronger. Why don't they just get on out, leave? Huh! Would you if you had a big house to live in without having to work for it? Something is going on out there, and I don't like any of it. No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away. Jesus! No telling what else. (275-276)

The men of Ruby interpret the self-sufficiency of the Convent women as a menace and an affront to their power and they want to establish, once and for all, who rules and who has control or, as they bluntly put it, "whose power is stronger." Unfortunately, the easiest and most effective way that these men find to assert their dominion involves the use of force and brutality. The wicked decision to attack a group of defenseless women at gunpoint responds to the inability of patriarchal men to recognize and respect the power of women. In *Pure Lust*, Daly addresses the issue of uncontained violence against women in patriarchy. As she explains,

The practitioners of horizontal violence also mirror the strategy of the sadosociety which I have called *reversal*, for instead of naming the *active perpetrators* of the social evils they claim to oppose, they choose the cowardly device of scapegoating women. Rather than confronting real danger, they promote among women the very atmosphere of irrationality, stigmatization, and hatred which endanger all women. (67-68)

In the scapegoating of the Convent women, I consider that Morrison renders a clear example of this "reversal," in which the perpetrators of violence not only blame the victims but also refuse to take any responsibility for their acts. Importantly, the scapegoating begins when the Convent women claim a room of their own with "no men" where they can actively "kiss on themselves" both in a physical and spiritual way. They begin to love their Self. This willing refusal to comply with "horizontal violence" enrages the phallogocentric regime which fails, as

Daly points out, to name the real promoters of cruelty and hostility: men. When women reclaim their space, patriarchal men are more than ready to chastise them and show them their “proper” station.

In the collection of essays *I am Your Sister*, different authors analyze Audrey Lorde’s views on Black Feminist Thought. One of the aspects she explores relates to female bonding. Like Morrison and Daly, I strongly believe that Lorde has full awareness of the situation of women who claim a haven for themselves and besides that, she explores the connotations that female bonding has in patriarchal backgrounds. The women of the Convent exemplify the situation that other groups of women have to face in American society and specially those who have to confront intersecting oppressions of race, class, and sexual orientation. As she declares, “yet within this country, for so long, we, as black women, have been encouraged to view each other with suspicion and distrust; as eternal competitors for the scarce male; or as the visible face of our own self-rejection” (quoted in Byrd, 8). Clearly, the main goal of the male-centered regime consists on discouraging women from creating significant connections that may bring independence and freedom. Putting black women against each other, and promoting cruelty and mistrust among them works as a perfect strategy to hamper their empowering process. I think that Morrison, fully aware of this situation, provides the Convent women with a unique space where they can bond without the intromission of male standards. In “Create your Own Fire,” one of the collected essays that conform *I Am your Sister*, Rudolph P. Byrd points out that “if black women are to build a meaningful sisterhood then, as Lorde suggested, particular forms of socialized behavior must be unlearned” (8). As a matter of fact, the Convent women go through this “unlearning process” that Byrd proposes. As Lorde states, black women must learn to create interpersonal ties, to help each other, and to value themselves.

Consequently, it is my interpretation that the women of the Convent succeed in this venture as they build a community that complies with all these female-oriented resolutions. And so, the promise of female empowerment enrages the patriarchs of Ruby, and they will do everything to interfere with their growing process. Regarding this aspect, Page points out:

The novel juxtaposes two opposing sets of characters –the residents of Ruby and the Convent inhabitants –who frequently interpret each other. Each set inhabits a locale that is in varying ways an attempted utopia, a refuge, a home, a version of an earthly paradise, but also an experiment whose success has become highly problematic and therefore subject to widely diverse interpretations. For Rubyites, the Convent is an open sign, freely available for interpretation but not sufficiently known to allow any single interpretation to achieve full credibility. (638)

Evidently, the patriarchs of Ruby interpret the Convent as a risk to their power, which also serves as a general metaphor of the way in which patriarchy interprets female bonding. As Page declares:

The most significant of these interpretations is the growing sense among some Rubyites that the Convent is not a sanctuary but a “coven” (276), a place where abortions and lesbianism and other supposedly unspeakable horrors are committed, a place that is responsible for the tensions and disharmonies within Ruby. The resulting extermination of the Convent is an extreme interpretation. (638)

I consider that by demonizing the inhabitants of the Convent, the fathers of Ruby transmit and perpetuate the patriarchal ideas against female bonding. In this way, they crystalize the misconception that women must remain under strict male supervision; otherwise they run the risk of “going wild,” which they eventually do. As a response to these absurd patriarchal assumptions, in *Pure Lust* Daly encourages women constantly to defy patriarchal surveillance

and to fight male oppression. Actually, she urges women to bond together and to befriend each other as a way to resist patriarchal impositions: “women require . . . Be-Friending both to sustain the positive force of Moral Outrage and to continue the Fury-fueled task of inventing new ways of living. Without the encouragement of Be-Friending, anger can deteriorate into rancor and can misfire, injuring the wrong targets” (375). Like Daly, Morrison considers that female bonding gives women the opportunity to create “new ways of living,” which corresponds exactly to the experience that the Convent women have. Also, Daly tackles the frustration that female bonding generates. She explains how in patriarchal societies women usually direct their anger and frustration towards other women, instead of directing their resentment against the real oppressor: men. The Convent women create new experiences and they discover the healing powers of “Be-Friending” other women. These women re-invent themselves by cleaning their minds, bodies, and souls from the rancid rancor against other women that patriarchy imposes.

Significantly, it is my thesis that in *Paradise* Morrison exposes one of the major problems of phallogocentric ideology, which has to do with the access to female bodies. This issue arises as the Convent women reclaim their independence from patriarchal dominance and, Ruby men in turn, try to prove the women “wrong” and assert their power. Denying access to female bodies constitutes a direct affront to male power. Marilyn Frye explains in her essay “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power” the concept of “parasitism,” which has a direct connection with the physical and spiritual dependence of men on female bodies. Patriarchal tradition views women as “parasites” that live at the expense of men but, as Frye demonstrates, the opposite is true:

It is often said . . . that the female is the parasite . . . one can and should distinguish between a partial and contingent material dependence created by a certain sort of money economy and class structure, and the nearly ubiquitous spiritual, emotional

and material dependence of males on females. Males presently provide, off and on, a portion of the material support of women, within circumstances apparently designed to make it difficult for women to provide them for themselves. But females provide and generally have provided for males the energy and spirit for living; the males are nurtured by the females. And this the males apparently cannot do for themselves, even partially. The parasitism of males on females is, as I see it, demonstrated by the panic, rage and hysteria generated in so many of them by the thought of being abandoned by women. (3-4)

I think that the idea of "parasitism" relates at different levels with the reality of women in the novel. First, the Convent women try to break free from the Out There, which regards them as scroungers who live at the expense of husbands, fathers, boyfriends, and the like. For instance, the case of Mavis and her pathological economic dependence on her husband illustrates this reality. She has to steal the car and money to run away. But a closer look reveals that Frank depends on Mavis completely. He actually depletes and exhausts all her spiritual and physical strength. Second, the women of Ruby nurture males both in a physical and spiritual way. The patriarchs even have the audacity to declare that "women are the key," which totally coincides with the reversal of the parasite concept. Men depend on women to open doors and provide all kinds of stability for them. Third, the way in which the men of Ruby act in response to the separation of the Convent women epitomizes the hysteria that Frye refers to. The possibility that some women govern their own lives, and even worse, that Ruby women might eventually follow their lead and desert them, starts a collective hysteria. Thus, the Convent women pose a real threat for patriarchy as they openly advocate for separatism and the end of male parasitism.

Frye reflects upon several aspects of male parasitism that epitomize the way that the men of Ruby (or any other patriarchal society) act. The author explains that "men are drained

and depleted by their living by themselves and among other men, and are revived and refreshed, re-created, by going home and being served dinner, changing to clean clothes, having sex with the wife . . ." (4). The atmosphere of "domesticity" that prevails in *Ruby* coincides with this description. Fry explains other ways in which men practice parasitism: "By dropping by the apartment of a woman friend to be served coffee or a drink and stroked in one way or another; or by picking up a prostitute for a quickie or for a dip in sexual escape fantasies; or by raping refugees from their wars (foreign or domestic)" (4). In my opinion, The women of the Convent have suffered all these types of parasitism in one way or another. Menus Jury used to drop by the Convent to get help to cure his hangovers. Steward Morgan takes Connie as his lover to fulfill his fantasies but refuses any sentimental connection with her. His nephew K.D. also takes Gigi as his lover just for the sex and denies any emotional ties that may exist. Seneca, Pallas, and Mavis have been the victims of different forms of sexual abuse. Thus, the novel clearly depicts how male parasitism operates. The reality of the Convent women, and their connection, or disconnection, to the *Out There* and *Ruby*, results of the direct impositions of men. As Frye points out, "the ministrations of women, be they willing or unwilling, free or paid for, are what restore in men the strength, will and confidence to go on with what they call living" (4). The way in which the men of *Ruby* return to their "dignified," so called "normal life" after the killing of the Convent women, as if nothing had happened, restored and willing to go on, exemplifies the extreme cruelty of a patriarchal "sadosociety." Clearly, both Morrison and Frye depict male parasitism as one of the biggest evils of patriarchal society.

I consider that Frye's analysis sheds light on other aspects of female separatism that associate with the Convent women.⁹³ She asserts that "women with newly raised

⁹³ Frye points out that "all-woman groups, meetings, projects seem to be great things for causing controversy and confrontation. Many women are offended by them; many are afraid to be the one to announce the exclusion of men; it is seen as a device whose use needs much elaborate justification. I think this is because

consciousness tend to leave marriages and families, either completely through divorce, or partially through unavailability of their cooking, housekeeping and sexual services” (6). All Convent women have completed this step of separation. They possess a “newly raised consciousness” and opt for a change in the direction of their lives, either by leaving their “masters” or denying them direct access to their Self. The patriarchal men of the novel show the typical response to female separation. As Frye explains, “the men affected by these separations generally react with defensive hostility, anxiety and guilt-tripping, not to mention descents into illogical argument which match and exceed their own most fanciful images of female irrationality” (6). When the patriarchs of Ruby discover that a group of women live by themselves without male support or supervision, they go insane. The arguments they use to justify their “fears” prove, as Frye points out, irrational: “my claim is that they are very afraid because they depend very heavily upon the goods they receive from women, and these separations cut them off from those goods” (6). When planning the justifications for the abuse they plan to perpetrate on the Convent women, the men of Ruby fantasize to the verge of irrationality:

Remember how they scandalized the wedding? What you say? Uh huh and it was the very same day I caught them kissing on each other in the back of that ratty Cadillac. Very same day, and if that wasn't enough to please the devil, two more fighting over them in the dirt. Right down in it. Lord, I hate a nasty woman. Sweetie said they tried their best to poison her. I heard that too . . . she said she heard noises coming from somewhere in that house. Sounded to her like little babies crying. What in God's name little babies doing out there? You asking me? Whatever it is, it ain't natural.

conscious and deliberate exclusion of men by women, from anything, is blatant insubordination, and generates in women fear of punishment and reprisal (fear which is often well-justified)” (6). In *Paradise*, the Convent women, consciously or unconsciously, create this atmosphere of controversy associated to all-women groups, which has fatal consequences for them.

Well, it used to house little girls, didn't it? Yeah, I remember. Said it was a school. School for what? What they teaching out there? Sargeant, didn't you find marijuana growing in the middle of your alfalfa? Yep. Sure did. That don't surprise me. All I know is they beat Arnette up some when she went out there to confront them about the lies they told her. She thinks they kept her baby and told her it was stillborn. My wife says they did an abortion on her. You believe it? I don't know, but I wouldn't put it past them. What I do know is how messed up her face was. Aw, man. We can't have this.

(275)

The reasons that the men of Ruby have to back up their assault lack any substance or credibility. They experiment the irrational fear of empowered women. In the end, they unveil their real concern: "you think they got powers? I *know* they got powers" (275). Everything sums up in an issue of politics. As Frye declares, "the slave is unconditionally accessible to the master. Total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access" (6). Thus, the moment in which the women of the Convent deny access to their masters, these women become empowered, and consequently, elicit the fury of the men of Ruby who suffer, at the same time, the helplessness of impotence to control them.

Therefore, it is my interpretation that men seek to impose vertical power and the women's rejection of that imposition creates controversy. Here, Morrison plays with a pun in the word "power." Whereas, one of the men tries to figure out if the Convent women engage in Supernatural practices, the other one asserts that these women indeed have power, as they have claimed their independence from men. The men of Ruby do not need further excuses to conduct the coward assault of a group of defenseless women. Frye explains how separatism leads to empowerment. As she declares, "When our feminist acts or practices have an aspect of separation, we are assuming power by controlling access and

simultaneously by undertaking definition. The slave who excludes the master from her hut thereby declares herself *not a slave*. And *definition is another face of power*" (7). In a patriarchal society that condemns the independence of women, the Convent women rebel against oppression when they decide to create a refuge of their own, free of the impositions and manipulations of men. Frye concludes that "when women separate (withdraw, break out, regroup, transcend, shove aside, step outside, migrate, say *no*), we are simultaneously controlling access and defining. We are doubly insubordinate, since neither of this is permitted. And access and definition are fundamental ingredients in the alchemy of power, so we are doubly, and radically, insubordinate" (9). The "sadosociety" of Ruby does not allow insubordination, let alone the double insubordination of the Convent women. Hence, the fathers of Ruby react with violence to the denial of these women to grant free access to their "hut" or sanctuary. They will not tolerate challenges to their power structure.

Moreover, I consider that the issue of "accessibility" to women relates to other important elements present in the novel such as Race and objectification. Reducing women to the category of objects -something that men can use and re-use, and have free access to- sustains the vertical imposition of power. To make matters worse, white patriarchal ruling groups have objectified black women consistently to the extent that they have reduced them to a commodity. The shocking history of the objectification of the black female body has a long trajectory of intersecting oppressions that have their origin in binary thinking. As Hill Collins explains, "African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of . . . binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination" (71). When patriarchal society presents black women as objects, it reaffirms the idea that men have direct access to their bodies. Thus, women of color suffer double objectification and double subordination. The Convent women, women of color most of them, aware of their reality, have found the ideal weapon to fight oppression: separatism. They know that to fight

the race, class, and gender impositions that they face in the Out There and in Ruby, they must find a sanctuary, a place where they can heal their wounds and re-define themselves.

In my opinion, separatism functions as the key that opens the door to a new way of living for them. One important aspect to consider is that the Convent women may come and go as they want. In this sense, they are free. They can enjoy a life separated from the abuse and impositions of the white hegemonic group, or the race-centered all black community of Ruby. In the Convent, a liminal space, race, gender, and class definitions lose all their meaning and connotations. The women acquire new values and a new spiritual force that allows them to grow and evolve. Without separatism, this process would not have been possible. The atmosphere of a “blessed malelessness” that Pallas perceives when she arrives in the Convent contrasts with the awful experiences these women have had. They find in the shelter of the Convent, a room of their own, a space where they have access to their own physical and spiritual beings, and at the same time, they deny access to the parasitical men that steal their energy. Daly explains in *Pure Lust* that “anything that directs a woman’s thoughts to the forbidden object, her Self, anything that brings her into intellectual contact with her Spiritual Touching Powers, is just as much prohibited as direct physical contact with another female self. This extension is inherent in the Total Taboo against Women-Touching Women” (251). This reflection describes perfectly the position of the Convent women who, by denying access to the energy-draining males, discover their capacity to get in contact with their “Self.” Also, it accounts for the adverse reaction of phallocracy to empowered women, women of color who have the capacity not only to fight oppression but also to get in touch with their inner energy and, most important, to create significant and strong ties with other women. They resist the patriarchal taboo of “Women-Touching Women.”

In conclusion, the Convent becomes a bastion where women fight oppression at different levels. The Convent women succeed at many ventures, one of which relates to re-

claiming the female body, making it their own, and separating from male impositions. They find their place and they have the capacity to voice their experiences. Unlike in the *Out There* or in *Ruby*, these women find in *The Convent* a place for empowerment. The former embezzler's house becomes a place where women have a privileged position. Morrison contradicts the traditional patriarchal view of women existing in the margins of male-centered society and gives a glimpse of what a female-centered community would look like, full of love, mutual understanding, and compassion. The Convent women create a space of their own and, in this process, they re-create and re-define themselves. They build a room of their own that allows them to learn from their sisters experiences and to grow spiritually. They are re-born while they live in this house. They go through an authentic life changing experience. Once they enter the Convent, these women will never be the same. The separation from patriarchal influence remains the key aspect for this transformation. By denying access to their physical and spiritual body, these women send a clear message of empowerment. They act with complete and absolute autonomy revealing against parasitic male dependence. They reclaim the life, the identity, and the actual physical body that has been taken away from them. Unfortunately, the end of the novel reveals the cruel intentions of patriarchal regimes. The "sadosociety" cannot allow the freedom of women. The men of *Ruby* react in the outmost expression of parasitic behavior and repression by killing the Convent women, which, in fact, illustrates the common reaction of a necrophilic and phallogocentric structure of power. However, even when they perish in their battle, Morrison transforms these warrior women in heroines, not victims of patriarchy, as they succeed in their quest for self-assertion and freedom.

THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE CONVENT

It is my thesis that the Supernatural, as a recurrent theme in Morrison's literary production, has a prominent role in association with the Convent. As a matter of fact, the aspect of magic and mysticism, which characterizes Morrison's writing becomes a tangible aspect in this special place. Literary critics have argued strongly about the presence and influence of the Supernatural in Morrison's novels. Many of them consider that her narrative belongs with literary trends like magic realism, which emphasizes the presence of magic work in literature. The Supernatural aura that surrounds the Convent exemplifies this type of literary work. However, Morrison shows reluctance to categorize her production. The author has declared that she dreads labels and any "-ism" attached to her work. Yet, later on in her career, as she discovers the relevance of the Supernatural in magic realism, she acknowledges that her narrative style shares diverse aspects with this literary movement. Thus, Morrison's work does not accept simplistic definitions and does not fit into a single literary trend but, on the contrary, finds resonance in other literary expressions that, like her own, challenge the literary cannon.⁹⁴

I think that the Convent remains, by excellence, the realm of the Supernatural. Neither the *Out There* nor *Ruby* show such a display of magic elements as the Convent. In fact, the Convent and the Supernatural have a special connection. They sustain each other. The Convent acts as a character in the novel. In this sense, The Convent embodies the Supernatural and the Supernatural defines the Convent, to the point that it is hard to know where one begins, and where the other one ends. Both feed on each other. Both influence each other. Moreover, the Convent as a place of transformation has a powerful influence on

⁹⁴ Although Morrison's novels belong to the literary cannon at the present moment, she made her way through canonic literature by subverting mainstream literary conventions. She has achieved a prominent place among American authors by producing a literary work that challenges and questions the establishment. In this sense, the presence of the Supernatural serves as yet one more aspect that sets her writing apart.

the women who inhabit it. The strong presence of the Supernatural in Morrison's works originates in black literary tradition. As Morrison points out, black literature has different elements that set it apart from mainstream literature, and the presence of "magic work" with a sense of the Supernatural remains one of the most important features of black literary expression. The powerful influence of the Supernatural in Morrison's literary production connects her work to black literary tradition. As Danille Taylor-Guthrie explains:

Morrison has sought to delineate the defining qualities of writing by African Americans . . . there are certain characteristics that she has identified as authenticating a piece as "black": a participatory quality between a book and reader; an aural quality in the writing; an open-endedness in the finale that is agitating; an acceptance of and keen ability to detect differences versus a thrust toward homogenization; *acknowledgement of a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery, and the body*; a functional as well as aesthetic quality; an obligation to bear witness; service as a conduit for the "ancestor"; uses of humor that are frequently ironic; an achieved clarity or epiphany and thus a tendency to be prophetic; and an ability to take the "tribe" via art through the pain of a historical experience that has been haunted by race to a healing zone. (X emphasis added)

Thus, from my point of view Morrison uses her literary work and in *Paradise* specifically to confront the established order. As she points out, literature must not only have an aesthetic quality but also must serve a purpose. *Paradise* embodies several of the characteristics that Morrison enounces, of which the touch with magic, mystery, and a broader cosmology, remain a central feature of the novel. Therefore, the Supernatural as an expression of a "broader cosmology" plays a transcendental role in the narrative because it enables other aspects of black literature like the participatory quality between the book and the reader, the open-endedness, and the achieved epiphany and tendency to be prophetic. Morrison utilizes

the Supernatural not only as a mere literary resource but as a political statement that conveys an ideology. In her essay “What would be on the other side? Spectrality and Spirit Work in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” Melanie R. Anderson points out: “Morrison’s endeavor to provide a space for the African American voice and experience within American history dovetails neatly with one of Kathleen Brogan’s tenets of twentieth-century women’s ghost stories: ‘in contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as an alternative –or challenge to ‘official’ dominant history’” (308). In the novel, the Supernatural functions as a catalyst that manifests resistance against mainstream literature, endorses black literary tradition, and empowers femininity.

I consider that the multiple manifestations of the Supernatural that occur in the Convent provide an aura of mystery and mysticism. The intense presence of magic work results almost palpable.⁹⁵ The strong sense of “out of this world” permeates the narrative and its manifold forms captivate the imagination. The “presence/absence” element becomes a manifestation of the Supernatural. When the authorities evict the embezzler of his house, it becomes a school for native girls. Therefore, a strong physical presence of children prevails in the Convent since the beginning. However, in spite of their physical presence, the Arapaho girls have a ghostly nature. They exist in the shadows as specters of their former selves. The nuns force them to renounce to their previous experiences until they fade away. Yet, when Mavis arrives to the Convent she “feels” the presence of children in the house: “Left alone Mavis expected the big kitchen to lose its comfort. It didn’t. In fact, she had an outer-rim

⁹⁵ Anderson points out that “in a 1983 interview, Toni Morrison told Nellie McKay: ‘I am very happy to hear that my books haunt. This is what I work very hard for, and for me it is an achievement when they haunt readers as you say’ (146). In her seventh novel, *Paradise*, Morrison returns to this thematic thread of haunting as she depicts the supernatural events occurring in and around an all-black town in Oklahoma and a neighboring former convent school for Native American girls” (307). Both McKay and Anderson comment on the importance of the Supernatural in Morrison’s narrative as the author herself declares that one of her main objectives is to convey that sense of mystery that “haunts” her narrative and makes the reader participate in the reading experience, which also coincides with the purpose of black literature that Morrison refers to.

sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children –laughing? Singing? –two of them were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it” (41). Mavis encounters her dead children in the Convent, and she feels that the haunting oppression of her loss begins to go away. Actually, Mother acknowledges the ghostly presence of the disappeared children when she talks to Mavis in her deathbed:

‘Are you all right now? Is your automobile working?’

‘Yes, m’am. It’s fine. Thank you.’

‘Where are your children?’

Mavis could not speak.

‘There used to be a lot of children here. This was a school once. A beautiful school. For Indian girls.’

Mavis looked at Connie, but when she returned her glance, Mavis quickly lowered her eyes.

The woman in the bed laughed lightly. (47)

Mother, who “sees everything in the universe” (47) senses Mavis’s pain and helps her reunite with her lost children. By acknowledging their “presence” in the house, she eases Mavis’s unsurmountable anguish. This spiritual moment marks the beginning of the healing process for Mavis as she overcomes the painful sense of loss and can begin an effective mourning process. The absence/presence of her children in the convent speeds up her recovery. She hears that the twins are happy. They laugh and sing, which helps her cope with her overwhelming sentiment of guilt.

Rituals define another significant manifestation of magic work in the novel. At different moments, the convent women engage in rituals that accompany their spiritual awakening. In my opinion, these rituals have an impact on the self-discovering process of these women, as they allow them to break free from their previous reality and embrace a new way of thinking and a new spirituality. The Convent rituals contrast with patriarchal-established religion. They embody a more liberating and fulfilling spiritual practice. Unlike the religious practices of patriarchal origin that tend to trap, the rituals of the Convent women have a renewing and healing quality. They help in the process of the construction of the Self. As Anderson points out in "What would be on the other side?" "Abused and outcast women are silent, social ghosts haunting the margins of society, but within their marginality, these characters can discover a power that is healing but not socially accepted" (308). The rituals that these women carry out in the Convent act as a mixed blessing because on one hand those rituals empower them but, on the other hand, the same rituals trigger the resentment of patriarchal society. Anderson asserts that "the women are outside of the purview and acceptance of society, but they also have achieved a power that threatens the town. The rituals that the women use to transcend their silenced identities appear to be 'witchcraft' to the judgmental townspeople. The men justify the killing at first with reasoning that the women are witches, since they don't need men and they don't need God" (308). Patriarchal society fails to understand the spiritual awakening of the Convent women through rituals. As a matter of fact, they quickly judge and condemn these women and make them pay a high price for their transgression.⁹⁶ Anderson explains that the Convent women "are blamed for the gradual

⁹⁶ In *Pure Lust* Daly gives valuable insight to the connotation of the word *witch*. She explains that "wild, weird women who sense and act in harmony with Elemental forces are commonly called witches" (184). As the Convent women become more and more aware of the Elemental forces within them, they establish connections with the Supernatural and men fear those connections. According to Daly, "the purpose of the witch craze was to destroy women's connections with the Elements and with [women's] ontological, Elemental powers. Since they themselves were incapable of being truly Mantic, of soothsaying/divining, the torturers lusted then, as they do now, to blunt and debase these powers" (185). Thus, the men of Ruby act accordingly because, as Daly

decline of the town and its people. The women achieve, however, a position of peace and integration that the rigid town of Ruby cannot understand. Additionally, it is only by working through their traumatic pasts within the confines of the spectral Convent that the women can regain a sense of personal identity” (308). Even if the spiritual awakening of these women has a high price, they succeed in achieving a practical connection with the Supernatural through rituals.

In this sense, I consider that ritual cooking has a special significance in the Convent. The Convent women magnify all the natural associations that come along with cooking and feeding people. Cooking acquires a superlative meaning and becomes a sensual experience. The Convent women connect cooking and feeding to nourishing and healing. Thus, cooking and feeding transcend the natural purpose of survival and transforms into a nurturing ritual for recovery and convalescence. The Convent women often treat the broken people who seek refuge at this place to a hearty meal. The Convent food provides superior spiritual force for the weak. Different examples illustrate how food images and ritual cooking provide well-being and comfort for those in need of solace. The Convent operates as a self-sufficient community. The women living there plant and harvest most of the produce they need to survive. The natural ingredients of their food add to that special healing quality. Those special ingredients possess high value. For instance, the legendary red-hot chili peppers that grow exclusively in the Convent mesmerize those who try them. The people of Ruby relish those peppers and they usually travel the path to the Convent to buy them from Connie. The peppers are spicy and sensual. They awaken even the most dormant passions. Actually, Dovey Morgan gets chili peppers for Steward, as he craves that spice that awakens his senses:

points out, “the male’s fear of the spiritual strength of these ‘bad’ angels who refuse subjugation is connected with his own sense of impotence” (189).

Not much point to garden peas. May as well use canned. Not a taste bud in Steward's mouth could tell the difference. Blue Boy packed in his cheek for twenty years first narrowed his taste to a craving for spices, then reduced it altogether to a single demand for hot pepper . . . it didn't matter whether her peas were garden fresh or canned. Convent peppers, hot as hell fire, did all the cooking for her. (81-82)

The associations of the Convent peppers may as well serve as a projection of untamed female sexuality. The red color of life, the intense flavor of lust, and the piquant taste that elicits passions remind us of the Convent women. Perhaps Steward enjoys the peppers so much because they bring back the affair with Connie to his memory. Like the Convent women, the peppers have a "devilish" charm that makes them "hot as hell fire." They are the spice of life.

Besides sensuality, it is my interpretation that food has also a nourishing and healing quality. For instance, when Gigi arrives at the Convent, Connie offers her a banquet with the food of Mother's funeral. In this instance, food acquires that special ritual connotation of celebrating death in life and life in death. Gigi starts her recovery with this hearty meal. Only after this turning point, will she be able to start her journey. Food provides her not only with physical strength but also with spiritual force to begin anew. The way in which Gigi craves nurturing food speaks also of her hunger for love and affection:

[She] noticed for the first time that the place was loaded with food, mostly untouched. Several cakes, more pies, potato salad, a ham, a large dish of baked beans. There must be nuns, she thought. Or maybe all this was from the funeral. Suddenly like a legitimate mourner she was ravenous. Gigi was gobbling, piling more food onto her plate even while she scooped from it, when the woman entered without her straw hat or her glasses and lay down on the stone-cold floor. Her mouth was full of baked beans and chocolate cake so Gigi could not speak. (69-70)

Gigi's sensual craving for food indicates more than physical hunger.⁹⁷ She suffers from a spiritual starvation that the outside world has failed to calm down. From a funeral banquet, a new life begins because this feast represents an initiation moment for Gigi. After this experience, her life will never be the same. She decides to stay at the Convent and help Connie through her mourning. From this moment on, Gigi stops being a self-centered, pleasure-seeking, hedonist, as seen in her food spree, to become a caring and supporting person with the capacity to connect with other people and to give and receive love.

According to my reading of the novel, food ingredients and food preparations also play an important role in the ritual Convent life. Not only the magic peppers that have the capacity to restore a taste for passions, but also all other kinds of natural ingredients like corn, pecans, and different garden produce grow abundantly in the Convent. As Connie points out, planting and selling produce constitutes the main income for them to survive. People of Ruby, especially women, come to the Convent to trade with them frequently. As Connie tells Mavis when her car broke: "Wait a while. Today maybe, tomorrow maybe. People be out to buy.' 'Buy? Buy what?' 'Garden things. Things I cook up. Things they don't want to grow themselves.' . . . 'suppose nobody comes?' 'Always come. Somebody always come. Every day. This morning already I sold forty-eight ears of corn and a whole pound of peppers" (40). The idyllic connection to Mother Earth and Nature has a paradisiac connotation. The Convent women live surrounded by the force of Nature that provides for them, which has the bucolic charm of ancient communities:

⁹⁷ Other Morrisonian characters show a similar craving for food. For instance, Beloved develops an unnatural craving for sweet food after her return from the dead. Like Gigi, Beloved craves not only food, but also love and affection, to the point that she starts "consuming" her own mother. In this womb metaphor, Morrison points out the need for care, affection, and consolation. Like Gigi, Beloved has returned from a place where they were "dead," disappeared, or invisible to the material world or patriarchal society. Besides, this craving for food might have also a biblical allusion. After Jesus resurrects Jairus' daughter, he commands the servants to feed her immediately. This need to nourish the weak to return them to life, either in a physical or spiritual way, resembles Connie's urge to help out those in need that come to the Convent.

Blowing into her cup, Mavis went to the kitchen door and looked out. When she first arrived she was so happy to find someone at home she had not looked closely at the garden. Now, behind the red chair, she saw flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables. In some places stack plants grew in a circle, not a line, in high mounds of soil. Chickens clucked out of sight. A part of the garden she originally thought gone to weed became, on closer inspection, a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond.

(40-41)

In my opinion, the bucolic scenery adds to the magic of the Convent and gives it a paradise-like quality of wilderness, abundance, and exuberance. This place functions as the garden of life with the metaphysical connections to enhance the life-changing experience of the Convent women. Untampered by men, both in a physical and spiritual way, this savage garden provides the ideal space for the liberating quest of these women.

It is my interpretation that one of the most decisive mystical moments in the novel connected with the Supernatural relates to Connie's descent to the cellar. After Mother's death, Connie retires to the cellar to decipher the events that have taken place lately. She feels emotionally drained and physically exhausted, so she takes some time on her own to recharge her energy:

In the good clean darkness of the cellar, Consolata woke to the wrenching disappointment of not having died the night before. Each morning, her hopes dashed, she lay in a cot belowground, repelled by her sluglike existence, each hour of which she managed to get through by sipping from black bottles with handsome names. Each night she sank into sleep determined it would be the final one, and hoped that the great hovering foot would descend and crush her like a garden pest . . . already in a space tight enough for a coffin, already devoted to the dark, long removed from

appetites, craving only oblivion, she struggled to understand the delay. “What for?” she asked. (221)

Yet, this period of isolation will have an outstanding impact on the spiritual growth, not only of Connie herself but also on the lives of the other Convent women. During this time, Connie metaphorically returns to the womb to recover her essence, and replenish her energies. She will emerge as a different person, re-born, charged with renewed strength and power to become the true spiritual leader of her community. The descent to the cellar marks a transformational moment for Connie, and by extension, for the other women. She experiences the dark night of the soul.⁹⁸ As Shirley A. Stave explains, “once Connie does grant Mother Superior’s wish for death, she undergoes a long mourning, a dark night of the soul, during which she withdraws from life, remaining in a drunken stupor in the basement of the Convent while the assorted outcast women who have taken up residence there provide for her basic needs” (221). This mystic time of transformation has extraordinary implications for the women of the Convent because it marks the beginning of their spiritual growth. Connie’s dark night of the soul represents a turning point that changes her life. This experience serves, indeed, as a metaphor of female empowerment. After this moment, Connie realizes that she has what it takes to guide these women through their path of spiritual freedom.

⁹⁸The dark night of the soul is a term that originates from the poem of St. John of the Cross, which refers to a period of great trial before Divine illumination. In modern times, this concept has come to signify “a period of spiritual desolation suffered by a mystic in which all sense of consolation is removed” (Oxford Dictionary). In literature, the term usually signals the dark phase of trials that precedes the metaphysical transformation of a character from which s/he will emerge as an illuminated being. Modern culture frequently interprets the dark night of the soul as an existential crisis or a period of depression. Carol Christ explains that “For the mystic, the dark night of the soul is a period of purgation in which all ties with the conventional world are broken in anticipation of revelation and union with a higher source of being and value” (quoted in Stave 221). Christ’s analysis describes Connie’s transcendental journey to a higher dimension that begins in the darkness of the cellar of the Convent.

However, not only Connie but also all the other Convent women have gone through difficult moments in their lives. All of them have experienced the dark night of the soul, in one way or another, and that unites them. They have that in common. As a matter of fact, they want to share their dark moments with Connie: "What she knew of them she had mostly forgotten, and it seemed less and less important to remember any of it, because the timber of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and, what Sister Roberta warned the Indian girls against, drift. The three d's that paved the road to perdition, and the greatest of these was drift" (221-222). The dark phase of these women coincides with their life in patriarchal society. That is the time when they suffer the most disorder, deception, and drift. Nevertheless, after their stay at the Convent, they become stronger and wiser because this place functions as a site for renewal and female empowerment. Connie's dark night of the soul has a serious impact in the novel because this is the moment when she becomes a true leader. From my point of view, this dark phase leads to her self-discovery. It leads to the realization of the power she has within, and to the finding of her capability to help the other Convent women. Connie's dark night of the soul marks a milestone, a turning point in the novel. From this moment on, her life and the life of those around her will change forever. This dark passage was necessary for her to find out how much she can do for her Self and for others. In a metaphysical way, the dark night of the soul usually results in an epiphany, which proves to be true for Connie and for the rest of her lot.

At this specific moment, Connie can move on and proves ready for the next phase: the Call. Thus, another important Supernatural moment follows. After the endless despair she suffers in the cellar, Connie receives a "visitation" of a stranger. This person has eerie resemblances with Connie. The same eyes, the same hair color, and they speak the same native language:

“Who is that?” she asked.

“Come on, girl. You know me” ...

“No,” she said. “Can’t say I do.

Well, not important. I’m travelling here.” There were ten yards between them, but his words licked her cheek.

“You from town?”

“Uh uh. I’m far country”...

She felt light, weightless, as though she could move, if she wanted to, without standing up . . . suddenly he was next to her without having moved –smiling like he was having (or expecting) such a good time . . . not six inches from her face, he removed his tall hat. Fresh, tea-colored hair came tumbling down . . . he took off his glasses then and winked, a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes, she saw, were as round and green as new apples. (251-252)

It is my interpretation that during this symbolic encounter, Connie receives the Call. As Sharon Jessee points out in her essay “The Female Revealer” (quoted in Stave), “Connie is Called, in the manner of Gnostic narrative, by a mysterious traveling man, after whose visit she radically changes her life and sets the Convent women on a course of spiritual cleansing” (151). Connie’s transformational journey reaches apotheosis at this point because she has mastered her dark side. She also proves ready to become a guide and a reference for the other Convent women. Jessee explains that “possessing an ability to ‘step in,’ as Lone terms the power of a healer, Consolata herself becomes the ‘Caller of the Call’ to the other women” (151). As a matter of fact, this Supernatural visitation transforms Connie into the spiritual leader of the Convent. The dark night of the soul prepares her for this turning point in her life.

After this moment, Connie discovers the inner force that has been inside her all this time. One can argue that this mysterious man complements, or rather completes Connie. She re-discovers her True self after facing her facing the visit of alter ego. Once again, I consider that Morrison places one of her characters in a house of mirrors. Like in other instances in Morrison's fiction, Connie has a twin. Confronting this "double" helps her to realize her full potential. Significantly, Connie's twin has a "Divine" quality. He does not belong to this world, which adds to the Supernatural atmosphere of the Convent. In his essay, Page confirms the divinity of this visitor and compares him to Dovey's mysterious friend: "the other two male figures suggest the immanent presence of God on earth –that is, of Christ –as they speak, listen, and empathize on intimate terms with Dovey and Connie. The presence of this series of semi-divine men is reinforced by similarly ambiguous presences of other figures who blur the usual boundary between human and divine" (646). As Connie receives the Call, she sets out on a spiritual quest that defies traditional conventions. Page argues that "ordinary methods of knowing . . . will not suffice, but instead deeper, more transcendent, more holistic kinds of knowing and interpreting, as modeled by Lone and Consolata, are required" (646). When Connie meets her other Self, she knows that she has the strength to carry on. Thus, this encounter signals the beginning of the most productive and significant part of her existence.

This mystery man reveals to Connie the power within. Melanie R. Anderson gives important insight about the special nature of Consolata:

If Beloved is interpreted as a child spirit attempting to deal with the trauma of slavery, then Consolata, a character in *Paradise*, becomes a mature spirit-guide with one foot in the real and another in the beyond, memorializing and healing the scars of slavery, Reconstruction, and the civil rights movement through her interaction with the four women in the Convent and the townspeople of Ruby. (309)

Anderson acknowledges the role of Connie as spirit-guide for the other Convent women and the supernatural source of her powers, which complements the Convent as a healing space:

Consolata's liminal identity becomes clear through her hybridity, her second sight and supernatural powers, and her close communication with spirits. Her living space, the Convent, is a spectral space where the resident women can turn their ghosted and powerless social positions into positions of healing and growth, dealing with their personal hauntings individually and as a group, and finally transitioning into a liminal space of transcendence between life and death, the real and the unreal. This transition, much like *Beloved's* questionable disappearance, does not end, but rather more powerfully continues the "spirit work" begun in the Convent. (309)

Thus, after the dark night of the soul and her eventual transformation, Connie emerges from the cellar as the guiding light for her pupils. She reveals to them her renewed Self and prepares them for the next phase in their spiritual healing process.

As Consolata emerges as spiritual leader of the Convent women, a new chapter in their lives begins, and perhaps one of the most significant moments of their *herstory*. Again, ritual and spirit work, mark this special transition from their former selves to new, Self-centered, spiritual beings. The transformation begins with a ritual dinner where Connie announces to the rest of the women the beginning of a new era:

The table is set; the food placed. Consolata takes off her apron. With the aristocratic gaze of the blind she sweeps the women's faces and says, "I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for." The women look at each other and then at a person they do not recognize . . . "If you have a place," she continued, "that you should be in and someone who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and

follow me. Someone could want to meet you.” No one left . . . in no time at all they came to see that they could not leave the one place they were free to leave. (262)

Consolata presents herself as the spiritual leader of the group with her renewed strength and rejuvenated power. She offers what the outside world has failed to provide: love, caring, understanding, family, a community. The women understand that they belong to this place - the Convent, and that under Connie’s guidance, they can achieve the spiritual awakening they have been striving for, and “gradually they lost the days” (262) as the Convent becomes their true spiritual home.

Melanie R. Anderson offers important insight on the issue of female empowerment through spirit work, which illustrates the revival that the Convent women go through. Anderson highlights Connie’s gift of “in sight,” or the ability to “step in.” She explains that “even when the town’s midwife, Lone, teaches Connie how to use her power of second sight to heal the dead, she views her “in sight” as evil and opposed to her Catholic faith” (310). However, when [Connie] comes to the realization that “in sight’ is something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it she can mentor the castaway women living with her in the Convent” (310). Anderson points out that “because of her mind-reading ability, Connie can identify the specific trauma of another individual, but it is hard for her to know where her mind ends and the other’s begins” (310). Anderson also acknowledges that during the time Connie spends in the cellar, “she enters a ‘void’ and a period of ‘ghostedness’ that she must pass through in order to heal herself and others constructively” (310). Anderson explains that after the visit of the mysterious man, “[Connie] changes, becoming more connected to the spirit world” (310). The evolution of Connie as a spiritual leader reinforces the idea of female empowerment, as she ends being Connie to become Consolata Sosa. As Anderson points out, “Connie has emerged from an erasure of identity, to an awareness of purpose” (310), and most importantly, “she begins instructing the women in spirit work, since she inhabits a

literal 'in-between' space... she has passed through the void, changing her silenced and rejected identity into one of power, and she has reclaimed her original persona. She has transformed from a ghosted woman into a spectral guide" (311). In like manner, the other Convent women will follow a similar pattern of female empowerment. The transformation of Connie fosters the spiritual rebirth of the other women.

I consider that the spiritual awakening of the Convent women has a ritual and magic beginning. Consolata directs a special ceremony where the Convent women draw templates of themselves. This specific moment marks their spiritual rebirth. This is, perhaps, the most significant ritual in the novel as it transforms the "ghosted" women into agents of power, the power within. Through this ritual, the Convent women are able to get free of their traumatic past, and re-center themselves, focusing in the present. They no longer live a dispersed life, but rather become in control of their own fate. The ritual allows them to re-discover themselves:

In the beginning the most important was the template. First they had to scrub the cellar floor until its stones were as clean as rocks on a shore. Then they ringed the place with candles. Consolata told each to undress and lie down. In flattering light under Consolata's soft vision they did as they were told. How should we lie? However you feel . . . when each found the position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body's silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight. (263)

The baring of the body implies the baring of the soul. Under Consolata's expert sight, the women face their innermost fears and deceptions. As Anderson points out:

Each of the women is running from a traumatic memory of violence or betrayal, or both. When they attempt to communicate with the outside world, they are ignored or told to leave, which is what occurs when the four attend Arnette's wedding reception. They remain in the Convent because they have nowhere to go and no one to return to, and they haunt the building, each wrapped in their own painful memories. (314)

It is my interpretation that when they acknowledge their pain, they acquire the capacity to heal and move on, which is exactly what the ritual does for them. As the women outline their fear and deception on the cellar's floor, which stands for a womb-like space, they get ready to be reborn to a new physical and spiritual life. This ritual helps the Convent women to appropriate and inhabit their own body. It helps them to move past trauma, and it takes them to a new spiritual dimension. They leave behind their former selves on the cellar's floor. The fact that these women reclaim their physical and spiritual selves indicates growth and healing. Patriarchal society has systematically denied their presence and abused them in different ways. Now they decide differently. They choose to be their own women. The re-appropriation of the physical body and reclaiming a space in society empowers the Convent women.

In *Women who Run with the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés explains that "in the instinctive psyche, the body is considered a sensor, an informational network, a messenger with myriad communication systems . . . in the imaginal world, the body is a powerful vehicle, a spirit who lives with us, a prayer of life in its own right" (214). Therefore, from my perspective the Convent women reclaim power in patriarchal society by reclaiming their own bodies. Estés suggests that "when women are relegated to moods, mannerisms, and contours that conform to a single ideal of beauty and behavior, they are captured in body and soul, and are no longer free" (213). Consolata, like the other Convent girls, has suffered systematical erasure by patriarchal conventions that reduce them to "moods, mannerisms, and contours," trapping them in a life that no longer belongs to them. Patriarchy prisons them

in body and soul. Thus, I consider that emancipating the female body conforms the outmost form of rebellion against patriarchal society. The ritual sketching of the women's bodies has a liberating effect. When the Convent women put their own bodies in perspective, they recover their Self because, as Estés points out, "like the Rosetta stone, for those who know how to read it, the body is a living record of life given, life taken, life hoped for, life healed. It is valued for its articulate ability to register immediate reaction, to feel profoundly, to sense ahead" (214). The Convent women, under Connie's supervision, learn to "read" their own bodies and experience a true connection of body and soul.

In like manner, Philip Page explains the healing process, both physical and spiritual, of the Convent women. He asserts that "Consolata also extends the novel's exploration of interpretation when she helps heal the four Convent women through her use of 'templates' and 'loud dreaming.' The templates –the outlines of themselves... become self-representations through which they are able to gain much-needed perspective on themselves and each other" (642). The templates ritual has a very specific purpose, which is to refocus the energy on the physical and psychological Self of these women. In this way, I think that Morrison denounces the systematic appropriation of black female bodies and psyches on the part of patriarchy. Mainstream society has "ghosted" and alienated these women. Their families and communities have shunned them. Through the creation of "templates" Morrison gives them the opportunity to re-create their own Selves, and at the same time, to subvert patriarchal rule by re-possessing their own bodies. As Page explains, "getting outside their hitherto closed, self-destructive egos enables them to see themselves, to interpret themselves, and thereby to begin to cure themselves. The templates are analogous to fictional selves, doubling the self and thereby allowing each woman 'to see in' to herself, to interpret herself, and thus to find a viable identity" (642). Although patriarchal society has

crushed these women, through the “templates” they can reconstruct their identity beginning, in this way, to heal and grow.

Like Page, Anderson considers that Consolata epitomizes the awakening of the other women. She succeeds in taking them to a new spiritual level seconded by the Supernatural energy of the Convent:

Connie has emerged from an erasure of identity to an awareness of purpose . . . she begins instructing the women in spirit work, since she inhabits a literal “in-between” space: “a melding of opposites –that is, of young/old and male/female –into a single identity” (Bouson 209). She has passed through the void, changing her silenced and rejected identity into one of power, and she has reclaimed her original persona. She has transformed from a ghosted woman into a spectral guide. Consolata and her place of residence are situated within the border between life and death and past and present. (311)

From my point of view, Morrison makes it clear that this spiritual evolution can only take place in the Convent. Neither the Out There nor Ruby offer the conditions for these women to grow and heal. On the contrary, those patriarchal sites hamper their evolution and threaten their spiritual freedom. The Wild in these women instinctively chooses the Convent, Consolata, and the other women to resume their spiritual power. Moreover, they cease to exist in the margins of patriarchal society to become agents in the creation of their own herstory. The templates of the Convent women validate Fry’s theory of female body accessibility. Patriarchy claims direct and unconditional access to female bodies. Yet, through the templates, these radical women outline their reality looking for a change. As Ingrid Daemmrich suggests: “transferring their individual stories of pain to their naked painted images liberates them so that they can embrace peace, unity, and joy in each other’s company” (225). In this way, they disrupt patriarchal domination and access to their body.

Thus, since in the Convent these women can negotiate between boundaries of past/present, real/unreal, material/spiritual, they reclaim, like Consolata, their “real persona” and subvert patriarchal impositions.

I strongly believe that besides appropriation of the female body through templates, “loud dreaming” becomes part of the ritual healing of the Convent women and has a powerful impact on their evolution process. Consolata leads the stage of “loud dreaming,” in which the Convent women are finally capable of *voicing* their experiences:

That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamers tale . . . in loud dreaming monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone or undone by murmurs of love. So, exhausted and enraged, they raise and go to their beds vowing never to submit to that again but knowing full well they will. And they do. (264)

It is my interpretation that both appropriating their bodies through “templates” and voicing their experiences through “loud dreaming” set the Convent women free. When they are able to verbalize their traumatic experiences in the Out There, the Convent women purify their souls. The ritual of “loud dreaming” has a powerful therapeutic effect. Externalizing their past traumas helps them move past them. Again, Morrison reflects on the benefits of storytelling as a way to exorcise past trauma. Whether it refers to collective storytelling to relieve the trauma of a community, like African-Americans, or at a more personal level, like in the case of the Convent women, Morrison endows storytelling with a soothing quality that relieves and liberates. The moment the Convent women are able to speak their truth, they become

empowered because words have power. As Morrison points out, “they understood and began to begin” (265). “Loud dreaming” marks a fresh start for the Convent women.

Therefore, I think that Morrison subverts patriarchy by giving a voice to silenced, marginalized women. Patriarchy routinely disregards these outcast women as pariahs. Thus, they resort to “loud dreaming” as a way to verbalize their experiences, which brings clarity of mind, and eventually, the opportunity to start anew. As the narrator points out, “with Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered. They have to be reminded of the bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (265). The “templates” and “loud dreaming” elicit change. The convent women will never be the same. They transform from ghosted specters to ethereal beings. Page points out that “the other ingredient of the healing process is loud dreaming . . . in loud dreaming they not only unburden themselves of their traumatic pasts, but each one talks, the others enter into her story, in full empathy with her, in intuitive fellowship akin to Lone’s and Connie’s reviving of the dead” (642). Through these rituals, the Convent women are able to revive their former Selves, which have been dormant for a long time: “just as Lone steps into a dying person’s body and soul, so Connie teaches the four women to step into each other’s. Each loses herself in full identification with each other, in acts of total interpretation” (642). In this way, the Convent women rekindle the female Spark that patriarchy has put out. They take the significance of sisterhood to a higher level and experience each other’s pain, suffering and frustration. Page points out that: “as they do so, they heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony. They gain self and community” (642). The rituals of the Convent women take them to that special place where they can enjoy peace, love and harmony. Thus, their version of “Paradise” proves much more effective than the one the people of Ruby or the Out There try to impose on them.

Similarly, Melanie Anderson states that, in these rituals, “each woman reclaims her past and faces it without feeling threatened or paralyzed” (315). She argues that “like Consolata’s previous descent into the cellar/void, the women find strength to overcome their painful pasts in the cellar through loud dreaming episodes” (315). Moreover, Anderson emphasizes on the influence of the Supernatural in Morrison’s narrative:

Although the rituals that Morrison’s female characters complete are supernatural in nature, the women do not view them as out of the ordinary once the healing begins. Power emanates from the interstitial spaces, and the Convent cellar is no exception... the Convent women enter the void of the cellar ghosted, social outcasts and leave as well adjusted individuals. Not only are they not haunted by painful pasts, but “life, real and intense,” shifted down to the cellar. These female characters have entered [the] void and returned with knowledge and meaning, having learned how to integrate within a community while simultaneously facing and accepting their past. (315)

Thus, besides voicing female experience, these rituals serve as an opportunity to explore a non-canonical approach to literature. As Morrison argues, black literature has a special connection with the Supernatural. As the Convent women experience that touch of the Spirit world, the Convent becomes a site for empowerment and transformation.

Therefore, it is my interpretation that the Convent, as a liminal space, offers an opportunity for change and spiritual evolution. The evident progress of the Convent women surprises everyone. A stranger would wonder “why the old woman who answered the knock did not cover her awful eyes with dark glasses; or what on earth the younger ones had done with their hair” (265). The physical transformation also hints spiritual renovation. Connie no longer needs dark shades to cover her eyes, as now she is able to see everything. She has clarity of mind and clarity of purpose. The younger women cut their hair very short as a way of abandoning their former selves and as a sign of a new beginning in their lives. A neighbor

would be more aware of change: “a sense of surfeit; the charged air of the house, its foreign feel and markedly different look in the tenant’s eyes –sociable and connecting when they spoke to you, otherwise they were still and appraising” (266). The women are now Self-centered and they are able to connect with their inner voice and with other people as well. They have developed a sense of community that gives them security. But most important of all, “if a friend came by, her initial alarm at the sight of the young women sight might be muted by their adult manner; how calmly themselves they seemed. And Connie –how straight-backed and handsome she looked. How well that familiar dress became her” (266). I consider that the convent women succeed in their quest for spiritual growth. They achieve balance and inner peace. As Soane Morgan notices: “unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted. Or hunted either, [Soane] might have added, but she would have been wrong” (266). The spiritual work is complete and the women have liberated themselves of their “hauntings.” However, these newly acquired freedom and wisdom elicits the rage of patriarchy and, as Anderson points out, “makes them a danger to the men of Ruby, who despise the women as witches and blame them for all the town’s problems” (315). Yet, what they really fear, as Anderson suggests, is that “the women’s abilities to cross borders and function in spaces of healing identify them to the men as having ‘acquired an illegitimate strength’ (Borgan 25). For the men, the women are still ghosted, ‘throwaway people,’ or at the worst witches, who need to be exterminated” (316). Thus, this hard-earned spiritual freedom and independence of the Convent women will provoke the Convent ride with its fatal consequences.

In conclusion, the Convent functions as a liminal space in the novel because it offers the opportunity for transition, change and creation. The Convent contrasts with the cruelty and chaos of the Out There and the rigid impositions of Ruby since it conveys harmony, spirituality and renovation. People come to this place to heal and grow. Thus, race, gender

and the supernatural acquire different dimensions. First, I think that Morrison proves the futility of the traditional concept of race. The idea of “race purity” and “race division” have no impact for the community of the Convent. Although there is no direct mention to the race of the Convent women, hints and bits of narrative suggest that they come from different racial backgrounds. The Convent, like America itself, remains a mix-raced community. Moreover, the Convent women manage to create an atmosphere that welcomes everyone regardless their skin color. The white supremacy of the Out There and the race purity rule of the 8-rocks in Ruby have no inference in the Convent. These women integrate all members of its community successfully. In this sense, the Convent stands for the true “American dream,” a community where everybody is equal and has the same rights and opportunities. Thus, in the Convent race boundaries become blurry and do not impose limits. Race is fluid, not rigid. Race is circumstantial, not determinant. Consolata serves as the best example. Her Amerindian-European-Black descent challenges the imagination. It is impossible to put her into one race category. Similarly, at least one of the other Convent girls is mix-raced, and the others probably black. Morrison demonstrates with this rich ethnic diversity that strict divisions of race do not work. They are not realistic at all. There is not such a thing as “race purity,” and the communities that abide to the race purity rule will fail.

Second, I consider that Morrison introduces the Convent as a space for female empowerment. Although there is not an explicit rule of “not men allowed,” the Convent remains a sanctuary for women intrinsically because these women are fighting to escape the manifold impositions of patriarchal society. It is only natural that much like the original Convent, the new community remains free of patriarchal influence. These women yearn for that “blessed malelessness” that they enjoy in the Convent. Although male guests visit the place sporadically, they never stay long. As Lone declares, “it is mostly women who walk the path to the Convent.” Thus, the Convent becomes the safe haven, the Paradise where these

outcast women can find what patriarchal society has denied to them. Most important of all, in the Convent the women can claim a place of their own, not only in the literal sense of space, but also in the metaphorical sense of reclaiming a place in society. When they find shelter in the Convent, these women cease to be social pariahs and become part of a community. Thus, the Convent becomes the epicenter of female empowerment and transformation. In this sense, Morrison suggests that Paradise mirrors the Convent: a community where people grow in love, acceptance, and compassion.

Third, the Convent has a significant connection to the Supernatural. From my standpoint, Toni Morrison explores different dimensions of the Supernatural throughout the novel. However, the Convent frames the Supernatural perfectly. Both the characters and the reader have to negotiate meaning in the Convent. Moreover, the Supernatural offers an opportunity to resistance because it challenges traditional approaches to canonical literature. In this sense, the Supernatural in the context of the Convent endorses black literary tradition. Morrison advocates for a literature that “haunts” the reader. She utilizes the Supernatural as her power weapon to debase all previous assumptions the reader might have provoking authentic responses. Also, the Supernatural promotes female empowerment. The Convent women go through a spiritual journey and they succeed in finding their true Selves. They do so by means of aphrodisiac banquets, rituals, and experiencing the Supernatural first hand. Under Consolata’s tutelage, they come in contact with the Spirit world and can expand their vision. They have access to a higher form of power. They experience a higher Self that transforms them. Thus, of all the versions of “paradise” present in the novel, the Convent approaches a holistic interpretation that is the most effective. This interpretation of Paradise promotes a high value of the Self and a strong sense of community regardless race or gender impositions. For this reason, the Convent women “could not leave the only place they were free to leave” as they feel safe and sound in this peaceful refuge.

CONCLUSIONS

This research project makes a useful contribution to the field of Morrison's literary criticism. I decide to explore one of the lesser-known novels by the author, *Paradise*, which is part of a trilogy. My objective in doing so is to explore this complex and rich novel, by bringing into the light new issues for discussion, and by providing new input in the analysis of Morrison's literary production. For this purpose, I combine different approaches. While most criticism of Morrison's work focuses on race issues, I propose a combination of race, gender, and the supernatural, which enables a broader spectrum for analysis. Race is a pivotal aspect of Morrison's narrative. Yet, I give this research a different direction by focusing on black literary criticism and black feminist thought mainly. I decide to use in my investigation as many black female critics as possible by including authors like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Nikki Giovanni, among many others, to offer a clear perspective of race issues from a womanist point of view.

I explore gender issues in this investigation for two main reasons: first, because gender is a less-studied aspect in Morrison's novels since most criticism deals with the approach of race issues in her work. Second, because exploring, investigating, and exposing gender issues empowers the discussion of feminist theory and feminist discourse. The academia usually interprets feminism as an exhausted subject or an overexposed subject, which promotes the idea that new research related to the topic results unnecessary. On the contrary, throughout this investigation, I suggest that approaching feminism –as a subject of study- is still valid and necessary. For me, as a recipient of male privilege, approaching Morrison's work from a feminist perspective means a highly enriching experience both challenging and educational: challenging because I have to question different aspects of male privilege in patriarchal societies, and educational because I have to learn to see reality from a

different perspective and unlearn patriarchal discourse. For this reason, I consider that many people may benefit from a similar experience as well.

Finally, I decide to include the supernatural in this discussion of the novel as a force that sets apart Morrison's work. The supernatural functions as a clear marker of black literary tradition and that makes her work unique. Also, the supernatural challenges and contradicts the cannon and introduces a diversity of new voices and different points of view that contrast with the "common" or "traditional" literary approaches. The supernatural works with gender and black feminist thought perfectly because it provides powerful interpretative tools to the literature of the margins. The supernatural holds together the discussion of race and gender as intersecting oppressions since it gives a more effective, holistic, and alternative approach to those issues. How those intersecting oppressions function and relate provide the rich, multilayered field of study of Morrisonian literature.

In this sense, Morrison's narrative remains more valid, accurate, and relevant than ever. In these dark times in which white, male-centered, radical, supremacist discourse resurges, not only in the United States, but also in different parts of America, and around the globe, Morrison's voice serves as an oasis of moderation and hope. The author's work continues to be an invaluable reference in the fight against oppression. The current socio-political situation of the United States and the world in general, exemplifies the danger of the existing hegemonic discourse, which Morrison denounces, warns about, and repudiates in her novels constantly.

As she insists repeatedly, violent discourse, theistic discourse, gendered discourse, and racialized discourse prove a powerful weapon, and the irrational use of language may have devastating effects. On the other hand, Morrison's subversive discourse provides a place for resistance. In the era of #black lives matter, #me too, #ni una menos, #yo te creo, among many other social movements that confront and combat hegemonic oppression, the

reader can revisit *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Paradise*, *Beloved*, or any of her other novels, for that matter, and find an appalling resonance with modern times. Perhaps the face of race, gender, and class oppression has changed but the essence is the same: a hegemonic group of men that imposes a vertical structure of power. In like manner, the places for struggle have changed. The new generations are becoming aware of the need for a new order: a society that is more inclusive, more balanced, and ecologically sustainable. People, young adults mainly, are beginning to understand that the current hegemonic form of power leads to destruction inevitably.

This is a moment of *awakening*, and in this context, Morrison's work serves as a source of inspiration for the new generations to keep on fighting for a better world. Morrison's novels are like prophetic voices that warn about the perils and challenges that our society faces nowadays. Morrison's discourse is very emphatic when she denounces the main problem humanity faces presently: *lack of love*. As she declared many times, her novels deal with love, or the lack of love, in its different forms and expressions. In this sense, the reader may recur to the inspiration and the strength of the subversive message that Morrison provides, for her works not only function as a warning about the dangers of hegemonic power, but also provides an alternative to autocratic rhetoric: one that promotes common understanding, love and inclusion.

The final coda of *Paradise* is a clear example of *constructive* rhetoric. After the horrible massacre of the Convent, each woman revisits their relatives or loved ones, to make amends. These visitations mean that hate, violence, and death have no power over these women. In this way, Morrison dispels the sad and negative sense that glooms over the novel's final events, and offers the possibility of change and re-birth. The Convent women have the opportunity to re-write their herstory, even after death, and as Billy Delia points out; they may even make a comeback from the spirit world, when someone needs them. Billy

Delia is certain of their returns. The Convent women have not disappeared. They are in a different realm gathering strength to continue fighting.

Anna and reverend Misner visit the Convent after the massacre and both have a supernatural vision. They see a door, or a window; they cannot agree on which one they see, but most definitely they see a way out. Following the black literary tradition of “open-endedness,” Morrison leaves a way out, a final resolution in touch with the supernatural.

Something that escapes common sense:

It was when they returned . . . that they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door, she said later. “No, a window,” he said, laughing. “That’s the difference between us. You see a door; I see a window” . . . They expanded on the subject: What did a door mean? what a window? focusing on the sign rather than the event; . . . they knew it was there . . . whether through a door needed to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (305)

In my opinion, Morrison gives the possibility of change, of a new beginning. By opening a door, or using a window that is already open, you may have access to a different reality. What would be on the other side? I think that Morrison urges the reader to question the *status quo*, to imagine a whole new world devoid of the problematic and complications of the “real” one. The convent women cross the borderline successfully. They transcend to a space where patriarchal impositions no longer haunt them.

As a matter of fact, one may venture to say that the novel ends in a highly positive note, as in the final passage, one sees Connie and Piedade sitting near the ocean shore, singing and gazing at an horizon full of possibilities. The last lines of the novel depict the scene as follows :

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise. (318)

I consider that Morrison gives to the reader an enormous responsibility in the construction of Paradise, which is a communal task. We have to build something together like the Convent women. After the *shipwreck* of the previous system, the passengers, lost and found, arrive at shore. However, they have the mission to create. They have an endless work. The resonance with modern times is uncanny. Morrison is compromising the reader to construct a better place, a Paradise where we all can coexist in peace and harmony. Yet, this work is in the making, this mission is a never-ending task.

From my point of view, Morrison's narrative allows for intertextual analysis. The very nature of her novels invites a comprehensive reading of her work. For instance, approaching Morrison's work from the perspective of other literary productions by minority groups in the United States like Hispanic literature or queer literature may give her novels new dimensions. The connections and similarities of shared experiences of other minority groups would definitely enrich the discussion of Morrison's novels, but also, the differences and discrepancies between these groups would provide new approaches and different possibilities to examine Morrison's work. This research focuses on radical feminism, black feminist thought, and cultural studies as main theoretical approaches. However, Morrison's work complexity permits different theoretical approaches and criticism. Deconstruction, reader-response, historical criticism, post-colonialism, and others may shed new light on the exploration of the vast possibilities of her narrative. Even a theological approach of her novels may result very effective since her writing has a very powerful biblical connection and

intertextuality. The versatility of Morrison's work would provide ample material to carry out analysis from other perspectives. Finally, more subversive approaches like afrofuturism and ecofeminism, may prove extremely interesting to decipher Morrison's work. The multilayered quality of Morrison's texts, as well as the complexity of her narrative, provide extensive ground for literary analysis using these theories, which demonstrates the importance of Morrison as one of the most prolific authors in U.S. literature.

In the documentary *The Pieces I Am*, about the life and work of Toni Morrison, she declares: "My grandfather bragged all the time that he had read the bible, and it was illegal in his life to read. Ultimately I knew that words have power." This early experience of Morrison with words reveals her source of inspiration, an inspiration that will penetrate all her work. Words have power, and Morrison uses those words to give a voice to those who exist in the margins like women, and people of color. That is what her work is about: empowering. As an author, Morrison discovers and shares the tremendous potential of language. In the documentary *Remembering Toni Morrison, An Iconic American Author* aired by the New York Times News on August 6, 2019, she makes important declarations about writing and power: "I don't think I could have happily stayed here, with the calamity that has occurred so often in the world, if I did not have a way of thinking about it, past, present, future, which is what writing is for me. It's control. Nobody tells me what to do. I am in control. It is my world. It's sometimes wild, the process by which I arrive at something. But nevertheless, it's mine, it's free, and it's a way of thinking. It's pure knowledge." Morrison is a true source of inspiration, especially for the future generations, as she acknowledges the power implicit in words and in language. Those who are able to access and control that power will have the future in their hands.

The death of Toni Morrison on August 05, 2019 leaves an empty space in the world of literature. The academia loses one of its greatest exponents and African American culture

mourns one of its favorite daughters as her emblematic voice ceases to exist. However, Morrison's legacy is monumental. The value of literary work is ungraspable. She will continue to exist. She has secured a name among the immortals. Moreover, and perhaps, most importantly of all, the *influence* that her work will have in future generations will keep her Spark alive. The validity and accuracy of Morrison's discourse makes her the Wise Old Woman, the voice you should listen, the one you should go to when in doubt.

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