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'She Shall Not Be Moved': Black Women's Spiritual Practice in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Paradise, and Home

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‘She Shall Not Be Moved’: Black Women’s Spiritual Practice in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *Home*

by

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Dedication

To Him who sits on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be all glory and honor and wisdom and power forever. Lord, I thank you for hearing and answering my prayers. You have been my writing hand and my intelligent thought. This degree belongs only to You.

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Ubuntu: I am because we are.

Sankofa: Go back and fetch it.

Ashé and amen.

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Abstract

'She Shall Not Be Moved': Black Women's Spiritual Practice in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *Home* argues that from *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's debut novel, to her 2012 novel, *Home,* Morrison brings her female characters to voice, autonomy, and personal divinity through unconventional spiritual work. The project addresses the history of Black women's activist and spiritual work, Toni Morrison's engagement with unconventional spiritual practice, and closes with a personal interrogation of the author's connection to Black women's spiritual practice.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.
Psalm 46:5

Cool Springs of Hope, or Who Were These Saints

"If Black women don't say who they are, other people will and say it badly for them" explains Barbara Christian to her young daughter. The two—one an adult woman, the other a small child—are sitting in the living room, and while Christian wants to work, her daughter, Najuma, wants to play. In the simplicity of that statement, I find the impetus behind the project I am beginning today. I intend to do two things: first, say who Black women are—using the novels of Toni Morrison—and then make sure that others do not say who we are badly. It is Barbara Smith who argues, "Since there are no 'experts' on black women's lives (except those of us who live them), there is tremendous freedom to develop new ideas, to uncover new facts" (4) so I endeavor to discover the newness, richness, and spiritual aggressiveness of Black womanhood through Morrison's everyday Black women like those in *Paradise* who "reveal the 'scraps, patches, and rags of daily life'" (408). Toni Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, *Paradise*, *Beloved*, and *Home* offers us a rich, new understanding of Black women's spiritual work through common means. The women in Morrison's novels *work* their faith, and through their work, they are able to save friends, family, and loved ones from physical, spiritual, and emotional destruction.

For theoretical assistance in reading Morrison, I look to Patricia Hill Collins, social commentator, theorist, and scholar. Her seminal volume, *Black Feminist Thought,* offers an intriguing framework to develop my project. In her chapter, "The Politics of Black Feminist Thought," she explains how "survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined (6); however, that does mean that not Black women have nothing to offer to conversations about religion, their bodies, nature, and the importance of community. In actuality, Black women outside of the academy are just as

vocal about their reality as the scholars who write and publish about the same experiences. Hill Collins claims, "Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas" (7), which underscores Christian's statement I quote in the beginning of this work. Black women who speak about and to Black women, or as Christian writes in "The Race for Theory," "those who write what I read and those who read what I read" (2136). I am writing to those who as Christian explains, write literature "always in danger of extinction or of cooptation, not because we do not theorize, but because what we can even imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by societal structures" (2136). Since "writing disappears unless there is a response to it," this writing ensures several Black female artists' work will not disappear (2136).

I examine four novels by Toni Morrison because she is the most gifted Black female artist of our current era, and some might even say she is the most brilliant writer–bar none—in American letters, or as Trudier Harris argues, she is "a *phenomenon*" (9). Her work has spawned critical reflections and response, but not always because the critics are deeply engaged with her texts. In a 1985 interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison explains, "Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write" (425). She calls these critics' perspectives, "other kinds of structures" and explains how little interest she has in those perspectives (425). Since 1985, though, there have been voluminous studies on Morrison and her use of spiritual traditions in her work[i]; however, in addition to those studies, I intend to look heavily to Morrison and other Black women for answers and explication. This is not to say there is not value in other studies and other structures—I engage a diverse variety of critics in this work—but I want to center Black women in this study. Black women should be afforded the opportunity to communicate with other Black women through literature, and I offer that space here. For example, in

"Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith argues, "the way, for example, that Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker incorporate the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence" (22), so I consider how the work of Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Z.Z. Packer, Gayl Jones, Jamaica Kincaid, and Gloria Naylor also illustrates a Black feminist project—one that parallels Morrison's work, of course. Patricia Hill Collins calls this similarity across difference, "U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint" (29), which explains how:

> all African American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent. Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African-American women have had all the same experiences nor that we can agree on the significance of our varying experiences. (29)

So I connect the work of Black women across age, national origin, and class considerations, and I do this by looking at the religious tradition and spiritual practices of Black women in critical theory and literature. In Smith's essay, she argues, "The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by women" (23), and I endeavor to do exactly that.

Instead of only relying on academic theory to offer foundation to my readings, I rely on the *everyday* lives of Morrison's characters as the key to uncovering the Morrisonian theological worldview. I am less concerned with what Morrison's women say and more concerned with what the women actually do, and whether their work is successful—which it typically is—or unsuccessful—as we see in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye.* I am engaging with what I consider to be spiritual practices present in unconventional, alternative spaces, and the primary question I ask is, How do Black women find God outside of the church? I find my answers through the unconventional spiritual work of

Morrison's women. I ask this question because, as a licensed Black female minister, I was concerned with the patriarchal nature of the Black church being a hindrance to my fulfillment of my calling from God because the Black female body is the "text upon which a racist [and heteropatriarchal] society has written the story of *black* womanhood" (Mermann-Jozwiak 191). This means that when I read Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, I felt equal parts fear and admiration because the women Walker knew were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release, and I knew I did not want to be one of those women. They were creators who lived lives of spiritual waste" (233). Despite their own wasted potential for public genius, these women "handed on the creative spark, the seed of a flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read" (240). The Black woman has always, then, ordered "the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (241). She took whatever space it was that she occupied and made it beautiful. She "grew as if by magic," planted gardens "brilliant with colors," all while making "all the clothes that we wore," making "all the towels that we used" (241, 238), and cooking all the food she, her husband, and her children ate. Walker's work then allowed me to understand the role of domestic, underappreciated women's work as key to the Black women's sense of self. Whether or not these women were allowed space in traditional leadership was not as important as the divine power she executed over her home and family.

Morrison makes the ordinary extraordinary by explaining the spiritual nature of Black women's work. Since I know the value of the domestic arts as well as I know the value of an academic degree, I acknowledge how Morrison allows women to find divinity in the comfort of their kitchens. If a woman finds divinity in a plot of dirt that she transforms in a garden, then it is her Morrisonian prerogative to do so. In this project, I choose to look at women using their bodies, nature, and the community as the grounds for their spirituality, and I explore the connection between traditional

religious practice and womanist theology. I want to make clear, though, that I argue a distinction between religion—a set of rules, regulations, and practices in a traditional setting—and spirituality—practices that embody a natural, communal, and common expression of divine power because Morrison's women find solace in the power of their own spirituality even when religion shuns and silences them.

A Womanist Framework

In addition to there being the Black feminist project in this coming work, where I use the feminist theory of Barbara Christian and Patricia Hill Collins, there is also a womanist project. In Walker's collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Walker outlines how she conceptualizes womanism. Walker's work is not traditionally theoretical; she includes poems, essays, and musings on a variety of subjects. Her writing, though, offers four definitions of womanism/womanist:

> **Womanist 1.** From *womanish.* (Opp. Of 'girlish,' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, or courageous, or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*
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> **2**. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance to laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men,

> sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in, Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans: 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.' Traditionally capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.' Reply: 'It wouldn't be the first time.'
>
> • • •
>
> **3**. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*
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> • • •
>
> **4**. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

Womanist relates to an individual person, being a "black feminist or a feminist of color," but womanism is the theory articulated or lived by the individual womanists (Walker xi). Womanist theology, as an outgrowth of womanism, explores how womanism manifests itself with Black women's spirituality especially as the third definition states, "*Loves* the Spirit" (Walker xii). Linda Thomas defines womanist theology as a critical reflection upon black women's place in the world that God has created, and [it] takes seriously black women's experience as human beings who are made in the image of God" (n.pag.) Another definition, from Kelly Brown Douglas, states that womanist theology teaches the "culture of resistance" of Black women to patriarchy (135). A third definition, from the online magazine *For Harriet*, defines womanist theology as the confrontation of "negative stereotypes and erasure of Black women's roles in theology" (n.pag.). For the Black female womanist, the project of spirituality, religion,

Christianity (in particular), and the Black church as an institution, all stand to be considered as sites of revolutionary struggle.

For the purposes of this dissertation project, all definitions of womanism put forth by Walker will be used at different junctures as a way of connecting both women's work. Specifically, each definition will be tested according to a particular Morrison novel in order to find if Morrison's four novels, *The Bluest Eye, Home, Beloved,* and *Paradise*, align with Walker's conception of womanism, which would illustrate the presence of a unity across Black women's literature, whether intentionally or unintentionally (as Morrison has never publicly aligned herself with a womanist ideology). Walker's work offers a point of departure, but not necessarily a theoretical position, as she was not attempting to write theory. She was reflecting on her life as a Southern American Black woman, but since she privileges nature, and so does Morrison, I believe Walker's work holds value.

As a natural expansion from Walker's work, the womanist theological project explores Black women's value to the African American practice of religion. Emilie Townes explains womanist theology as an outgrowth of the Southern slave tradition. She explains, "Their blending of West African cosmology and Western Christianity produced a distinct religion that met the needs of those who sought the presence of the divine in the midst of their struggle to survive" (19), and for Black women, that struggle to survive lasted much longer than the institution of slavery. Slavery was the beginning of a dehumanizing cycle of oppression, subjugation, and mental, physical, and emotional waste, but there was always a "just God who would one day answer the cries of His poor Black children and deliver them from their enemies" (20). God was also "right there in the midst of them" (21), so the Spirit continued to live within Black women even when there could be no outward expression. In Townes' estimation, after the emancipation of enslaved men and women, "Black women took the roles of wife, sister, daughter, and mother, combined them with a personal spiritual experience of God in Christ, and

understood themselves to be ministers in their homes" (33). Their ultimate allegiance was to God, not to men (33).

Ergo, the purpose of this project to explore Black women's enactment of African American religious, or womanist, tradition in Toni Morrison's four novels about community beginning with *The Bluest Eye* and ending with the fullest exploration of womanist spirituality in *Paradise.* The pertinent questions I ask are: How do Black women enact womanism in Morrison's four novels? What role does religion play in the lives of Black women? How does the community function as a site of religion? In what ways does a womanist spirituality develop in Morrison's novels? Are the women in Morrison's novels successful at organizing, structuring, and leading the faith walk? If the women fail, why might that have happened? Also, how does the "church" in Morrison's novels appear? Which women occupy unconventional pulpits? To answer these questions, I will be occasionally engaging other novels by Black women to compare their womanist leanings to Morrison's work.

Both Walker's explanation of ordering the universe and Walker's definition of womanism serve as the critical points of departure for this dissertation project; however, I also look towards the words of other Black women carving out identity and spirituality through the written word. For example, Ntozake Shange, who took up her pen to write, explains how she uses language to further her journey to wholeness. In "my pen is my machete" from her collection, *lost in language & sound or how i found my way to the arts:*

> i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as s/he learns to speak of the world and the 'self.' yes/ being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious abt/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate/ i haveta fix

> the tool to my needs/ i have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image [sic] (19).

Shange uses language typically privileging white men to enact freedom for Black women. Just as in her most-famous work, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf,* she closes with "a layin on of hands/the holiness of myself released [sic]" which ultimately leads to the women chanting, "i found god in myself/ & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely" [sic] (63). Shange uses spirituality to include Black women as women. Walker finds this divinity in nature, and Morrison reconceptualizes Black womanhood as a site of spiritual affirmation. The women in Morrison's novels believe that through their faith, they can change the communities in which they live. From the girls of *The Bluest Eye* to the women in the Convent in *Paradise,* these images of Black womanhood find God within themselves.

Womanism, though, stresses the interrelatedness of the struggle all Black women face, so in a womanist theology, women's allegiance is to each other with the spiritual covering of God. In Morrison's novels, the community spirit is key, and it underlines the most important chapter of this project. If the women do not stand in agreement, they cannot save. If they cannot save, then a woman will be lost. In some way, the loss of Pecola Breedlove in Morrison's first novel is redeemed by the salvation of Sethe Suggs in *Beloved.* The community has ostracized both Pecola and Sethe, but in the latter novel, the community eventually unites for a cause larger than themselves. In '"Yonder They Do Not Love Your Flesh': Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Dara Byrne explains, how the return of "Beloved consequently enables the town to reestablish the continuity and vitality of the circle (intrinsic to African culture) by redressing the current fragmentation of their community consciousness" (45). This is how womanist theological *practice* looks—it is women who not only know the word of God, but the women practice the word of God.

Womanist spirituality is also concerned with wholeness and the full humanity of its subject. Instead of the relationship between the self and the other being a "split," Emilie Townes argues for a "self-other *relationship*, for it is in the relational matrix that wholeness can be found for African-Americans" (49). What Townes means is that in the quest for wholeness, there is also a need for unity. Byrne's further argues, "African-American cohesion [is formed] not only in the 'rememory' of bondage but in the struggle to establish individual worth beyond the oppressive commodity exchange system" (46). This is why Miss Ella in *Beloved* believes that she *has* to save Sethe; when two white men held Miss Ella for a year and did unspeakable things to her body, no one rescued Miss Ella from her master and his son. Because there was no one to save Miss Ella, she makes it her business to save Sethe when the latter woman's deceased daughter returns from the grave for vengeance. Along the same lines, when Consolata, in another Morrison novel, *Paradise,* finds that her home is full of women, but the women remain fragmented and weak, she decides to issue a spiritual directive that the women be made whole. In John 5:6, Jesus asks a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years, "Wilt thou be made whole?" (KJV). The man first replies that he has no one to assist him, but Jesus tells the man to "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk" (KJV), which is very similar to the commandment Consolata makes in the Convent. Consolata preaches her initial sermon in the kitchen, and then she begins her salvific work, and as Channette Romero argues, "Consolata [teaches] the other women at the Convent the importance of connecting the material to the spiritual, the body to the soul" (417). In Morrison's novels, we see how "the entire community [determines] that slavery [and its aftereffects including colorism, sexism, racism] will not consume them" (Byrne 47).

The women of Morrison's novels cannot and will not be saved by theory; it is practice—womanist practice—that will save lives and heal bodies. Townes explains how Baby Suggs' sermon in the clearing offers "pithy instructions for womanist ethical reflection" (54). Dana Byrne offers additional

support, writing, "Baby Suggs [creates] a church through which blacks could develop their sense of self-love" (45). In the Clearing, Baby Suggs tells the men, women, and children to love their bodies because "to love the mouth, the eyes, the hands, the neck, and the heart—to love the body is radical spirituality within structured domination and control" (Townes 55). Baby Suggs knows, and tells the people, "Yonder out there, they will see [you] broken" (*Beloved* 54), but a womanist project is capable of saving even bruised, battered, and broken bodies, so I make use of the transformative value of a womanist theology to heal.

It is Morrison's *practice* to write her women into wholeness and healing. She is not only composing critical theory, but she is working out her theoretical positionality in her texts. Morrison's women are capable women, filled with common knowledge that enables them to perform spiritual work. Patricia Hill Collins explains, "the commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women growing from our everyday thoughts and actions constitutes the first and most fundamental level of knowledge" (38). Morrison, in her own critical volume, *What Moves at the Margin,* calls this selfsame knowledge "discredited" (61). It is the knowledge Black women develop in conversation, community, and collegiality with one another. It is the reason the women in Morrison's texts are drawn to one another with examples in each of the novels interrogated in this project.

I want to be clear, though, that even as I use womanism, Black feminism, and womanist theology as natural explicators for Morrison's work, Morrison herself squarely states, "I would never write any 'ist.' I don't write 'ist' novels. In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed… I detest and loathe [these categories]" (Jeffrey n. pag.). Morrison chooses not to *call* herself a female or a womanist, nor can I find conversations between Morrison and Walker that speak to a connection between the two women, but that does not mean feminism and womanism are not useful theoretical paradigms to explore Morrison's work. As a Black woman who

writes about Black women, Morrison has to engage feminist considerations. As a Black woman writing about Black women reckoning with both God and man, Morrison has to engage womanist considerations. Even as Morrison's Convent women decide to live in an abandoned church on the edge of town supports Walker's definition of womanism that advocates periodic separation for health reasons. Ergo, though Morrison resists labels, these labels offer useful frameworks for a thorough analysis.

Locating the Silences

From this spiritual perspective, I address the gaps I see in the treatment of all of the women's— not only the prominent women's— individual and collective divinity in four of her novels. As I will later argue, Morrison chooses the least of these as protagonists, and even as religious subjects, and empowers the least of these as well. Though I will only be focusing on four novels, I will engage nearly all of the Black (or purportedly Black as in *Paradise*) female characters in her novels. What most critics do is focus on Sethe and Beloved, the women of the Convent, Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda, Pauline Breedlove[ii], but I am also looking for the religious tradition of Aunt Jimmy and her caretakers, Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Billie Delia, Lone DuPres, Ella, and other women. To date, this has not been done. Since *Home* was only published in 2012, it has not yet received major critical attention as it relates to its religious significance.

Morrison, though, includes typically religious characters, those who attend church, lead churches, and/or instruct their children in the ways of the Lord, but also those women who instead take religion into their own hands and enact the divine. TeResa Green argues in "A Gendered Spirit: Race, Class, and Sex in the African American Church," that even though "Black churches could barely have endured without the critical assistance of Black women, the position of preacher and preacher continues to be male-dominated" (116). With this knowledge, Claudia, Frieda and the sister-friends in *The Bluest Eye*, the sister-friends in *Home*, Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, and the Convent women in *Paradise* take God's

command to subdue the earth quite literally. Instead of waiting on someone else to complete their work, they hold the earth in their hands and attempt to shape it into healing because the "survival of African American communities requires a practical vigilance" (Evans 383).

As it relates to the criticism on Morrison, religion, and healing, there are comprehensive studies on religion in Morrison's texts (Zauditu-Selassie (2014); Higgins (2014); Jennings (2008)[iii], and this, of course, is in addition to bevy of articles, reviews, and notes on Morrison. Higgins' and Jennings' volumes will be engaged in this study as Higgins offers insight in the chapters on the community and the African presence in the novels, and Jennings conducts similar work. Selassie, though, focuses more of the African tradition, rather than a merging of African and American religious tradition. What I am doing with these women's work is drawing connections between the critical theory of Black women and Morrison's work, so I am building a community of women of color who write and respond to Black women's writing using scholars such as Trudier Harris, Renita Weems, Roxanne Reed, Gurleen Grewal, Emilie Townes, Melissa Harris-Perry and others. To be clear, I use Walker and Hill Collins as my theoretical foundation, but I use the work of Black female scholars, and other female scholars, to support and further explicate the work. I build from the theory of Black women and then expand my analysis to other women's academic writing.

Morrison is writing specifically about Black women and Black communities and the ways in which Black women come into an understanding of their value and worth. She offers non-traditional protagonists a space for self-actualization. Even in the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison recalls overhearing a classmate say that she wanted blue eyes, even though she was blessed with dark Black skin. In Morrison's estimation, blue eyes would have made her friend grotesque, but Morrison did not yet have the language to explain her feelings. Some forty years later, Morrison writes a novel to explain to her friend, and all women who do not adhere to the traditional standard of beauty, the dangers of

unattainable ideals. Morrison, then, illustrates how the community of Black women must support, encourage, and affirm the weakest members of the community, especially when the weak are the young or the infirm. As Jane Kuenz argues, *The Bluest Eye* documents the invasion and erasure of certain bodies and explores how commodity intersects with sexuality (n.pag.), so it is the community's responsibility to reclaim the bodies of those who cannot reclaim themselves.

Organization

Since this is a feminist and womanist engagement with Morrison's text, I use a positionality advocated by Barbara Christian to more deeply engage Toni Morrison's novels. In "The Race for Theory," Barbara Christian writes of Black women's use of theory in their everyday academic lives. Because there are those who "have been intimidated, devalued…" by theory, Christian focuses her essay on affirming those theorists. Christian exclaims, "some of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, women, third world) have been influenced, even coopted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation" (52). As this dissertation is a radical work, it requires a radical foundation; it requires "imagination" as Barbara Smith argues in "Doing Research on Black Women" (4), since in Barbara Christian's estimation:

> …[P]eople of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play of language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. (52)

In my analysis, I use a diverse array of Black women's work to undergird, signify, and explicate Morrison's work, for Toni Morrison is not the only Black woman author engaging in a spiritual project

in her literature; she is one of many and all deserve, even if fleeting, critical attention. In other words, "our work *is* a collective endeavor" (53), so I will not treat Morrison as if she is an outlier to the Black female literary oeuvre. In so doing, I also, as Christian demands, make sure there will always be an audience for Black women's literature because "writing disappears unless there is a response to it" (62). I mention the names of well-known and lesser-known Black women authors in order to make sure these women never disappear. As I proceed into my study, I will move into how and why Morrison engages spiritual practices, illuminating her connection to the ancestral homeland of Black Americans. This is hybridity at its finest: she takes what is best from the African Diaspora as it relates to spiritual practices, combining this with the foregrounding of African American religious practice, and then puts the religious "power" in the hands of Black women instead of Black men.

Since there are four major chapters of this work, the chapters will be separated by practice instead of text, so that each practice is allowed its full exploration in relationship to each text. Some practices are more heavily engaged in one text than another, so it will be more fruitful to focus on practices rather than texts. Additionally, I can delve into the background of the practice before examining how Morrison uses and represents it. As Morrison examines racial, historical, cultural, and theological positions, it will be key to my exploration to give attention to each of those positions as they work in tandem. Morrison's oeuvre deserves deep attention instead of wide, so I have pinpointed key spiritual practices.

In order, those practices are: 1) the recognition of the divine, 2) the reclamation of the body, 3) the cultivation of the earth, and 4) the gathering of the community. My selection of these practices is not only birthed in my research into Morrison's literary work or even my study of Black feminist and womanist theory, but this project is deeply personal. I have watched my grandmother tend to the land behind her home in both Miami, Florida and Brunswick, Georgia, and as she rose early in the morning

to hoe, rake, weed, or plant, I saw God's grace shine on her. When deer or possums would eat what she had planted before she had a chance to harvest, she was never angry; she figured she was only participating in ensuring the lives of lesser creatures. Even my own mother, though she never grew plants to eat, would plant roses in whatever piece of a land she found, even trying to force her roses to live on an apartment balcony. There was always something alive in the houses of the women in my family. Though I have failed at gardening, unlike my mother and grandmother, I know its significance; however, when frogs ate my young basil, I realized gardening at home was not for me. Over the years, though, I have seen my mother and grandmother pray over their seeds, so I know, for them, there is spiritual significance in planting.

The same is true for the reclamation of the Black women's body, her acknowledgment of the divine, and the gathering of the community. These are not only practices that I have studied, but they are ones I have witnessed. I see Black women who take ownership of their own lives after spending the majority of their time being mothers or spouses. Though I am not advocating women remain single, there is something to be said for a woman who carves out identity without parental or spousal responsibilities, which is what I will examine. There is also something to be said about Black women's pure worship, when the shoes and hats come off and the Spirit comes in. Black women recognize God's presence in whatever form He takes. Lastly, gathering for worship is something I continue to do, but it also occurs throughout literature. Women who gather in Black women's novels gather for a particular purpose, one they are usually able to achieve. These practices are not foreign to me; they are a part of the woman that I am.

In the first chapter of this project, I outline how Morrison's engagement with the divine is a central relationship in each of the texts. Black religious practice is similar but not the same as white religious practice, and more importantly, Black female religious practice also differs in intriguing ways

from traditional religion. As I interrogate the four novels, I look at womanism and womanist theology as the primary grounding because within womanism is one who "loves the Spirit" (Walker xii). I offer readings from noted theorists who all define womanist theology in related ways including definitions from Linda Thomas, Kelly Brown Douglas, and even a popular Black women's online magazine, *For Harriet*. The diversity of the definitions allows for a nuanced vision of womanist theory, underscoring the necessity of differing perspectives.

When Morrison's women, in the novels, enact spirituality, they not only take up alternative pulpits, but the women perform miracles by their own hands. These women refuse to be limited by their class, sex, race, or physical ability, and transcend their barriers to be effective in their communities. When there is a need for physical, spiritual, emotional, or mental healing, the women come together, bringing whatever they have to offer, to be of service in whatever way they can. In addition, the women have a strong religious foundation, reading and preaching the biblical word, praying, and singing spirituals as ways of grounding their spirit work. Even the youngest practitioners, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, know how important their relationship with God is to their work. The girls say a prayer before they begin their intervention into Pecola's situation. Throughout all the novels, the presence and importance of a relationship with God and His church is continually present.

In the second chapter of this project, I look to the reclamation of the body as central to womanist practice; womanists want "to know more and in greater depth," and is "interested in grown-up things" (Walker xi). I use Claudia and Frieda MacTeer as my initial focus because it is Claudia's statement about being put "outdoors" that offers a worthwhile definition of marginality, and Claudia is only beginning to "revel in her own body's myriad substances and smells" (Kuenz n.pag.). As a young girl, Claudia's perspective is key because her immaturity allows for a more honest image of budding Black

womanhood. I not only focus on Claudia, though, I use her words to characterize the behavior of all Morrison's women who attempts to reclaim themselves and their own subjectivities.

Subjectivity is a necessary goal because, as is well documented, after 1619 when the first slaves landed on the shores of the James River, African bodies no longer belonged to the person living within them. Black men and women were auctioned, sold, and traded up and down the Eastern coast. What made this crime against humanity even more heinous is that many of these slaves had no idea what had happened, or any idea that their lives were no longer their own. After rapes and forced breeding, some of the women understood what had taken place, but did not accept this change in their status. They continued to exert any control over their body necessary, including the right to bring forth or nurture children. Thus, in these four novels, I look for the same bodily reclamation passed down from the legacy of slavery.

The body is important to spiritual practice because African Diasporic women tend to engage the wholeness of the self in spiritual worship. For example, women will lift their hands, stomp their feet, shake their heads, and even dance during worship. Sheila Walker extends this wholeness of self in worship to the "phenomenon of spirit possession [which] is almost universal in black mass-oriented churches" (34). African worship practices celebrate the body as a site of the brilliance and magnificence of God as the creator of the body. Walker claims, "Both the Holy Ghost and the African gods dance in the persons of their devotees, often giving them a physical agility that they might be hard to manifest under more usual circumstances" (35). For a woman, the ownership of her body comes at a high price since at birth, she belongs to her parents, and then she is married to a man who takes over ownership from her father; so for a woman to own herself is a radical choice. Women who choose to remain single or childless or even engage in entrepreneurial work are culturally discouraged, especially in America; however, the women in Morrison's novels seek to own themselves and their futures. Leaving behind

husbands, boyfriends, and children, the women are leaving others to find and claim themselves, and they do.

In the third chapter, which focuses on how Morrison's "ministers" cultivate the earth, I will explore how the women engage and trust the land. With these novels, I rely first on the Black women's relationship with gardening as a way of "ordering the universe," as Alice Walker writes in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." In the essay, she recalls how her own mother enacted personal creativity while she planted flowers in her garden, ultimately creating a breathtaking display, causing passersby to stop and question how her mother was able to achieve such beauty (Walker 241). Walker explains that her mother used the garden because her creativity was limited in so many other ways by her station in life. For a Black woman, the work of her hands was her only outlet, so women took up gardening, sewing, cooking, and other home-related activities to sustain their desire for expression. Morrison speaks of her mother and father's own garden in "The Site of Memory," saying, "They didn't welcome me and my sister there, when we were young, because we were not able to distinguish between the things they wanted to grow and the things they didn't…" (75).

Gardening is central for Morrison, as it is with Walker, as it continues to be with generations of Black women struggling under the weight of gender, race, and class restrictions. The ability to create beauty and life with only a packet of seeds, a small pot, a plot of dirt, and a watering can alleviate some of the weight inherent to living life on the margins. Black women could come home from a day spent cleaning the home of a wealthy white family, or nannying white children while her own children were in daycare, or even working in an elementary school cafeteria, to her own garden, in her own yard, with her own flowers. The garden is the place when she can find the peace that escapes her at so many other junctures during the day, a peace which gives her time to think or pray without the interruption of her children—likely the real reason Morrison's parents discouraged her and her sister from visiting. As

such, I outline the ways in which Morrison's novels speak to womanist spiritual practice illustrated through Black women's relationship to the ground.

Lastly, the fourth chapter of this project, which is the most important and covers the central practice, is the gathering together of the community. For any of the other practices to be effective, the community must stand behind (and with) the Black female ministers. As Barbara Christian argues, in Morrison's novels, "the characters' conduct of their lives is connected to their community's value system" (65), so the community's work is the women's work, and the women's work is community work. Walker explains womanist women must be "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people" (xi), so although the women who engage in cultivating the ground might be able to raise food for their families or flowers in a garden, the community is central if they are trying to raise a cure. In *The Bluest Eye,* Claudia and Frieda, in their childish naiveté, believe that if they only plant the seeds and watch them grow, that will be enough to ensure Pecola's salvation since Pecola is a victim of "whole community, which has allowed itself to become debased by dominant culture" (Göbel 131), so the community cannot intercede. For Aunt Jimmy, the community rallies behind her with all of the women in town bringing over their pot liquor to help clear out Jimmy's sickness. Similarly, in *Home,* the women all come after Miss Ethel begins to minister to Cee. They take turns nursing and even berating her, making her body—and her mind—stronger. When she regains her strength and health, she is not only physically better, but she is also mentally prepared for the challenges life will bring. It is through the women's work with Cee that Frank is able to heal as well. Her vibrance begins to even permeate his spirit and disposition, a healing by proxy. In *Beloved,* the community unites to save Sethe from her returned-from-the-dead daughter, and in *Paradise*, one woman assembles a community so spiritually powerful that the women threaten the very fabric of the adjacent city to the point where the townsmen take deadly action against the women.

In each of these examples, Morrison is venerating the community above all, a community of Blackness which was split through the slave trade, America's "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery, and then further compounded even by W.E.B. Du Bois's selection of some as the "talented tenth," and contemporarily with class differences manifesting themselves even in Black communities. This project will argue the presence of spiritual practices, and also a privileging of African American knowledge and experiences, as paramount to Toni Morrison's novels. Morrison connects the ministers of her novels to the lands they cultivate, the religion they value, the divinity they worship, and the communities they serve. Exploring Morrison's engagement of these practices is crucial to understanding Morrison as a novelist and especially as an African American female artist.

A Fire Shut Up in Her Bones, or I Found God in Myself: A Morrisonian Theological Worldview

My son noah built new/ark and
I stood proudly at the helm
as we sailed on a soft summer day
I turned myself into myself and was
jesus
men intone my loving name
All praises All praises
I am the one who would save…
I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended except by my permission
-Nikki Giovanni, "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)"

In 1972, Nikki Giovanni returned from a trip to Africa and wrote "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)." On the continent, it seems the countries, sights, and monuments she viewed affirmed Giovanni's divinity. She felt, as she intimates, "ethereal," as she makes her way across the land. When she talks of walking "the fertile crescent," one can feel her footsteps traipsing over lush greenery (line 2). The claims she makes might seem outlandish since she mentions, "drinking nectar with allah" (line 9) while her "bowels deliver uranium" (line 36), but there is a communion that permeates the African American soul and spirit as it relates to the African motherland. While she traveled through Africa, Giovanni felt at home. Moreover, she felt the presence of God.

Giovanni, as a Black Arts Movement poet and theorist, knew the importance of locating God within the Blackness of her self. The connection—between the self and the spirit—is never stronger than that which is seen in the Black community, especially as it relates to Black womanhood. During and after the 1970s, it was not uncommon for Black women writers to envision themselves as manifestations of God or Jesus. They were literally reimagining the white male God/Jesus of their childhood into their own image, so it is no surprise that Toni Morrison attempts a similar project. In the four novels I am

addressing here—*The Bluest Eye, Home, Paradise* and *Beloved*—Morrison illustrates for her readers another way of knowing similar to the way in which Giovanni can imagine herself as Jesus. As Morrison explains in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Black people "are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality, we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition or magic, which is another way of knowing things" (61). This "other way of knowing" undergirds the four novels as these women—primarily Claudia, Frieda, and Mrs. MacTeer, Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, Ycidra Money, Consolata Sosa, Lone DuPres, and Baby Suggs, as well as several other women on whom I will also focus—engage and enact their own subjectivity through spirituality. As Black women, and African Diaspora-descended women, this acknowledgment of the divine figures heavily in their everyday lives and physical activities.

I structure this essay by first explaining Black women's worship practices, then Black men's and women's worship theory (Black liberation theology and womanist thought), followed by the presence of alternative, and traditional, religion in Black women's literature, before finally focusing my attention on Morrison and her spiritual work. Exploring, even briefly, Black liberation theory and womanist theology allows for a more comprehensive examination of spirituality in the African American community. Church is not only limited to the services one attends; it is an expansion of the self. As Carol Terhune explains in "Coping in Isolation: The Experiences of Black Women in White Communities," "The church is a 'refueling station'…" (550). The Black church *is* the Black community, which is why markers are in place to gauge worship attendance across generations, socioeconomic station, and gender.

In History and Literature: God's Immaculate Presence

"Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (16).

-Nanny, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

For Black women in particular, worship extends further than from just hearing about God in the pulpit. Black women feel God through the presence of His Holy Spirit extending His arms and offering rest. As Melissa Harris-Perry, political scientist and MSNBC news anchor, writes, "Religious faith, most often expressed through traditions associated with black Christian churches, is one way African American women have felt free to admit their vulnerability and seek authenticity" ("Strength" 219). In the Black church, Black women are able to "lay their burdens down" on the altar or in prayer and let the Lord fight the battle. That vulnerability is key to the Black woman's physical and mental health because the most enduring stereotype in the African American community is not Peaches, Caldonia, Topsy, or Aunt Chloe.[iv] Nor is she, "the mammy, matriarch, the sexual siren, or the welfare mother or queen" (Woodard and Mastin 266). Black women are also not "the jezebels, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary pop culture" (Hill Collins 7). The stereotype that Black women have not been able to conquer is the "strong, Black woman" because to some extent, Black women have not resisted this characterization. The Black woman is not supposed to admit her weakness, fear, or insecurities. She is supposed to shoulder the burdens of the Black man, the Black child, and Black life without complaint. During slavery, she was supposed to be able to go back to work in the fields directly after the birth of a child. During Jim Crow's reign, she was supposed to be able to cut her husband, or child, down after he was lynched and go to work the next day. Since the American civil rights movement, she was supposed to be able to raise a family without a husband and still be able to climb the corporate ladder. In the church, though, she can find the space to express herself without threat or judgment.

Ultimately, the role and presence of Black women in the Black church cannot be overstated. For the Black woman, the Black church has stood as the primary training, teaching, and organizing ground for the family since African Americans were allowed to worship in barns, fields, and outside structures

during the peculiar institution of American slavery. In the 1700s and 1800s, the Black church existed to unify Black slaves under the auspices of Christianity, but with the birth of freedom-focused movements, it began to evolve into something much more powerful: the church became a shelter and safe haven for slaves seeking freedom and families seeking escape. Many churches operated as stops on the Underground Railroad or, at the very least, way stations on the road to the North, West, or Midwest, so the Black church became a site of resistance to white oppression. The history of the Black church and political activism has been well-documented[v]. Since "faith, celebration, worship and resistance form the traditional basis of black church life," Black Americans formed an unbreakable bond with the Christian institution (Harris-Perry 223).

For Black women, though, the relationship formed with the church had a slightly different genesis. As Harris-Perry further explains, "The same God that protected Black women under slavery and gave them fortitude to endure bondage is at work in the lives of contemporary black women," so Black women relied on God as the healer of their infirmities and the releaser of their burdens (222). Black men saw their potential for leadership in the church, but Black women recognized their own call to lead. As the purpose of the Black church changed, so did the way Black women interacted with the Black church. The Black church had previously been an infallible institution: the site of struggle and survival, but when Black men began to see the Black church as a liberatory site, Black women also began to envision their own freedom, birthing feminism inside of the patriarchal church. As TeResa Green argues, "Christian feminism is attracted to the image of equality, wholeness, and freedom affirmed in Gal. 3:28: We are no longer Jews or Greeks or slaves or free or even merely men or women, but we are all the same" (117). Black women began to choose freedom, even inside of the male-dominated church.

The church had to rebuild the Black family because the decimation of the Black family, and the absence of Black men in the home, began long before the presence of the Black church as an institution.

American slavery, dating back to the early 1600s, separated families one from another and placed the white master as the head of the Black home. The master was responsible for the care, providence, and shelter of the family while the enslaved Black father worked for years without pay. According to Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," "under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter possesses it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony" (74). The Black father was not allowed to "provide" for his family in any sense of the word, so he was not versed in the ways in which to care for a family; however, because of the necessity of new slaves, he was aware of how to procreate and make a family. Black men fathered children with Black women, and the Black women were, sometimes, responsible for the nursing of their children, if the children were not automatically sold away. For at least nine months, then, Black mothers were able to bond with their children. For the Black man, this connection was not always possible. In short, the Black family structure was, from the genesis of Black American enslavement, much different from the traditional, nuclear family structure seen in the master's house. Black men were, quite literally, breeders for the family but not heads of the household.

There were families on the plantation allowed to remain together, sometimes even residing in the same home, but the Black father was still largely unable to care for his family. He still had no discernable income, or input; however, the formation of the church structure embodied a shift in the perception of Black maleness. With the birth of a formalized Black church, Black women were able to see their men stand and be leaders, heads, and organizers. Most importantly, Black women began to see their men as preachers: the ones called by God to speak the Word of the Lord. Christianity, having been one of the most important tenets of the English enslavement project, now being turned over to Black slaves, irrevocably changed the position of the white master as all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful.

Black women, then, found themselves in the church as teachers, evangelists, and prophets, even though they might not have been allowed to sit in the pulpit with male preachers and leaders. The deacons' board was reserved for men, so was the trustees' board, but the Sunday school teachers were primarily Black female. In God, Black women found there was the promise of "an alternative measuring stick for judging their human worth" (Harris-Perry 222). Black women were found to be capable teachers in the classroom of the church but were not afforded the opportunity to lead a congregation. Even though "the Black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the Black community," Black women still needed to locate their place in leadership of the selfsame church (Harris-Perry 223).

Enter the Black Liberation Theology movement. According to Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Black religion developed as a response and expression of a people oppressed on the basis of race" (197). From there, Black theology developed because there "is a need for a God in black people's own image" (198). If God was to be a God worshipped in the Black church by Black people, then He should resemble His worshippers. Quoting James Cone, the founder of Black liberation theology, Calhoun-Brown explains, "The significance of black theology was found in the conviction that the content of the Christian gospel is liberation" (198). Black men and women had been freed from slavery, and even from Jim Crow laws and segregation, so they were now looking for that same freedom in the church, as a result, there was Black liberation theology.

Black liberation theologies "existed long before their formal intellectual explication beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s," because slaves "came to understand the dignity and worth of all people and that their God had no respect of persons" (199). If the slaves prayed, and God answered their prayers, then they knew that God heard them just as clearly as He heard their masters. This means religion is a fundamental aspect of the slave's lived experience, but the Black woman still had to develop a theology that included her as well, since Black liberation theology was decidedly male. An

outgrowth from liberation theology is the movement that became womanist theology, a take on Alice Walker's volume, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.* In the collection, Walker explains a womanist is someone who "loves the Spirit," which was taken by womanist theologians to be the Holy Spirit; however, Walker offers no definition for a "womanist theologian," so practitioners must define their theory individually (Walker xii).

According to Linda Thomas:

> Womanist theology is critical reflection upon black women's place in the world that God has created and takes seriously black women's experience as human beings who are made in the image of God. The categories of life which black women deal with daily (that is, race, womanhood, and political economy) are intricately woven into the religious space that African American women occupy. (n.pag.)

Womanist theology is a personal space, and in the volume, Walker muses on the lived experiences that have shaped her life, and especially those which shaped her religious perspective. In one of her definitions for womanism, Walker shares a conversation between a mother and daughter: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada, and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.' 'Reply:' 'It wouldn't be the first time'" (Walker xi). In other words, one of the primary considerations for a womanist sensibility is to stand despite fear.

Kelly Brown Douglas, who wrote a very practical explanation of womanist theology and pedagogy in "Teaching Womanist Theology: A Case Study," explains that the womanist must "enter the story of Black women's struggle for survival and freedom for themselves and their families" (135). Though I have not yet transitioned to my discussion of Toni Morrison's religious work in her *The Bluest Eye, Home, Paradise,* and *Beloved*, this is a key consideration to remember: Black women begin their struggle for themselves and their families. Womanist theology, then, teaches the "culture of resistance"

Black women have come to know and share with one another. Even looking back to Black liberation theology, the Black woman was not offered a space in the theory, so she made her own and called it "womanist." Womanist theology exists in conversation, dialogue, and mutual exchange. It does not happen in a vacuum with one Black woman, but rather, as even this project germinated, it happens from the community of Black women coming together with a collective goal. The "thought, experiences, and wisdom of women must be the basis for womanist thought," so it is imperative that Black women retain and remain in the center of womanist theology (Brown Douglas 135).

The online magazine, *For Harriet*, defines womanist theology thusly:

> Womanist theology, as an established field of study, seeks to confront the negative stereotypes and erasure of Black women's roles in theology, the church, the community and society, by challenging the constructions of their personhoods (or nonexistence) in these respective areas. It critically examines the dialogical relationship between Black women's social allocation and faith as dual sources of survival and liberation. (n.pag.)

What is also key to womanist thought, and Black women's religious freedom, is the diversity of thought that comes from the sharing of experiences, which is why I offer several definitions of womanist thought. As Brown Douglas explains, "Throughout Walker's definition of womanist there are references to the *diversity* of the Black community in general, and of Black women in particular," so Black women must remain open to the differing and, possibly even, difficult experiences of other Black women (136). The Black woman is not a monolith, neither are Black women's concepts of religion and spiritual. This is echoed by Patricia Hill Collins in a section of *Black Feminist Thought* in which she discusses "Black women's standpoints" instead of the Black woman's standpoint. Black women do not necessarily have to agree with another woman's perspective on religion solely because of the similarity of their racial or social backgrounds. Womanist theology, as an outgrowth of womanism, explores how womanism

manifests itself with Black women's spirituality especially in line with the third definition: "*Loves* the Spirit" (Walker xii). For the Black female womanist, the project of spirituality, religion, Christianity (in particular), and the Black church as an institution, all stand to be considered as sites of revolutionary struggle.

In three literary works in particular, African Diaspora religious tradition functions as womanist theology. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and bell hooks' *remembered rapture* all include the very distinct tradition of African American praise, worship, and healing religion. In *The Color Purple*, Walker writes even in the preface, this is a book "about the desire to encounter, to hear from, the Ultimate Ancestor" (n.pag.) She considers the novel a "theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual" (n.pag.). What most readers know is that Celie, a fourteen-year-old Black girl, has strong faith in God, but Walker intends to teach the "possibility of a conscious connection to All That Is" (n. pag.). Celie's journey from an untested belief in God to a mature understanding of faith is chronicled through Walker's work because it was abundantly necessary for Black women to see themselves as important to God. In fact, for the first almost two hundred pages of the novel, Celie is writing letters to God about her life, but towards the middle of the novel, Celie begins to address her letters to her sister instead of God.

The traumas that had happened to Celie in her letters—rape, teenage pregnancy, loss of her two children, forced marriage, and domestic abuse—did not discourage her from a relationship with God until this letter:

> Dear God,
>
> That's it, say Shug. Pack your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me.
>
> But I feels daze.

> My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa.
>
> You must be sleep.

After all of the letters to God, that were actually closer to prayers, God had not answered Celie's petitions. Shug had decided to take Celie away from Mr. _____'s house, and Celie did not believe God had anything to do with her deliverance. When Shug finds out Celie had stopped addressing her letters to God, she asks Celie, "What happen to God?" Celie replies, "Who that?" Before saying, "What God do for me?" (193). Shug explains people attend church to share God, not find God (196). As the section continues, Shug explains to Celie all the places in which one can find God, but none of those places is inside of the church. Black women would have to locate their spirituality on their own. Black women knew God, but they had to reimagine His face. They began to see themselves as extensions of Him.

Similar to the way Alice Walker takes the responsibility for human salvation away from God, in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, God lives in the people of Willow Springs, a small island located across the bridge from Georgia and South Carolina, which would be the actual site of the Gullah/Geechee nation, a sect of African Americans who were able to retain much of the African Diasporic spiritual practices. In Willow Springs, Miranda (or Mama Day) uses herbal medicines and remedies she takes from, as Naylor calls it, "the other place" in order to heal the people (43). When a woman is having trouble conceiving, she consults Mama Day for the cure; however, Mama Day is sure to clarify her power comes from the Lord. She is not superior to His will. When the life of her granddaughter is at stake, though, Mama Day and her sister, Abigail, will utilize what resources available. They begin to do more than pray that God heals; these two women join together to make sure there is a cure. When Mama Day tells Abigail, "some

things can be known without words" (267), this illustrates the supernatural power of spiritual engagement. To save a life, Mama Day consults God and her garden.

Though Mama Day locates her spirituality in her garden, she is emblematic of Black women's quest for personal divinity. When author bell hooks writes about faith in her own life, she consults her pen. One of the earliest experiences of spiritual awakening for her happened at a classmate's church when she was a child. In *remembered rapture*, she recalls that her parents told her she was "not to allow [herself] to surrender to the call of divine rapture. [She] was not to be moved by unseen spirits" (124). She was raised in a conservative house, so the Pentecostal tradition of rousing worship was strongly discouraged. Despite her parents' instruction, she knew "the spirits were there in the tent that night. [She] could hear and feel them" (124). Because she had attended with her friend who was accustomed to this type of service, the friend was unfazed, but hooks was "mesmerized. Awed to be a witness to mystery" (124). From that moment, spirituality became her foundation. Her writing was about what she could feel and experience, the "force that had the power to call us, to touch us with the divine spirit" (125). In short, for hooks, "writing becomes a way to embrace the mysterious, to walk with the spirits, and an entry into the realm of the sacred" (130).

As bell hooks relies on the presence of the spirit, Delores Williams engages the Spirit as a site of liberatory theology. In "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," she explains:

> The importance of this emphasis upon the spirit is that it allows Christian womanist theologians, in their use of the Bible, to identify and reflect upon those biblical stories in which poor oppressed women had a special encounter with divine emissaries of God, like the spirit. (n. pag.)

hooks' essay not only explains the word of God as it relates to the Spirit, but she has a deeply personal connection to the movement of God in her presence. She is not only reading about God, she feels and

sees God. Just as Jesus was wounded by God for humanity's sake, Black women often feel similar pain, with glory to come. Most Black women do not believe that they are Jesus-incarnate, but Black women identify with His humble beginnings.

Toni Morrison, though, makes it clear that she adheres to the tenets of no movements and refuses to be categorized as a "type" of writer. She is not a feminist, a womanist, or any either other –ist. This does not mean, however, that Morrison does not have a distinguishable religious project in her works, especially as it relates to Black women. Morrison, as Channette Romero argues, highlights the "historical importance of Christianity for mainstream American and African American nationhood and community building" (415). Black women, then, reckon with Christianity in intriguing ways, especially when reading through a womanist lens since, Toinette Eugene in "To Be of Use" argues, womanism "demonstrates African American women's emerging power as agents of knowledge and as providers of liberating care in the church and the world" (139). Womanism should not seek to confine Morrison's project, but does offer some assistance in explicating it.

In her own critical thought from *What Moves at the Margin*, Morrison explains how her novels should make the reader:

> Feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede and to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered. (59)

Participatory spirituality is key to African American religious practice. Black worshipers do not sit idly as the preacher delivers his sermon. The congregation actively engages their own bodies in the sermonic work. They add in key phrases, expand upon the sound, converse with their neighbor (when asked), and visibly react to the word shared. It is a practice of faith. There is room for the entire church to become

involved, and it is imperative that the hearers respond. Even in my own worship practice, my pastor will comment that the house seems "cold," or the people are "asleep" when no one is standing, singing, or waving hands during the service. She expects participation from the congregation, and active engagement with the sermon, praise, and worship.

Since "American blacks are, by some measures, the most religious people in the world," this religion permeates African American life (Patillo-McCoy 767). In the article "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community," Patillo-McCoy explains the way the structure of the Black church exists both within and without the four walls. Because Black church attendees "feel" God inside the church, that same feeling carries and extends beyond the church. It is a feeling one may experience listening to music, praying, or reading the Bible. This is why, in Morrison's work, the worship can take place outside of the traditional church structure. In my estimation, another part of the reason Morrison does this is the historical reluctance of Black men to relinquish the pulpit to Black women. In the home, a Black woman can preach a sermon, sing the choral songs, and bring listeners to spiritual awakening without having to concern herself with her "proper" place.

Turning to the novels, though, Morrison does feature Black male ministers, especially the traditionally religious—Reverends Locke and Maynard in *Home,* Reverends Misner, Cary, and Senior Pulliam in *Paradise,* and even Elihue Whitcomb in *The Bluest Eye*—but a non-traditional Black female preacher typically counters them. Morrison does not use the men to carry the ministry; instead, the female characters take up the mantle to preach, teach, heal, deliver, and set free. When Morrison's first novel was published, 1970, "about 3 percent of clergy were female" (Barnes 372). Morrison is clearly responding to that deficit with courageous womanist action in her novels.

In the four novels under study here, I am looking at the religious tradition carried by Morrisonian women across time, space, and place. This tradition is evidenced through the placement of call-and-

response engagement, usage of prayers and spirituals, acknowledgment of God, service to the ministry, delivering of sermons, placement of religious symbols, and the working of miracles. Since this is an engagement of the spiritual tradition of Black women, I will mention Black men infrequently, but when the need arises, I will mention how religion shapes the men as well. For the most part, though, I use African Diasporic women as the site of the spiritual connection with attention focused on the specific female characters.

In the article, "'She Was Laughing at Their God': Discovering the Goddess Within in *Sula*," Michele Pessoni offers this about Morrison's work: "[Morrison] began to explore the possibility of discovering divinity and meaning from within, of reconnecting to the feminine archetype buried deep within the human psyche in order to resurrect a way of seeing and feeling which offers the promise of healing of life to an ailing world" (439). The women in Morrison's texts are not oppressed by their femininity; femininity instead offers freedom from the oppression of the outside, heteronormative, patriarchal world. Additionally, the woman is not "the repressed virgin of Christianity"; instead, she—meaning each woman—is "the spirit of the Great Goddess, the archetypal feminine virgin/mother/crone who can provide what traditional patriarchal institutions have failed to provide: reverence for all forms of life" (439). The women are able, through Morrison, to enact personal and spiritual subjectivity through an identification of themselves as representations of God's glory.

The Church as the Foundation of Faith

Morrison offers the traditional church as an integral site of identification for men and women in three of the four novels under examination here. When she opens 2012's *Home*, she begins with a man lying in a hospital bed. As the man, who we come to know as Frank Money, begins to plot his escape from the hospital/mental institution, he remembers "when he was handcuffed in the backseat of the patrol car [and] had swerved his head wildly to see where he was and where he was going" (9). As he

looked around, he saw "a huge yard sign for a tiny church: AME Zion," and right then, he decided, "if he succeeded in getting through the fire exit that's where he would head: to Zion" (9). Zion, here, has a dual purpose. Not only is Morrison referencing the literal name of the church, but she is also making a reference to Zion, which has religious significance across denominations as the Promised Land.

The Black church also functions as an affirming site when Frank's grandmother, Lenore, recalls her wedding. This time, the church was God's Congregation, and it was the place Lenore and her husband, Salem, took their wedding vows (despite not being able to receive a wedding license because neither had a birth certificate). The Money family church is also referenced when Ycidra is interviewing at Dr. Beauregard Scott's home. His wife questions her about her church affiliation. The conversation proceeds thusly:

> Mrs. Scott: 'What church affiliation? Any?'
>
> Ycidra: 'There's God's Congregation in Lotus but, I don't…'
>
> Mrs. Scott: 'They jump around?'
>
> Ycidra: 'Ma'am?'
>
> Mrs. Scott: 'Never mind.' (59)

It seems Mrs. Scott was asking if Ycidra attended a Pentecostal church, one where African American parishioners consider "catching the Holy Spirit" par for the course at every church service, similar to the service hooks remembers. She, apparently, wanted to know what *kind* of church Ycidra attended, not just whether she was a regular attendee. Interestingly enough, Ycidra had not attended God's Congregation for at least several months, but Mrs. Scott did not care to allow her to finish. It seems it was not really important whether or not Ycidra attended church. Mrs. Scott was just asking the questions she felt she should ask about the type of woman coming into her home. Church attendance, in many

ways, signaled respectability, and Mrs. Scott only wanted respectable women in her home (even though Dr. Scott would be performing despicable work on the women).

As in *Home*, the church continues to function as a safe haven in *Beloved.* There are three prominent examples of the church as a site of safety and security. The former home of a church minister, which acts as a corollary of the tradition church structure, is where Baby Suggs finds her first site of safety. After her son, Halle, purchases her freedom, Baby moves to Ohio into a house vacated by a preacher's family. She would then walk the floors of the former home of the minister, which after the indignity of slavery, was bound to make her feel closer to God. Interestingly enough, in that house, Baby Suggs answers the call to preach. It seems the preaching power of the house's former occupant transfers to Baby Suggs.

When Paul D finds himself in the church, it is because he is escaping the weight of Sethe's confession. After finding out Sethe had murdered one of her children (and attempted to murder two others), he leaves Sethe's house and comes to the Church of the Holy Redeemer to find rest. He refuses offers to live with another family in the community; he would prefer to sit in the house of God, drink, and think. The peaceful feeling Paul D seeks in the church mimics a recollection by Stamp Paid about the taste of fresh blackberries. Stamp Paid says, they tasted "so good and happy that to eat them was like being in church. Just one of the berries and you felt anointed" (136). In the house of the Lord, Stamp Paid was no longer a slave; he was touched by the power and presence of God. The women, and even the men, of *Beloved* acknowledge the traditional role of the Black church as a refuge center, a place of peace.

The function of the church in *Home* is as a sanctuary; in *Beloved*, it is a place of rest; but in Ruby, with three churches, it is a site of contention. In *Paradise*, the infighting among the pastors makes their churches non-neutral "institutionalized" spaces (Romero 416). When a town meeting is called, they

collectively decide to meet at the Oven, a central space in town since no one would agree to meet at someone else's church. The presence of God does not permeate Ruby; there are far too many conflicts, divisions, and issues. Morrison appears to be criticizing the traditional church structure because the citizens of Ruby find only persecution in their churches, not redemption. The God of Ruby was supposed to vanquish, not save. Because the people who populate Ruby were used to being turned away by other communities, they kept their community close-knit and impenetrable. Even God could not come in without permission, so in *Paradise*, the reader sees a Christian religion which "works to divide individuals from each other and the world" (Romero 416), not a benevolent, accepting church.

The feeling of there being no safety in a house full of God's images extends to *The Bluest Eye* as well. When a young boy named Louis Jr. invites Pecola into his home to see some kittens, she walks into a "beautiful house. There was a big red-and-gold Bible on the dining room table" (89). There was also a "color picture of Jesus Christ hung on the wall with the prettiest flowers fastened on the frame" (89). Judging the room by what she could see, she assumes safety in God. While Pecola was looking at the room with the big Bible and the painting of Jesus, Louis, Jr. was plotting on her. He chases her around, tosses a cat on top of her, and then locks her in what appears to be a sitting room. While in the room with the cat, Pecola begins to calm down by rubbing the cat's fur. When Junior sees this, it reminds him of his own mother preferring the cat to him, so he becomes enraged and swings the cat into the radiator while his mother is unexpectedly arriving home.

Geraldine's house has all the symbols of God, so this should be a safe space. Patricia Hill Collins intimates, "…Bible principles are [applicable] to the lived experiences of African-Americans and become symbolic representations" (277). Despite the outward appearance, though, Geraldine's house is dangerous for a girl like Pecola. Here, the reader finds that the symbolic appearance of God does not necessarily signal God's presence. In the house with big red-and-gold Bible and the color portrait of

Jesus, Louis's mother curses at Pecola and tells her to leave her house immediately because she "reads Pecola as dirty, poor, and unworthy" (Mermann-Jozwiak 194). Crushed, Pecola walks out of the door, and she sees "Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes" (92). Even the savior will not save her. In *The Bluest Eye,* then, God tends to function much differently than in the other novels. He is not the salvific figure of lore, as Pecola is not saved in this instance, nor is she saved later. Even Pecola's mother, who should function as a child's first image of benevolent God, only illustrates God's judgment with none of His care.

When Pauline marries Cholly Breedlove, she brings the devil right into her home. Cholly is a man who preferred the devil because the devil was "holding the whole world in his hands, ready to dash it to the ground" (134). The devil was "strong" and "Black" and able to "blot out the sun," but God was weak (134). For Cholly, God was white, so Cholly had little faith in His power, and Pauline exponentially increases her spiritual connection in an effort to balance Cholly's lack. She becomes the picture-perfect Christian, and bore her husband "like a crown of thorns, her children like a cross" (127). She attempts to embody even the burden of the Savior as she shoulders Cholly, Sammy, and Pecola.

Not only does Morrison offer symbols of God without the practice of faith, as we see above, but she also offers perversions of those symbols. One of the symbols present in *The Bluest Eye, Paradise,* and *Beloved* is the Christian image of the cross. In an interview with Robert Steptoe, Morrison explains, "Black women have held, have been given, you know, the cross. They don't walk near it. They're often on it" (479). Pauline feels herself crucified every time she returns home from the Fishers' house and finds the filth of her own universe staring back at her because as Jane Kuenz argues, "Her job with the Fishers provides her with the semblance of acceptance and community she cannot find or create in her own home and neighborhood" (n.pag.). Pauline takes up her cross as a sign that God sees and knows her, and she finds joy in the damnation of others that her cross allows. In Pauline's eyes, there was no

God outside of the God who required perfection. As the narrator explains, "Mrs. Breedlove was not interested in Christ the Redeemer, but rather Christ the Judge" (42). As such, God's people, including her husband and children, must be close to perfection as well. If they fell short, which they, of course, would do, Pauline then discarded them and turned her full attention to God.

In Christianity, the cross is the visual representation of the suffering of Jesus Christ that led to the salvation of God's people. Additionally, La Vinia Delois Jennings connects the cross to the "identifiable West and Central African traditional cosmologies that entered the New World through Vodoun in the Caribbean, Voodoo in the United States, and Candomblé in Brazil" (22). Jennings goes on to explain that "these cosmological survivals fold seamlessly into Morrison's narratives just as they are invisibly tucked into the (un)consciousness of the African Diaspora of the United States" (22). In Morrison's novels, the cross, for some, becomes a weapon; others use the cross as a tool. When Reverend Misner in *Paradise* talks about the cross, he has a salvific image in mind. Despite his anger at the way fellow minister, Reverend Pulliam, had perverted Christianity, Misner explains that the cross was the:

> first sign any human anywhere had made: the vertical line; the horizontal one. Even as children, they drew it with their fingers in snow, sand, or mud; they laid it down as sticks in dirt; arranged it from bones on frozen tundra and broad savannas; as pebbles on riverbanks; scratched it on cave walls and outcroppings from Nome to South Africa. Algonquin and Laplanders, Zulu and Druids—all had a finger memory of this original mark…Remove it and Christianity was like any and every religion in the world…Without this sign, the believer's life was confined to praising God and taking the hits. (145-146)

Reverend Misner's image of the benevolent cross-bearing savior who would save is not the cross-bearer Pauline sees, though.

The cross, which in Christianity symbolizes the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, functions for Pauline as a symbol of the work she came to complete. Pauline took up her cross to bear it. She used the cross of redemption to lord it over her family and neighbors, not as a symbol of forgiveness and inclusion. The more she learned about Christ, the more she punished her husband and children. Pauline was not always a woman who used the cross as a weapon, though, for when she first met Cholly, she and he would stretch their "arms outwise like Jesus on the cross," enjoying each other, but that was before Pauline's fall from grace (130). After Pauline lost her front teeth, and embraced her own ugliness, she resigned herself to only being a perfect Christian, carrying the burden of her family. While the cross once symbolized love and protection, it comes to represent damnation and judgment as she used and then perverted this symbol of the almighty and righteous God.

Similarly, in the Convent of *Paradise*, men also use the cross as a tool of denigration and degradation. The same damnation Pauline issued over the life of her husband and children is eerily reminiscent of the men of Ruby's invasion of the Convent. As they make their way through the women's house after having killed the white woman they meet at the door, they see "the outline of a huge cross" and "clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus" (12). For the men who already believed these women were godless and unredeemable, seeing the absence of the cross and Jesus is too much for them to fathom. At this moment, they solidified their mission to rid the town of these women. To them, the Convent women were "malevolently disconnected from God's earth" and could not continue, so the men choose to take the women's lives (18). The men of Ruby, who should be protectors of women, become their executioners perverting the very idea of the creation story in which men were charged with protecting all the living things of the earth.

The perversion of the cross, exemplified through Pauline and the men of Ruby, also happens in *Beloved.* For Sethe, the cross does not represent freedom from sin; a cross represents the enslavement of

her mother, which is a perversion of the cross that initially symbolized freedom. Deborah Guth, in '"Wonder What God Had in Mind': *Beloved*'s Dialogue with Christianity," explains that in *Beloved,* the cross is first introduced as a mark branded on Sethe's mother's body" (87). This is not only the first, but it is the only memory Sethe has of her mother, and after Sethe learns her mother has been hung, she goes to check the body, looking for the cross, but "nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all Sethe" (61). Not only does the cross not represent the savior, but it is also not a positive referent. For Sethe, it reminded her of her mother's branding, her own marking, and the capriciousness with which slave life was treated. A man had first branded her mother's body, and then men took her mother's life, and the cross that should infer salvation instead symbolized both instances.

Even though the cross was synonymous with slavery for Sethe and dishonor for Pauline and Reverend Misner, it was a cross that led Mavis to the Convent and to her escape from domestic abuse. When Mavis leaves her husband and children and drives toward the highway, she passes a hospital with "a green cross in a field of white" (28). In a moment of complete transparency, she recalls that she had been a patient "four times for childbirth" but fifteen times total (28). The text does not explain the reason for the other eleven admissions, but it is fairly obvious that her husband is abusive. For Mavis, then, who would become a permanent resident of the Convent, the cross was her only hope. The cross was the signal that there was joy to come if she would go find it.

Acknowledging the Presence of God

In addition to the symbols that relate to God, Morrison places acknowledgments of God's presence and protection throughout the four texts. In each of the novels, characters mention God's house, His people, or His presence, which undergirds the spirituality sensibility of slaves, former slaves, and the descendants of slaves. Sometimes, the acknowledgment is simple, as when in *Beloved*, Sethe is recalling her introduction to schoolteacher. She remembers that he was "the kind to know Jesus by His

first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face" (37). In this moment, Sethe is recalling the schoolteacher who was not a monster. This schoolteacher is not the one who allowed adult men to drink the milk from her breasts, nor was he the monster who would have her whipped when she reported the men's behavior. He was, in this instance, "gentle in a lot of ways" (37). Sethe respected schoolteacher before she found him to be the devil incarnate in the text. After Sethe escapes the devil, it is a white girl who reminds her that God is still working of her behalf. Amy Denver, a runaway who finds the near-death Sethe and nurses her back to a measure of health, tells her to be sure to "thank your Maker I come along," reminding Sethe to be grateful even in that moment of extreme pain (79).

These moments recollecting the plan and providence of God happen frequently in *Beloved*. When Amy Denver sees the wounds on Sethe's back, she wonders aloud, "what God had in mind" (80). Amy had never seen a woman look as battered as Sethe, but she still knew God has a plan for both of their lives, even if it was not clear in the moment. Amy, working through the power of God, made sure to do her part while Sethe was in her care. According to Nicole Coonradt in "To Be Loved: Amy Denver and Human Need—Bridges to Understanding in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" "Amy [is] a prophetic healer and a compassionate white woman who plays a crucial role" (169). Morrison develops Amy Denver as the angel of God because Sethe, just like Frank Money, needed a miracle. Sethe was literally dragging her pregnant body through the woods when Amy Denver showed up out of nowhere, but this is how God manifests in the lives of the faithful. Even as she and Amy Denver go about the work of saving Sethe's newborn daughter, Sethe remembers it was only the two women working, "no pateroller came and no preacher" (85). The pateroller would have returned Sethe to slavery, but the preacher might have helped her on her path to escape; however, neither was coming, so Amy and Sethe would have to do for themselves. The preacher would have been a man on whom these two women could rely, but he was not

present. These women had to harness the power of God for themselves, so they pray, and then they work.

God's presence is recognized in all areas of life, including the successful journey from slavery to freedom. Sethe, of course, is not the only one in *Beloved* who acknowledges the providence of God because Stamp Paid remembers a time when they "baked, fried, and stewed everything God put down here [on earth]" to celebrate Sethe's arrival at 124 Bluestone (156). God had been a provider for Stamp Paid time and again, but this time, Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid created a large feast to celebrate Sethe; however, this same feast left some attendees extremely jealous. They felt like "loaves and fish were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave" (137). Though the community wanted to celebrate Sethe's safe homecoming, they thought Baby Suggs felt like she was God, which they resented. Even former slaves believed there should be limits to God's work and that included Baby Suggs's ability to cook more food than they could possibly eat. The excess of Baby Suggs's party did not make her neighbors admire her; instead, they rejected her for what they considered pompous behavior. Morrison is affirming that even illiterate slaves had a relationship with God despite being unable to read and understand the Bible. In other words, these slaves and former slaves experienced God, even though they could not read about Him.

The strong faith in *Beloved* counters the weak, perverted faith of *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison offers an example of a man who uses the religious foundation of the community for his sexual deviance. After Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer take in their boarder, Mr. Henry, Claudia and Frieda see him in their house with two local prostitutes. When they ask him what he was doing with the women, he replies they are from his Bible class (78). He believes that the children will accept his explanation without question because he invokes a practice with which the girls are familiar. Claudia and Frieda know they are supposed to report his behavior to their mother because she would not allow women like "that" into her home, but

they later decide against it since the women did not touch anything important in the house. Mrs. MacTeer's house was respectable, so she would not allow prostitutes to sit in her living room, drink from her cups, or eat from her dishes, even if they *were* actually there to study the Bible. Mrs. MacTeer is the image of a good, Christian woman, one who takes in those who need a home (Pecola), and does not allow depravity into her home (the prostitutes). Mrs. MacTeer could not be seen with immoral women in her home, which would actually make her a hypocrite. If she is called by God to minister to those who need assistance, then that includes even women who are hired for sex.

In the Black community, sexual immorality is taken seriously because the appearance of propriety is key. The idea of "looking respectable" actually runs counter to the teaching of Christ, but it is pervasive in communities of the oppressed. In these communities, respectability politics govern the way in which Black women act. Defined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the "politics of respectability describes a range of strategies, largely regarding notions of honor, self-respect, piety, and propriety" (724). For example, in *Home,* the older women of the community invoke the assistance of Reverend Alsop to discourage an older single woman from introducing the local teenagers to sex. Many in the small community felt "teenagers had to learn somewhere," and as long as it was not with their own daughters, it was okay. The older grandmothers, though, thought her behavior was deplorable, and called in the local preacher to assist them. However, Mrs. K., as the woman is called, has no respect for the preacher, and when he comes over, she throws coffee on his shirt (90). Apparently, she did not acknowledge the holiness of his presence, or even the presence of His Holiness. Mrs. K. was not concerned with respectability and its politics, so she lived a life with which she was pleased; however, this made her a pariah in the small town because she lacked respectability. As Aisha Durham et al. explain, respectability politics "employs tactics such as surveillance, control, and repression, [so] it ultimately succeeds in reinscribing dominant systems of power, namely, white capitalist

heteropatriarchy" (725). When Mrs. K. resists censure by the preacher and the community, she acknowledges her God-given right to control her life and her own body.

When Pauline Breedlove attempts to carve out her own identity, it is through a damaging use of faith. From Claudia's perspective, "It was as though some mysterious, all-knowing master had given each of them a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question" (39), and Mrs. Breedlove in particular used hers for "martyrdom," which explains the way in which Pauline treats her children and husband (39). Pauline Breedlove felt her appearance added credence to the burden she was born to carry. For it was in church, Pauline said, her dreams of acceptance grew. In the church, as Allen Alexander argues in "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Pauline is able to imitate and echo "the teachings of slave masters, who manipulated biblical passages to stifle dissatisfaction among those they oppressed" (294). As a child, she was special to no one. In church, she was special to God. In her eyes, "the songs caressed her, and while she tried to hold her mind on the wages of sin, her body trembled for redemption, salvation, a mysterious rebirth that would simply happen, no effort on her part" (113). Pauline was constantly preparing for the next life when she would be released of the challenges of her current life. She was waiting for someone to rescue her, and "the someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest" (113). In Pauline's imagination, that Presence would carry her away from the shame of poverty, ugliness, and abuse. In the meantime, she would focus on beating the devil out of her husband and children in preparation.

Pauline Breedlove has a deep understanding of God as sovereign, so she focuses her life on service. She acknowledges that God must have preordained whatever gifts and trials she has, so she does not blame society for her understanding of beauty and unattractiveness; she sees her appearance as God-given (or God-gifted). Instead of attempting to repair her relationship with her husband as his wife, she

begins to think even her marriage is a trial by God intended to strengthen her faith. Though it may seem Pauline has descended into an unhealthy relationship with God, she is Morrison's best example of a woman who is fully reliant on God for her salvation, but she is also the Morrisonian example of a woman who did not recognize her own divinity. Pauline is only living to be rescued by the Presence, the Presence that promised her rest.

In the worldview of the characters, in the same way God gave the Breedlove family unattractiveness, according to Soaphead Church, God also gave the world evil. Morrison wades into a major theological debate on the presence of good and evil, and she uses Soaphead to explain one position. He says simply, "Evil existed because God created it" (172). At the very least, He allows evil. In *The Bluest Eye,* Cholly appears as the presence of that evil. In *Beloved,* he takes the shape of schoolteacher. In *Home,* he is the evil Dr. Beauregard Scott, and in *Paradise*, he is Deacon Morgan, the leader of the Ruby men, a man who only desired the taste of hellfire peppers. After Consolata's affair with this devil of this man, she finds she has the power to raise the dead, and her first patients are this man's children.

Consolata, though, is a well-trained Catholic, so she does not believe in alternative spirits and powers. She says being able to raise the dead was "like devilment. Like evil craft" (246). Lone DuPres, though, admonishes her for that line of thought, saying, "Don't be a fool. God don't make mistakes. Despising His gift, now, that is a mistake" (246). Though Consolata would continue to use her power, she sacrificed her sight for it. God "burned the green away and replaced it with pure sight that damned her if she used it" (248). When Consolata danced with the devil, she received a power unlike any she had ever felt. This devout Catholic becomes a conjure woman, one who was gifted to heal, and she begins to understand the need for a "balanced, connected worldview" (Romero 417). Consolata was tempted by the devil, and she fell for him, but God still redeemed her. Unlike the Christ of the Bible

who resisted the devil, Consolata cannot resist the temptation, but she is not damned. She is eventually redeemed through her salvific work with the Convent women.

An acknowledgment of God might be signaled in the texts by the church, the preacher, and the paintings of Jesus, but it seems without a reverence for His presence the symbols are empty and useless. In *Beloved*, the women resist the power of the devil through the invocation of scripture. Similar to the way in which Aunt Jimmy in *The Bluest Eye* ignores everything but "the words from First Corinthians" when she falls sick, the women in *Beloved* quote scripture as well (136). Before they come to Sethe's house to exorcise the ghost of Beloved, Ella, the leader, tells them, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," which is from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Ella could not allow this devil-woman, Beloved, to have free rein over their community. Immediately after Ella quotes the scripture, the text explains, "nobody needed more" to be moved to action (257). To do their work, the women brought both their folk wisdom and the word. "Some brought what they could and what they believed would work… Others brought Christian faith—as sword and shield. Most brought a little bit of both" (257). All of the women had "goody bags" full of healing remedies, and covered in prayer, they left for Sethe's house to rescue her from the living, breathing ghost. The women agree that action must be taken, and with the consent of the Holy Spirit, they act.

Although the presence of God functions as a signifier in all four novels, an inclusion that speaks to an underlying sense of spirituality in the novels, Morrison illustrates that the presence is not enough. In Morrison's theological worldview, prayers do not work unless the petitioner rises up in action (Sethe); potions will not cure unless the sick accept their remedy (Ycidra, Aunt Jimmy); potions written by devious men will have no effect (Pecola); sermons offered in vanity will not save (Reverend Pulliam); simply placing symbols of God in a house will not make a house a temple of God (Geraldine).

In short, Morrison exemplifies that having faith means nothing unless the faithful are willing to do the required work.

Other Acts of Service

In the Black church, it is no secret that members regularly conduct acts of service as a part of the church body. In some churches, the work includes cleaning the sanctuary, counting the tithes, teaching Sunday school classes, or cooking for large church events. In Morrison's work, women conduct similar acts of service as they practice spirituality, even in their non-traditional ministry positions. Service is the work the women in *Home* complete on Cee. As they prepared themselves, "their devotion to Jesus and one another centered them and placed them high above their lot in life" (128). Because of their service to Christ, they became more than maids and mammies; they became mothers.[vi] It was their faith that ensured them success in healing the girl.

Similarly, it is Pauline Breedlove's faith in the sureness of glory that makes her an "upright and Christian woman" (42). She was "an active church woman, did not drink, smoke, or carouse, defended herself against Cholly, rose above him in every way" (128). Her service to the church and her dedication to the Lord allowed her to transcend physical deformity, dental decay, and accept unattractiveness. Pauline believed that if she took care of God, God would take care of her. Pauline chose God over the world because God was the only one who could rescue her. It is the practice of Pauline's spirituality that allows her to fashion an identity. Though Pauline's religion makes her dangerous to her family, like the men of Ruby are to the women of the Convent, it is all she has to control the world. Like those men, Pauline's religion makes her believe she is better than those around her, a simulacra of religion. Pauline does not use religion as service to the lesser man; she only uses God as a way to belittle others. She is not inviting or loving, she cannot even love her own daughter back to life. Pauline all but abandons her husband and her children to worship God and work for a white family. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*,

Morrison illustrates the danger of having religion without spirituality. It is through spirituality that religion becomes a positive force in the lives of Morrison's women. Without spirituality, Morrison's women use religion for condemnation.

Conversely, Morrison offers Consolata as the embodiment of what Christ-like love should be. Consolata uses her relationship with God in service to others. God gifted Consolata with an ability to serve, and her "teachings attempt to implement a new, more accepting form of religion that focuses on the community" (Romero 417), so when a young dead man is brought to her, she resurrects him. After Consolata successfully brings Scout, the young man, back to life, she learns that she can do the same for the woman who kidnapped/adopted her, Mother Superior, and the women of the Convent. All she needs to do is locate "the pinpoint of light" after she steps in, and she can bring the dead person back to life (289). Consolata functions as a Christ figure in the text, healing women, raising people from the dead, and creating disciples. This was the work she was called to complete. Consolata's tangible presence as the symbol of God does much more effective work than the presence of Bibles or painting of Jesus would do in the Convent, but the men of Ruby are so used to empty symbols that they are blind to the salvific figure before them. They cannot see beyond Consolata's womanhood to imagine her as divine.

Baby Suggs, though, has the respect of her fellow formerly enslaved men and women, and she was allowed free rein to preach in the Clearing, even though she was not offered a pulpit in any traditional church. La Vinia Delois Jennings, in *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa,* explains, "Baby Suggs' designation as an 'unchurched preacher' denotes that she may be considered a lay priest outside the doctrinal jurisdiction of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (163), but Baby Suggs still considers her call to preach in the Clearing her reasonable service and spiritual practice. Suggs' sermon is in line with Thea Bowman's explanation, "When we remember from whence we came, then we can look into our souls, our Black souls, and testify to that we have seen with Black eyes, heard with Black ears, and

understood with African hearts" (307). When Baby Suggs arrives in her new home, she "had nothing to make a living with but her heart," so she became a preacher (87). The text says:

> Accepting no honor before her name, but allowing a small caress [holy] after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. In winter and fall she carried it to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. (87)

Baby Suggs's service was simple; she opened up her heart and let the words flow. She admitted she "always wished she could read the Bible like real preachers," but she did not let that stop her from doing her best work (208). According to Emily Griesinger, "Baby Suggs' sermon is *genuinely* Christian nevertheless in understanding that salvation includes the body and in recognizing that God does not look on outward appearance but penetrates the heart" (694). Preaching was how Baby Suggs practiced her religion, and before she left the pulpit, she—in the tradition of unconventional preachers—preached mightily in a forest-surrounded Clearing. As Michéle Bonnet writes, "The people first sit among the trees, intimately connected with them…and it is from them they leap in response to her call" (44). The trees and the Clearing then operate as the site of her sermon, offering the agreement of nature to her words. Baby Suggs, however, would not have called her sermons "preaching," "insisting she was too ignorant for that—she *called* and the hearing heard," but she delivers a powerful word (177). Here, and I will only quote a portion of her sermon, she implores, "Love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all of your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too" (89). Lastly she tells them, "[L]ove your heart. For this is the prize" (89), and "love is better when it is communal" (Draga

Alexandru 200). When the men, women, and children of the Clearing learn to love their bodies, they will have achieved their freedom.

After almost a lifetime of slavery, Baby Suggs knows what truly matters. It is not whether or not she was educated, or had fine clothes or belongings; it was the beating of her heart and the love held within it. In the traditional church, she would not have been allowed to preach her message, but in the Clearing, it was welcomed, so she "fixed on her own brand of preaching" (147). Her life was spent "giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick; hiding fugitives; loving; cooking; cooking; loving; preaching; singing; dancing and loving everybody," and she loved them with her words (137). Baby Suggs knows what the presence of God feels like, and she wants to be able to share it. Morrison offers this alternative image of the preaching ministry because Black women are just as powerful as Black men when it comes to the delivery of the sermonic word. Morrison, literally, clears a space—a Clearing—for Baby Suggs to do the work God called her to do.

When Baby Suggs quits the ministry after finding ministry could not protect her from white men, there is a distinct sadness in the community. Baby Suggs believed having free papers actually meant that she was free, but white men still entered her yard uninvited. For her, there was no deeper disrespect. Stamp Paid, a conductor for escaped slaves, attempts to goad her into returning to the pulpit, by bridging a conversation about her calling to preach. He tells her:

> 'You missed the Clearing three Saturdays running.'
>
> 'Folks came,' he said.
>
> 'Folks come; folks go,' she answered. (178)
>
> As they continue their walk, the conversation continues:
>
> 'Saturday coming. You going to Call or what?'
>
> 'If I call them and they come, what on earth am I going to say?'

> ‘Say the Word!’ He checked his shout but it was too late…Bending low he whispered into her ear, ‘The Word. The Word.’
>
> ‘That’s the one other thing they took from me,’ she said.

In the above section, Morrison uses the call-and-response pattern developed through African-American wordplay. According to Maggie Sale, “Call-and-response patterns, developed in spirituals and play and work songs, are related to the group or communal nature of art; these patterns both value improvisation and demand that new meanings be created for each particular moment” (42). Even though Stamp Paid is angry with Baby Suggs, he still engages her in familiar form of conversation. What he does not know is that when the slave-catchers came into her yard for Sethe and her children, Baby Suggs quit. She gave up on everything except “something harmless in this world,” and she chooses to spend the rest of life surrounded by color (179). Baby Suggs does not return to the pulpit. She laid it all down, sword and shield, and prepared to take her rest. Baby Suggs had been stripped of her ability to work for God because He allowed those white men to come into her yard to take Sethe back to slavery. Even more devastating than Pecola’s descent is Baby Suggs’s decision to leave the pulpit. I read this as a complete failure of Baby Suggs’s faith, if not also a failure of God. He who left Baby Suggs with only her heart allowed men to come in and take that as well. Baby Suggs accepts defeat, which ultimately leads to community-wide brokenness, but another woman of faith, Miss Ella, calls together the women for another practical act of spiritual awakening. Miss Ella eventually fills the absence of Baby Suggs, though Miss Ella’s calling is not to preach; her ministry is to exorcise, which I explain in detail later.

Just as Baby Suggs and Miss Ella called the people together, Consolata’s sermonic invocation is more like the command Jesus makes to His first disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew, telling them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). Consolata, though, tells the women, “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I

say… 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. Someone could want to meet you" (262). The pronouncement is the same: follow me, and in both instances, the followers accept the request. After the reincarnated Reverend Mother, Consolata, assembles her congregation, she can then preach, teaching "the Convent women to connect to the natural world and each other" (Romero 417). In her sermon, she tells the women of a time when her body was hurt and women saved her (the nuns). Then when her flesh was hungry, it ate a man (Deacon). As she closes, she tells the women, "Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263). In other words, Morrison refuses to damn the mother of the earth since that woman was the vehicle through which the mother of the Savior entered the world.

La Vinia Jennings surmises, "Consolata's priestly text is an analogue to Baby Suggs' exhortation of flesh love in the Clearing…" (176), and both Baby Suggs and Consolata focus their attention on love. Christine Bieber Lake explains, "Morrison, following generations of African Americans, clearly draws religious ideas from Africa and from the west. But she insists and demonstrates that African Americans found in authentic Christianity something that it needed to survive—a distinct focus on love" (54). Miss Ethel has the same spiritual message for her congregation of one, Ycidra, as she sits in Miss Ethel's garden. Miss Ethel tells the newly-made-whole Ycidra, "You back home. Mended finally, but you might just run off again. Don't tell me you going to let Lenore [Ycidra's grandmother] decide again who you are… Look at yourself. You free" (125-126). In Miss Ethel's estimation, someone had to tell Ycidra how valuable she was to herself and to God. Because no one had ever done it before, Ycidra had not known better than to run off with the first man who came calling. Miss Ethel ensures that would never happen again. Not only did Miss Ethel have to address Cee's physical scars, she had to acknowledge why Cee felt she was worthless. As Bieber Lake explains, "Love [is] charity extended through

community to the 'least of these'" (54). Miss Ethel, relying on the grounding of faith, teaches Cee her value to God, and her value to the community and her family.

Conversely, the sermons from men who are ordained preachers are much different than the love and encouragement the women offer each other. From Reverend Cary, one congregation in Ruby learned about the vices of the world: television, disco, and policemen (274). The message was not intended to give the congregation compassion or empathy; they did not intend to extend "a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense" (275). When Reverend Misner and Senior Pulliam preach, it is a competition, and "Senior Pulliam had scripture and history on his side. Misner had scripture and the future on his" (150). The two men are not worried about peace, salvation, or love; they are only concerned with the other's congregation. Instead of being like Baby Suggs who chose to study war no more, the reverends of Ruby are constantly in the midst of disagreement. They had not yet learned the gospel of peace.

In Sethe's home and in the home of Mrs. MacTeer, there seems to be a proliferation of a gospel intended to create and keep peace. When Sethe tried to assert her authority over Beloved, she tells her, "Honor thy mother and father that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. I will wrap you round that doorknob, don't nobody work for you and God don't love ugly ways" (242). Because Sethe is responding to disobedience, her brief invocation of scripture is directly related to behavior modification and an invocation of peace. In the same tradition, when Mrs. MacTeer finds Pecola has drunk three quarts of milk, she launches into her own version of the sermon. She says, "Bible say watch as *well* as pray. Folks just dump they children off on you and go on 'bout they business. Ain't nobody even *peeped* in here to see whether the child has a loaf of bread. She could be *dead* for all he know" (25). Not only is Mrs. MacTeer preaching, but she is offering inflection to her words through the italics indicating stress. As she draws to a close, she says, "Bible say feed the hungry. That's fine. That's

all right. But I ain't feeding no elephants" (27). At the beginning of her sermon, she is upset because Pecola drinks mug after mug of milk. When she remembers what the Bible says, she includes God's Word in her message. In her close, she remembers the call she has to be of service. Her congregation, her children and Pecola, are familiar with this particular word, but they listen in anyway, at least until the part about "Roosevelt and the CCC camps" (25).

What Claudia and Frieda were really waiting for was the music that came after Mrs. MacTeer's "sermon." Claudia knows, "If my mother was in a singing mood it [the sermonizing] wasn't so bad" (25). For Claudia, the songs her mother sings add so much joy, Claudia "found herself longing for those hard times" (25). Now, her mother is not singing spirituals in the traditional sense, but the intention is the same: to ease a sorrowful situation with sorrow-filled music. Morrison's inclusion of African American spirituals undergirds her religious project, as Negro spirituals have captured the African American's social and cultural positioning since slavery. Spirituals were "signal" songs used by slaves to have church service and also to make their way to freedom. Even in a more contemporary era, these songs still signal safety, even for Claudia MacTeer.

Spiritual songs function as a symbol of peace in addition to connoting religiosity. In *Paradise*, that spiritual is "Amazing Grace," and it is sung after the curtain falls on the Nativity play. A community of men and women make up the chorus who bellow, "I once was lost but now am found" (212). In Ruby, they found a place of their own since they had been disallowed in so many other places. Ruby was their home, so they were no longer lost in the wilderness. In *Home*, that spiritual is "Nearer My God to Thee," and it is what Frank hears as he brings his near-death sister up the steps to Miss Ethel's house. He is bringing Cee away from the devil, Dr. Scott, and nearer to the agent of God, Miss Ethel. Ironically, that same spiritual is the one the MacTeer's boarder, Mr. Henry, is singing after he molests

Frieda, and Mr. MacTeer throws a tricycle at him (100). As he runs away singing, he is not seriously injured.

As statements of enduring faith, Pauline Breedlove finds herself singing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," as she prepares for deliverance by a Stranger, who would turn out to be Charles "Cholly" Breedlove. He was supposed to be the one who led her on because she was too weak to stand. Pauline knows the Word, and she knows to depend on the Word. She believed God would bring her deliverance, but He actually brings her Cholly, who delivers her from one hell and brings her to another. Instead of taking Cholly's hand, Pauline should have waited on the Lord to deliver her. Conversely, after Frank drops Cee off with Miss Ethel, he could hear women singing, "Take me to the water. Take me to the water. Take me to the water. To be baptized" (117). Because Frank needed an unconventional cure for her unconventional ailment, he relies on their faith to heal. He felt both hopeless and useless, so this spiritual gave him the strength to wait for news about his sister. She and he both would need to be made new just as converts are when they rise from the baptismal font.

Not only do Morrison's novels feature unconventional preachers and those who sing unconventional spirituals, but there are also those who bask in the presence of God with a different type of spiritual engagement. According to Christopher Ellison and David Gay, there is an "otherworldliness" as it relates to Black American spiritual engagement (127). This otherworldliness involves a "highly emotional worship style," which is what Frank Money experiences in a neighborhood jazz club (127). As Frank sits, he listens to a band play. At a point in their performance, "The pianist and the trumpeter were through, the drummer was not" (108). The Spirit had overtaken the drummer, and he "lost control. The rhythm was in charge" (109). Eventually, the pianist and the trumpeter "lifted the drummer from his seat and took him away, his sticks moving to a beat both intricate and silent" (109). The spirituality in the jazz club is so looming and overwhelming that even outside of the church, it can overtake jazz

musicians. A similar possession happens to the Convent women as they dance in the rain. They became "holy women dancing in hot sweet rain" (283). As they danced, they were like the women singing in their backyards to be taken to the water to be baptized, except here, the water came to them. The singing in the kitchen, playing in the club, and dancing in the rain are a part of what Trudier Harris calls, "the vibrant folk traditions" of Morrison's novels (325). Black women, and men for their part, find new and interesting ways to engage the God of our mothers and fathers. Also, Black women found new ways to create miracles.

For the most part, the miracles come after the sermons are preached and the spirituals are sung, but they also need the prayers of the righteous to be prayed. Belief in God is supposed to be the key that unlocks the miracles of God, but Frank has seen no such miracles. Frank is not too sure what God can do because he had witnessed firsthand the ineffectiveness of prayer. When a family Frank lodges with for a night tells him about their son whom a "redneck rookie" shot, Frank listens intently to the boy's story (31). The child lived but was left with a slight disability, which the parents said kept him out of trouble. Frank asks, "So the boy cop did him a favor?" The father responds, "No. No, no, no. Jesus stepped in and did that. He said, 'Hold on there, Mr. Police Guy. Don't hurt the least of mine. He who harms the least of mine disturbs the tranquility of my mind'" (31). For this child's family, God even allows physical disability to fulfill His ultimate plan.

Since prayer saved the life of that child, Frank begins to wonder why prayer did not work for his friends. Frank begins to think back to Korea, and although he was not the most religious soldier, he had seen other people pray: "Beautiful, thought Frank. Bible stuff works every time every place—except the fire zone. 'Jesus. Jesus!' That's what Mike said. Stuff yelled it, too. 'Jesus, God Almighty, I'm fucked, Frank, Jesus help me'" (31). Mike and Stuff both died in the line of duty, so Frank was not sure about the effectiveness of prayer or even the presence of God. Frank had to find a different way to deal with

his trauma, which he does not until he returns home and focuses on Cee. Through his redemptive work on his sister, Frank is also able to work through his depravity in Korea. As spiritual practice, Frank exchanges the life of the child he killed with the life of the sister he saves.

Both Frank and Sethe move beyond trite prayers to action. She is not the "traditionally figured [Mary] weeping helplessly at the foot of the Cross" (92), Sethe uses violence to control her world. After slavery, freedom, jail, freedom, and then enslavement to the presence of her returned-to-life child, Sethe was not sure what her relationship with God was supposed to be. When Denver sees her mother praying, she asks her what she was praying about. Sethe responds, "Not *for* anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk" (35). Sethe understood that God might hear a prayer, but He would not necessarily answer it. Twice, she says, "God do what He would," but she knows she has a part to complete as well (31) (198). Sethe illustrates that faith without works is dead, so she decides that she would have to act while praying. Sethe acted when schoolteacher, one of the nephews, a slavecatcher, and the sheriff came to take her back into slavery. Sethe also acted when Mr. Bodwin came toward her house looking like schoolteacher all over again, though the actions were very different and had different conclusions.

Action is why Miss Ethel knows she had to heal more than Cee's body; she had to heal her mind. Action is also why Pecola, who had prayed for invisibility, realized she needed to do more when she wanted blue eyes (45). For a year, she prayed, but then she took action. Like Claudia and Frieda, she believes she can "make a miracle" (191). With her prayers in her heart, she goes to Soaphead Church and asks him to give her blue eyes. She does not actually receive them, but she believes that she does. Her faith makes it so. Pecola needed a cure beyond her own power, but God was not going to grant her petition. God made her Pecola fearfully and wonderfully already, but she did not believe it. What Pecola needed was not a miracle; she needed very practical conversations about the beauty of her Blackness. Pecola should have instead prayed to God that those around her be sighted since they were, in fact, the

ones who were blind. Pecola represents for them the personification of the ugliness they tried to avoid. Pecola was all one could expect of Jesus; she was loving, caring, benevolent, and kind, but no one can recognize her as a savior because she is Black; she is "nothing to see" (Mermann-Jozwiak 194). What this means is that her community would not recognize Christ even if He were living in the same house because the only God they knew was a white man.

Morrison then creates alternative images of Jesus to counter the white man in Cholly's mind and the white man on Geraldine's wall. In the novels, Jesus takes the shape of the little Pecola Breedlove, the Brazilian orphan in Consolata Sosa, Miss Ethel Fordham who brings Ycidra back to life, and Amy Denver who does the same for Sethe. Images of God, then, run counter to the prevailing stereotype of who God should be. Through Morrison, He becomes white, Black, or Latina, female, old or young. These images of God are made in the likeness of His own people, which is Morrison's primary project: if one is going to see God, then God must be reflective of the seer. If God's people see themselves in God and God in them, then the selfsame people would believe in their own power to work miracles. For instance, in Ycidra's house, there could be a miracle because the women recognized the God operating within each of them. They, who covered her in "the most useful prayers," made sure the Lord would work. They did not only pray to God, but they believed in their own power, and they used it. Similarly, in *Paradise*, Consolata, Gigi, Mavis, Divine, and Pallas are temporarily raptured away (292) (296) (298), but they return in their own power. Morrison is a little ambiguous as it relates to the women of the Convent after they disappear, but Lone DuPres considers the women as having been raptured away. However, each of the women later returns to their homes, all except Consolata, and they reunite with their families for a brief moment. When the women return to their homes, they have been changed by their experience in the Convent because they are healed of their afflictions. As Channette Romero argues, "The women change. They become more 'sociable and connecting,' they appear 'calm' and have

a more ‘adult manner’” (418). They are strong, independent, and powerful as opposed to their having left as weak, dominated, and powerless. During their time with Consolata, they had been called to salvation, baptized in the rain, and then transfigured before their families. Returning to Pessoni’s article on the “Great Goddess,” the archetype is a woman who “functions as a unifying force, connecting human beings to one another and nature in moral, social, and psychical interdependence,” which Consolata does for her boarders (440). She recreates the women in her own image.

Conclusion

What Morrison teaches through all of the women in the four novels is that God has given women power to change their own lives. They can create miracles; they can save lives; they can heal. Pecola, in all honesty, did not need blue eyes; she needed to accept herself, which she might have been able to do had the world not conspired against her. Pauline did not need a Stranger or a Presence to rescue her, she needed to look into a mirror and find the beauty of her own reflection, not gaze at a movie screen and internalize an unattainable standard of beauty. Ycidra needed to see herself as her brother saw her, useful, valuable, and cherished, and she does after she spends time with other women who would speak into her life. Sethe needed to approve of herself and her decisions instead of believing she needed to be punished for choosing for herself what would happen to her children.

As Black women began to embrace their call to be ministers of God, the opportunities that were available were initially slim. Black women could take no position that was higher than the position of a man in the church. Even contemporarily, this remains true. In some Black churches, Black women are not allowed to preach from the pulpit nor would they be allowed to pastor a church. It might not a hard rule, but it is one that is unspoken and well-established. In Toni Morrison’s work, though, she collapses the separation between Black women and ministry work because it is a division that does not need to be one. As we see, in Morrison’s novels, women will sing spirituals and pray, which is traditionally

women's work, but they will also preach sermons, which was traditionally men's work. Even Stamp Paid, who implores Baby Suggs to return to the Clearing and preach, does not even consider taking the mantle from her. He knows that the work she does is the work God created her to do. As Pessoni writes, "Morrison's characters are all in desperate need of spiritual connection because they inhabit disconnected and nonregenerative patriarchal societies," and Morrison offers alternatives to these societies (440).

Since the men in *Home, Beloved,* and *The Bluest Eye* move out of the way and let the women work, they, for the most part are successful. When Claudia and Frieda decide to make a miracle, though, they are ill-equipped for the work they try to do. But when Sethe and Amy Denver work together to save lives, both Sethe's own and her child's, they are successful because they have been trained. Amy has learned how to heal, and Sethe was the mother of three other babies. They come together with the covering and protection of the Holy Spirit and invoke Him when necessary; however, they do not blindly rely on the Lord to work a miracle; they make their own. In *Paradise*, Morrison is really detailing the dangers of normative Christian religion and practices, so the women have to work around the men, which then makes the women's eventual salvation even more miraculous. In Morrison's texts, she illustrates how God saved His best gifts for Black women.

I Belong to Myself, or Body, Eyes, Memory

You were sitting on a big rock, watching the water as if you were waiting for an apparition. Papi paid one of the boys by the riverside to interpret for him while he asked you who you belonged to. And you pointed to your chest, and said, yourself. Do you remember? (91)

So opens Edwidge Danticat's 1998 historical fiction, *The Farming of Bones*, a text that chronicles the life of a young Haitian girl, Amabelle Desir, just after the massacre of Haitians living and working in the Dominican Republic in 1937. Though her employers do not know this, Amabelle is sitting on the rock because she had watched both of her parents swept under the strong current of the Massacre River. It is through this trauma, immediate and devastating, that Amabelle instantly becomes an orphan, and her presence of mind in this moment is frank. She no longer belongs to anyone but herself because she has no parents to take her home, no brothers and sisters to ever see again, and no family that would come to rescue her. She belongs only to herself. Amabelle's sudden realization that she is her own even though she is a "child who still must hold a hand to walk, a child who must look up to talk" (139) mirrors that of the decision Black women must also make during the course of their own lives.

Since the life of the Black woman is complicated by race, sex, and class considerations, owning herself is typically the last thing she has historically been able to do. According to Helen Tiffin in "Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid," "The erasure of the female body and its possible reclamation is of course central to the contemporary feminist debate, and has its own genealogy within feminist discourse" (909), so in the four Toni Morrison novels I interrogate here, *The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Paradise,* and *Home*, Morrison offers the space for Black women to refashion independent identities in the face of social,

parental, and spousal responsibilities. Patricia Hill Collins, in "The Power of Self-Definition," from *Black Feminist Thought*, queries, "How have African-American women as a group found the strength to oppose our objectification as 'de mule uh de world'?" (109), and I surmise it is by reclaiming the self through spiritual work. What women seek is a chance to become the fullest version of the person God created them to be, and to see their bodies as temples to be used of God and themselves as vessels fashioned in the image of God. As women reclaim themselves, they reclaim their right to God's divinity inside of them.

In this essay, I begin with an exploration of Black women's self-creation during slavery, after its formal end, during the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, and then to the present day. Then I interrogate Morrison's novels, using the words of one of her own characters, to chart the growth of women's reclamation of the self as divine practice in the four novels mentioned above. This essay will outline the process of women reclaiming divinity, but because that divinity only comes after the women acknowledge their minority status and then consolidate their weaknesses, the realization of their divinity will come near the end of this analysis.

The History of Black Womanhood

First, let us look at the experience of the Black female slave. On the Southern slave plantation, as bell hooks explains in "Sexism and Black Slave Experience," "Enslaved black people accepted patriarchal definitions of male-female sex roles. They believed, as did their white owners, that a woman's role entailed remaining in the domestic household, rearing children and obeying the will of husbands" (47). I do not agree with hooks' supposition that enslaved Black people "accepted" these definitions—rather, I argue these definitions were forced on families in a new country by the structure of the plantation economy. Instead of African slaves accepting, I surmise that they acquiesced to the hierarchy they came to understand. As Paula Giddings explains in "To Choose Again—Freely" from the

volume, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, "History had not instilled in Afro-American women 'the spirit of subordination to masculine authority by either economic necessity or tradition'' (58). What the slave woman was able to do, though, was "maintain authority over the domestic domain—as women had traditionally done" (58).

Similar to the slave "household," slave masters/owners made the important decisions, while his wife, being a proper lady, did not typically involve herself in her husband's business; however, a mammy could "extend their domain to the master's house"(58), so the Black woman retained spheres of influence despite her enslavement. She did know her place under white authority because when the slave woman was sold, she was typically sold to a man. When she arrived at the plantation, it was a man who unloaded her. When she was sent to the fields, the overseer was male. It seems untenable that despite all of this maleness, she would then believe, as hooks writes, she had power to exert over male slaves. Additionally, hooks admits Black male slaves were the first to be brought to the New World with women to follow later, which means men were already accustomed to the plantation, so for the women who had just arrived to submit to the men who had already been living on the plantation seems only logical.

Despite this disagreement with hooks' version of the slave system, the important conclusion is that the slave woman, after being purchased by the white man, was given to a Black man as his "wife" to bear children and had no personal subjectivity or sovereignty. A woman was the property of some other entity outside of herself. Moving forward through history and after the end of chattel slavery in America, Black women were still largely unable to manage their personal lives without the oversight of another party since "they did not have the ability to create an autonomous household" (Byrne 27). During the Jim Crow era, 1876-1965, Black women experienced more freedom than they had before as education became available for privileged women. Though there was more freedom to organize and participate in

women's rights activities, most of these women still returned home to patriarchal households. It was the taste of what could be, though, that changed the way in which Black women thought of themselves.

For example, women like Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, Georgiana Simpson, and Eva Beatrice Dykes were redefining what it meant to be an African American in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ida B. Wells was campaigning for the rights of women, as was Mary Church Terrell, with Terrell, in 1884, becoming one of the first African American women to earn a bachelor's degree. In 1909, Terrell and Wells were asked to be founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Terrell was later asked to write a creed for all African American women to follow, which she did in the late 1930s. The creed includes a galvanizing call to Black women stating:

> I will not shrink from undertaking what seems wise and good because I labor under the double handicap of race and sex but, striving to preserve a calm mind with a courageous spirit, barring bitterness from my heart, I will strive all the more earnestly to reach the goal. (63)[vii]

A generation later, Black women would continue to heed Terrell's call. In 1921, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, Georgiana Simpson, and Eva B. Dykes were pursuing doctoral degrees, ultimately becoming the first, second, and third African American woman to receive a doctor of philosophy degree in the same year (Giddings 65). Alexander went on to pursue a law degree, which she also attained, becoming the first African American woman to hold both doctor of philosophy and juris doctor degrees.

While individual women were making strides for the rights of all women, organizations like Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated were organizing for the rights of women nationally. After the organization's founding in 1913, the first public act of the historically Black sorority was to march in the women's suffrage march of 1913 (Giddings 55). As college-aged, socially-mobile, financially-privileged

women, they had not yet been pressured to marry, so they were free to charter organizations, march, and engage in revolutionary acts of individualism. From there, many organizations began to germinate, offering women alternative lives to the ones they were directed to by their parents, friends, and well-meaning college instructors. It was no longer the automatic go-to life plan for a young woman to be married and begin to have children. She could not only choose to remain unmarried and childless, she could choose to enact personal subjectivity through her employment and living options. Women began to see the necessity, and the inherent value, in making their own decisions and becoming autonomous, which would allow them to own themselves and embrace their divinity.

During the American civil rights movement, which overlaps with the Jim Crow Era by about ten years, Black women continued to work and organize about racist oppression, but many had yet to tackle sexual oppression. For many women, the monster outside of the home (racism) was a lot easier to combat than the one inside (sexism). Though, when women learned of the feminist movement, reproductive choice and sexual liberation, there was then another shift: women saw themselves as whole, capable women. Lesbian women, unmarried women, and even some women who were not quite sure about the feminist movement, joined with other women for broad legal protections through the social and political movement deemed Black feminism. For Black women, an understanding and appreciation of feminist ideals helped them to define themselves for themselves in a new America. This was not without challenges from the patriarchal establishment, though, with men like Stokely Carmichael suggesting that the woman's position in the movement was "prone" (Brownmiller n.pag.).[viii]

Despite this and even other Black men's reluctance to accept Black women as their equals, Black women still experienced a fundamental shift in self-perception. They had seen enough examples of women who named and claimed themselves to know that it was possible to be more than a mother, wife, and daughter. They claimed themselves to be persons, with or without spouses or offspring. As Mary

Helen Washington explains in the introduction to *Black Eyed Susans: Classic Stories By and About Black Women*, "People other than the black woman herself try to define who she is, what she is supposed to look like, act like, and sound like. And most of these creations bear very little resemblance to real, live black women" (ix). In Black women's literature, there are examples of Black women who resisted characterization as mothers, wives, and daughters, in what became, unsurprisingly, many of these Black authors' most well-read and well-studied novels.

Key examples of this independent streak are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Sula,* and autobiographies by Maya Angelou—*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—and Ann Moody—*Coming of Age in Mississippi.* It also surfaces in Black women's plays, like Ntozake Shange's self-described choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, and Black women's poetry. Even Black women's slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs' experience, express Black women's pursuit of freedom and individual identity. However, Hurston's and Walker's work is key because in 1937, Janie's eyes are watching God. In 1982, Walker's Celie writes to God. In Morrison's novels, the women become like God. The independence of Morrison's women bridges the gap between the natural world and the spiritual world, so the God who once would have been separate from them, women can now see as reflected in them.

The individuality that precedes divinity manifests in each novel differently. *Beloved* challenges the way in which we define motherhood. *The Bluest Eye* explores our ideas of parenthood (and, of course, beauty). *Home* complicates womanhood, and *Paradise* offers images of all three: motherhood, parenthood, and womanhood. In *Paradise,* that is what the women create: a paradise centered on the women, their needs, desires, and expectations. A place in which a convent of women come to say, "I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of my me-ness" (Lorde 11). Reclaiming the self as having been made in the image of God takes historical

interrogation, self-reflection, and focused attention, which is what I argue Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Claudia, Frieda, Pauline, Ycidra, Consolata, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Billie Delia do in their respected texts. Even Pecola attempts to fashion herself as a woman she can live with, and though we as readers may believe Pecola has failed in creating herself, she seems satisfied with her reflection. In that way, Pecola recognizes the power of God to change the circumstances of her situation. Though unsuccessful to readers, Pecola embodies the presence of God shielding one of His most fragile creations from death, even if not destruction.

If the end result of empowerment work is to be able to find "god in myself," and "love her fiercely," as Ntozake Shange instructs at the end of *for colored girls*, then the necessity is locating the God inside of the self, and then loving that self just as fiercely as the God of the self. As an extension of Diasporic spiritual practices, the Black woman's work in reclaiming her self is of vital importance. In an African community, women might not be equal to men, but women are valued as important community partners and are free to worship. Their bodies bring forth children, nourish and nurture those children, and then prepare them for adult life. These blessings were withheld from the mothers of slave children; many times they were prevented from even nursing their own children.

In Morrison's novels, which function as an alternative space of spiritual and physical reclamation, individual choice becomes vital to the creation of an African American female identity; however, sometimes the creation of the individual identity meant disavowing those aspects of identity typically used to denote womanhood, e.g. mothering, marrying, and nurturing. Some women, despite their inherent womanhood, chose to follow a different path, e.g. Consolata Sosa, Miss Ella, and Lily. In many ways, their choice made them divine because it is the notion of making the choice that is a central indicator of individual personhood. Having the ability to decide within one's self whether or not one wants to marry, have children, and take care of a home is of the utmost importance, especially

considering societal pressure to choose a "traditional" life. In "The Birthing of Self," from the anthology *Arms Akimbo*, Janice Liddell cites a Nigerian woman writer who explains, "In marriage, men are like amoeba. They embrace, absorb, and entirely devour the identity of their partner, her name, state of origin, private property, and a whole lot more" (14). In Morrison's texts, we see women who refuse the "amoeba" of marriage and create an individual self. Female characters in these novels constantly invoke their right to individual choice and freedom.

In Morrison's own words, she once found herself feeling like, "I was somebody's parent, somebody's this, somebody's that, but there was no me in this world" (*Conversations* 19). Morrison went looking "for that dead girl" who used to be her, and she found that girl in her novels (19). What Morrison had to do, what women all must do, is reclaim the self from outside sources that work to limit the expanse of one's self-actualization. Liddell explains, "Even where marriage is not the single devouring culprit, Africana women are effectively invisibilized in both private and public sectors," so because "patriarchal tools, often coupled with identity-devouring tools of racism, conceal the true selves of so many Africana women, even from themselves," women have to sometimes even disregard what they believe they are supposed to be for who they can become (14).

When Morrison writes about Black women, she shows us who the women are and who they can be since "Black women exist as the backbone of their culture" (Higgins 181). Criticism on Ntozake Shange and Zora Neale Hurston also speaks to Morrison because she illustrates a "distinct African American female self in all its idealized and flawed dimensions," which is what Carol Marsh-Lockett explains about Shange (47). Marsh-Lockett's theory about Shange mirrors what Morrison does when she creates not only her female protagonists, but also the women who round out the supporting cast of characters. There is a sense that Black women are "complete, complex, undiminished human beings" (Walker 85), as Alice Walker details in one of her three odes to Zora Neale Hurston included within *In*

Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens. Black American women are complete while being complex, but those complexities do not diminish any of these women. In their work, these authors, Hurston, Shange, and Morrison embody the spirit of God through the practice of creation in literature.

Understanding Minority Status

Earlier in this essay, I quoted Janice Liddell's essay, "The Birthing of Self," and this essay explains why a birthing of the self is necessary for Black women. The impetus behind Liddell's work was, for her, the memory of needing to contact a female colleague and then realizing that she could not locate the number in a phone book without knowing her colleague's husband's name. In that moment, Liddell felt the erasure of women through marriage. As I center this analysis, I look to Mari Evans's poem, "I Am a Black Woman" where she writes:

> I am a black woman
>
> tall as a cypress
>
> strong
>
> beyond all definitions still
>
> defying place
>
> and time. (n.pag.)

The key line, of course, is that Black women exist beyond definition, so when these women insist on telling their stories, the reader must disregard conventions, judgments, and assumptions to listen. Patricia Hill Collins notes, "Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating their own internally defined images of self as African American women" (94), so Black women continually raise their voices. If a Black woman tells her story, but the world refuses to listen, Amy Jacques Garvey instructs, "Be not discouraged black women of the world, but push forward, regardless of the lack of appreciation shown you" (94).

The lack of appreciation shown by the world manifests quite clearly in Claudia's prescience in the narrative of *The Bluest Eye.* As Claudia discusses the reality of being put "outdoors—the real terror of life," she describes outdoors as:

> the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. *Being a minority in both class and caste* we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to live with… (emphasis my own) (17)

In the making and reclaiming of the African American female body, there are three significant points to pull from Claudia's statement. One, that Black women are minorities in both class and caste, two, Black women consolidate their weaknesses, and three, Black women attempt to creep singly into the major folds of the American garment. Looking to Morrison's texts that offer women the opportunity to reclaim their selves, I will use Claudia's statement to organize my reading and Patricia Hill Collins' chapter on "The Power of Self-Definition" for theoretical support. For Black women tasked with claiming their own divinity as instruments of God, reclaiming the self must precede their work.

For Deacon and Steward Morgan, the patriarchs of *Paradise*, the image of what a woman should be seems to be encapsulated in their visit to one of the older Colored towns. In this section, Deacon and Steward Morgan concretize their image of the perfect Black woman. Perfect Black women should:

> [wear] 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…Laughing and teasing, they

> preened for a photographer…Slender feet turned and tipped in thin leather shoes. Their skin, creamy and luminous in the afternoon sun. (109)

This is what Deacon and Steward believe that women should be, how they should dress, and how they should interact with each other, so when the Convent women arrive, Deacon and Steward are appalled. The women of the Convent are nothing like the Negro ladies of the summertime they remembered. Instead, the women of the Convent have "plain brains" and with "no one to bother or insult them," they "managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew" (8). To Deacon, they are women "like none he knew or ever heard tell of" (8). Women who, despite being "just women," had "no male mission to control them," so they became "heifers" and "sluts" who "don't need men and they don't need God" (201, 233, 276). Most importantly, these women had to be stopped. As Linda Krumholz explains in "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, "The distinction between good and bad women allows [the brothers] to scapegoat the women of the Convent…" (24). In the women, the brothers see everything that could doom their New Haven [Heaven]. Since the men of Ruby see women as minorities in class and caste, they want to make sure that all women realize they are just women who have no right to individual thought, achievement or feeling. In Deacon's estimation, women are supposed to be lovely, quiet, and smiling, preening for pictures, giggling at the attention of men, and operating under the guiding thumb of an all-knowing Black man. Women are raised to understand they exist as a part of an underclass, organizing on the margins of society, participating only as an auxiliary character.

It is *The Bluest Eye* that offers the most vivid examples of female empowerment, and interestingly enough, as Morrison's first text, it seems to outline her literary project for the rest of her career: moving the marginalized to the center. Alice Walker's first definition of womanism also seems to explain the young women of *The Bluest Eye*—even though Morrison's novel predates Walker's

volume—because it refers to "outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more or in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in doing grown-up things. Being grown up" (xi). Womanism is a concept in Black womanhood that existed long before Walker's work, but her definition still offers necessary language. Because "adults do not talk to [Claudia and Frieda]—they give [them] directions," the girls are left to explain the world on their own terms (10). Pecola, though, does not have that womanish sensibility, and she feels her minority status both at home and at school. Pecola "loses every sense of selfhood, [so] she attempts to obliterate her body piece by piece" (Mermann-Jozwiak 194). When she is with her family, Pecola prays, "Please, God… Please make me disappear," and when she is at school, she was "the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk" (45). Claudia believes it is her youth and non-whiteness that make her a member of a minority class, but Pecola believes it is her ugliness that made her "ignored and despised" (45) by all those with whom she came into contact. Like Claudia and Frieda, left to her own devices, Pecola assumes the "distaste must be for her, her blackness" (49) when she is shunned in the classroom and the community. It seems to the girls that Blackness, and especially deep Blackness, makes one physically unattractive and unworthy.

In 1941, when *The Bluest Eye* is set, African Americans had not yet risen up as a united voice screaming, "Black is Beautiful!!!" In 1941, Black girls in Lorain, Ohio, were beautiful if they were light-skinned with long, wavy hair. The dolls were all blonde with blue eyes; the movie stars were either blonde or brunette with blue or green eyes, and the only Black woman reflected on the screen was either in *Imitation of Life* (which is mentioned as the origin of Pecola's name) or *Gone With the Wind* with both principal Black women working as maids. Black girls did not yet see themselves reflected in the starring images on the movie or television screen or on the movie paraphernalia milk cups.

In the 1940s, even the Black women who were able to carve out some semblance of a career, Josephine Baker and Dorothy Dandridge, for example, were extremely light-skinned. Additionally, Dandridge was limited to small, inconsequential roles until 1953. Baker, though popular in France, was never able to attain any real stardom in America, and she eventually turned her attention to resistance work. Since there was hardly any room at the table for a light-skinned women, there was definitely no room for a dark-skinned, dark-haired, dark-eyed Black girl. In the world of *The Bluest Eye*, this causes the three Black girls, four, if we also include Pauline Breedlove, to configure beauty through whatever means are available. These young women, then, would have been unable to see God in themselves because they were never represented. As second-class citizens, America was not conscious of their needs and desires, so if they were going to carve out spirituality, it happened in alternative spaces. This is why Claudia and Frieda go to the earth, Pauline becomes a martyr, and Pecola descends into madness; they were limited in the ways in which they could express their individuality and their conception of divinity.

By the 1950s, in *Home*, it is not Cee's lack of physical beauty that cements her minority status; it is the circumstances of her birth. Because Cee was "born 'in the street,"' her grandmother treated the girl like a "gutter child" (45), so she does not know she is divine. Cee's salvation from complete destruction is her brother, who cares for her. Cee, though, is not independent; she is a ward of her brother and subjugated to him. He believes he knows best and treats Cee as such; however, when this brother, Frank, leaves for Korea, she loses her protector. In his absence, she finds herself "broken… not broken up but broken down into her separate parts" (54) after being left by her boyfriend, who was "the first thing she saw wearing belted trousers instead of overalls" (47). Having existed as a "shadow," in the periphery of her brother's life, Cee accepted her minority status as a man's ward, shifting responsibility of her care from her brother to her boyfriend (103). It was not yet possible for her to

recognize the value of the person she was, because for too many years, she was defined by her brother and by their relationship.

For Cee, as with Pauline Breedlove as well, self-definition is affected by the experiences of their childhoods. Both women were ostracized as children and treated as if they were less valuable than other members of their families and community. These women, then, are faced with the dilemma than Claudia and Frieda had yet to confront: how they could claim validity and identity in the face of disrespect and dishonor. In the context of the spirituality of their interrogations, Cee and Pauline formulate alternate identities that allow them a measure of self-worth and value. Cee takes a position working in the home of a white doctor; Pauline takes a position working in the home of a white family. Hill Collins explains, using a quote from Audre Lorde, that Pauline would be a "watcher," which is one who becomes "familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection" (107). Pauline's position in the Fisher's home allows her to embody self-definition and self-worth unavailable in her own home. For Cee, her position affords her independence from her family, but she does not yet have the confidence to become divine. Despite the challenge of being a racial and sexual minority, they are developing individual identity but not yet divinity; however, they "crafted identities designed to empower them" (Hill Collins 108).

In *Beloved*, Denver is challenged with creating herself and developing her individual identity not due to her relationship with men; rather, Denver's life is complicated by the presence of her mother and sister. Denver is defined first by her relationship with her mother and then by her relationship with her ghost sister, Beloved. This "sister" initially manifests as a spirit who terrifies their home.[ix] Denver feels a sort of kinship with this sister, but then one day, Beloved betrays her. When Paul D, Sethe's friend from Sweet Home, arrives at Denver and Sethe's home, Beloved, in a rage, disappears. Since Denver only knew how to define herself by who she was in relationship to the behavior of her sister, Denver

sadly recognizes, “she has no self” (123), so she must create a self. All Denver knew about herself was that which her mother told her and that which she felt in relationship with the presence of their ghost. She had no idea who she was without the two of them, and then suddenly, one of them had vanished. Even in the fleetingness of that moment (because Beloved returns) Denver falls into despair at just the thought of abandonment. The relationship between these two sisters should operate as an affirming one. Beloved, though, is selfish. She wants Sethe all for herself, and Denver adjusts to Beloved’s presence, even becoming protective of the sister who never showed any concern for her. However, in the emotional absence of her sister (and later, her mother), Denver is forced into the subject position, which I will illustrate below.

In addition to the sister pairs of Claudia/Frieda and Denver/Beloved, Morrison offers another sisterly relationship in *Paradise*. This unhealthy relationship between Seneca and Jean is similar to that between Denver and Beloved. When Morrison introduces Seneca and Jean, she does not initially explain what has happened to Seneca’s parents, but when we meet her, she is a “girl whose heart was breaking” (126). Fifteen years before Seneca arrives at the Convent, she had spent “four nights and five days knocking on every door in her building” (126), looking for her “sister.” Seneca had been living with her fourteen-year-old “sister,” who later introduces herself as her cousin. By the end of the text, we learn this sister, Jean, is actually Seneca’s mother, who gave birth to the girl when she was only a teenager. In this way, Morrison complicates even sisterly relationships because Seneca never learns that Jean is the mother who birthed her, so in Seneca’s view, both her parents and her sister had abandoned her.

It is through the experience of being orphaned that Seneca learns her position in the world. She was a helpless child, who learned how to make a living with the body God had given her, and how to self-medicate with cutting. The fractured relationship she experiences with her sister causes her to find alternative means by which to enact subjectivity. Seneca does not fully move into the subject position

until she meets Consolata in the Convent, but in the meantime, she begins to experience the world as a cutter, which helps her manage grief, and a prostitute, which helps her manage poverty. Since the goal of self-reclamation is to exert full control over one's body, then even a prostitute who secretly cuts her skin is capable of engaging her own sense of spirituality through the scarring of her body as "the body becomes a place—if not *the* place—to root oneself" (Badt 569). She wounds herself for her transgressions. A boy ripping off her pants caused her first scar, but every scar after that was either put there by Seneca or sanctioned by her.

Abandonment helps Billie Delia move into the subject position as well, and hers comes from the community. After she pulls down her panties in the street to ride a horse, she becomes the "wild one" (151) because no self-respecting young woman would drop her panties in the street. The teasing, contemptuous looks, and sidelong glances began, and the welcoming smiles of the townspeople ended. As the text reads, there were only two women, Soane and Dovey Morgan, who still spoke to her kindly, but the rest of the town had decided that Billie Delia was an enemy of decency. As Helen Tiffen explains, "Victorian attitudes to sex effected the particular repression of the [B]lack female body and female sexuality" (910), so in the eyes of Deacon and Steward Morgan, Billie Delia is not respectable like the nineteen Negro ladies, nor was she like the demure, domesticated women Ruby cultivated. Billie Delia was wild, and she was light-skinned. If she was going to create a new identity, she would have to do it outside of Ruby.

Billie Delia ultimately finds herself in the subject position after she meets Consolata of the Convent. Consolata had been educated about a woman's place, though she is Brazilian with tea-colored hair and green eyes, through the sexualization of her body, like Billie Delia. For Consolata, it was "dirty pokings her ninth year" that stripped her of her virginity (228) and propriety. When nuns visit the orphanage in which she lives, they see her "docility." Consolata had already committed to her to service,

so one of the sisters, Sister Mary Magna, decides to kidnap the girl and bring her back to America. As orphans, both Seneca and Consolata become wards of the state, but as girls, they become wards of society, and although they choose very different ways to respond to their condition, the two young girls learn early what their place in society must be. Consolata responds to her subjugation for thirty years and "offered her body and soul to God's Son and His Mother" (225) in penance for being born a woman. Because Consolata was so familiar with female trauma, she was able to minister to all the women who showed up at the Convent door, including Billie Delia and Seneca.

Seneca, on the other hand, accepts an offer for her body from a woman named Norma Keene Fox. Fox who used Seneca's body as her playground, "moving from peacock feathers to abject humiliation; from coddling to playful abuse; from caviar tartlets to filth" (137) made Seneca her sex slave without ever locking the front door. When Claudia describes the danger of being put "outdoors," she is explaining why Seneca remains in Norma Keene Fox's home. Seneca does not want to live on the street, similar to Lenore not wanting her granddaughter, Cee, to be born in the street. Even Consolata was molested and then found in the street. As children of the street, their gender made them susceptible to various indecencies.

Sexual vulgarity happens to women across time, space, and place, typically used by men as a means of control over women. So when Ella in *Beloved* says, "You couldn't think up what them two [a father and son] done to me" (119), there needs to be no further explanation. The father and son had kept Ella locked in a room for more than year and used her body for whatever purposes they saw fit. Ella recalled "the bottom teeth she lost to the brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope around her waist" (258). Even the physical scars, though, were nothing compared to the baby she delivered "but would not nurse" (259). The baby was a "hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet'" (259). Ella could not even identify the father of her child, so she attributes his life to the experience. Her body

belonged to the father and son for that entire year, just like Seneca's body belonged to Norma Fox, Consolata's body belonged to the boys/men at the orphanage, Pecola's body belonged to her father, and Cee's body belonged to Dr. Beauregard Scott.

For some—Pecola, Consolata, Frieda—the taking of their bodies by men for their own devices happened early in life, but for other women, namely Mavis, Gigi, Pallas, and Sethe, the process of making a woman into a commodity happens later in life. Sethe, having been bought as a slave and moved to the Sweet Home plantation, was legally restricted from owning her own body since her body was "usable, marketable," argues Cynthia Dobbs (564), but Sethe still lived a relatively uneventful life in slavery. She was able to choose a man for herself, marry him, and even sew her own wedding dress. It is then no surprise that Sethe would believe she had choice over her children's lives because when she became pregnant and gave birth to children, they were hers to raise. Jean Wyatt argues in "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," how "Sethe extends her rights over her own body" by birthing, raising, and feeding her children" (477). The "freedom" in her enslaved state ends when a new overseer, schoolteacher, comes onto the property, a man who would wrap "string all over [Sethe's] head, 'cross [her] nose, around [her] behind" (191). Sethe did not initially think anything of his behavior, but then one day, under schoolteacher's supervision, his nephews strip her and drink the milk from her breasts. When Sethe tells the mistress of the house, believing justice will be served, she is whipped until her back is bloodied.

While Sethe, Ella, and Baby Suggs, as slave women, were automatically subject to masters, Pallas, Mavis, and Gigi, coming of age in the 1960s, are a century past the women of *Beloved*. They may be legally free, but social conditioning has informed them of their marginality. Pallas is from a wealthy background: her father is a lawyer who is able to buy her anything material thing she wants, but while in the mall at Christmas one year, Pallas watches a woman as she "danced on the up escalator, the rolling

hips, the sway of her head… with rouge and gold teeth" (164). In that moment, Pallas seems to recognize her sexuality reflected in that woman, so Pallas goes looking for that feeling and finds herself heartbroken. She begins a relationship with the school janitor, and he refuses to touch her. Pallas's rich father had sheltered from the ugliness of the world, but he could not protect her after her boyfriend, Carlos, breaks her heart. The broken relationship informs Pallas of her marginality because after she runs away, she is accosted by men and hides in a lake before being picked up by an Indian woman and driven to a clinic, where Billie Delia happened to be on duty. Pallas's broken and abused body needed complete healing and restoration, which was available in the Convent.

For Gigi, that recognition of marginality drives her into the desert looking for "a man and a woman fucking forever" (63). On the instruction of her imprisoned boyfriend, Gigi searches for a place called Wish in Arizona where she and her boyfriend were supposed to meet. She, holding on to Mikey's promise to meet her, searches until she realizes she will never find the rock formation he promised her was there. In many ways, Gigi was defined by her relationship with Mikey, and without him, she does not know who she is. To compound her minority status, when she calls home to her grandfather, he tells her to "bring your butt home, girl" (65). In her first independent act, she does not. Gigi decides that the woman she had become would not allow her to return to the small town in which she was brought up. She realized that the world had much more to offer to a Black girl, and she would take her chances on finding out what those offerings might be. Gigi chooses to find herself a new home and a new identity outside of being a granddaughter or a girlfriend. In so doing, Gigi finds she is more than anyone's partner or ward. Gigi's choice prefaces her ascent to divinity, which happens with Consolata in the Convent.

Gigi was a rebel, taking on the cause of social justice with her boyfriend. Pallas is, for all intents and purposes, a runaway. Seneca and Consolata are orphans, but Mavis is an adult woman with five

children, who for the first time, realized that the life she was living was unbearable. Mavis was the mother of five children until her newborn twins die in the car when she goes into the store to buy hot dogs for dinner. Mavis is married, but her husband does not come home regularly, so when he shows up for dinner, she has to make adjustments to the meal she planned. She remembers, "He was fit to be tied. Spam ain't nothing for a working man to eat" (24). Frank Albright is both physically, mentally, and emotionally abusive, telling Mavis, "she was the dumbest bitch on the planet" (37). As a wife, she was a failure because her husband did not come home to her at night. As a mother, she was a failure because she had killed two of her babies and the others, she thought, were going to kill her. When her mother tells her, "Children need a mother," Mavis cannot even locate a response (31). The only identities she had were ones that no longer fit. By the time she arrives at her mother's house, she has abandoned her husband and her children in fear for her own life, so she had to ascertain a new way of formulating an identity. Mavis first leaves her husband's house and then she leaves her mother's house, and she is headed west. Mavis has no idea where she is going, like Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas, but she strikes out anyway. For each of these women, their first independent act was leaving the place that confined their identity. As a means of grasping reclamation, the women search for goodness in the world. Marriage, love, and/or children had not offered them the beauty or fulfillment they desired, so the search continued.

When Gigi began to review her life, after she arrives at the Convent, she finds she "had not approved of herself in a long, long time" (257) and an overdue change would have to come. Gigi, of course, is not the only woman who could come to this same realization; Mavis, Pallas, and Seneca had also become women with whom they could not live. The realization of one's position at the bottom, at the margins, or as the "mule uh de world," as Zora Neale Hurston asserts, can have tragic consequences. Though each of the above women successfully transcended her former life, they each could have been

killed had they remained a part of the life they were living. For their safety, they leave home and ultimately arrive at Consolata's door.

Looking to *Beloved,* even though Baby Suggs has a very different lived experience than the women in *Paradise,* she still must locate her identity in the midst of a very different life from that to which she was accustomed. In *Beloved,* even after being and feeling free, Baby Suggs finds she is still subject to the desires of white men. Her son, Halle, had sacrificed his Sundays for his mother's freedom, so after sixty years of slavery, she was able to feel freedom in her body and in her soul. Baby Suggs was then able to leave the plantation and move into her own home; she even becomes a preacher. However, one afternoon, white men "came into her yard" to arrest her daughter-in-law, Sethe, for escaping from slavery (180). In that single moment, Baby Suggs found out that nothing she could do would withstand the will of a white man, so she gave up on attempting to create a life outside of enslavement and the whims of white men. Baby Suggs retires to her bed because white men had taken from her everything she valued. Though she does have that brief time of autonomous living, Baby Suggs could not supersede the power of white men, even after being endowed with the power of God. Though she does succeed in reclaiming her body, she still chooses to give up even her body for the glory of the afterlife.

All of the women in Morrison's novels find that they are minorities because of their age, color, or gender, so they must first address their status before they become able to subvert it. Hill Collins further explains "for individual women, resolving [the] contradictions [of being an outsider within] takes considerable strength" (110). In other words, being welcomed into white spaces in domestic or service positions does not empower Black women enough for the women to form subjectivity. After realizing they are not the subjects of their own stories, the women have to then coordinate a way to move from the margins to the center. In so doing, each woman has to be strong and courageous enough to embrace her call to be a divine vessel, purposed to do mighty work. At the margins, though, the women seek to unite

with other subjugated women. Their divinity might not yet be clear, but as they relocate and reclaim themselves, they also begin to internalize the mightiness of their own abilities.

Unity at the Margins

Hill Collins notes the necessity of safe spaces, such as "extended families, churches, and African-American community organizations where safe discourse can occur" (111). Further, "these spaces are not only safe—they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other" (112). In *Beloved,* Beloved would be the other even in a community of Black women because she was *other*worldly. The ghost-daughter, Beloved, arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, a safe space for so many freed and ex-slaves, to reclaim her mother, and when she arrives at Sethe's home, she realizes quickly she has to share Sethe with Denver. Beloved's weakness, which is her unconquerable jealousy, causes her to rock Sethe's house, abuse Sethe's dog, and choke Sethe in the Clearing. Ignorant of her own strength, Beloved almost kills Sethe. Her weaknesses motivate her behavior, but it is strength that allows her to be a force with which her family and the community must reckon. Beloved is an example of how women recognize the power within their own bodies and spirits and exchange marginality for might.

In *Beloved*, love is the crucial weakness that the characters struggle to control. Denver is in love with her sister's presence until Sethe and Beloved choose each other, leaving her alone. About Beloved, Sethe emphatically states, "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (200). Then Denver says in the next chapter, "Beloved is my sister" (205). The chapter after that, "I am beloved and she is mine" (210); then the next chapter, "I am Beloved and she is mine" (214). But for the brief punctuation of Denver, Beloved and Sethe have a love affair for two. In *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*, Jacqueline de Weever explains, "The words of identification between the women…are variants from the biblical erotic poem, *The Song of Solomon*, were in chapter ii.16 the lover says, 'My beloved is mine, and I am his'" (160). Denver has stumbled into the middle of a passionate relationship that does not

include her. After this, she chooses to look after and protect herself (252). Having previously been her mother's only living daughter, she was comfortable with living in the presence of the baby ghost without the physical presence of the baby ghost, and then Beloved arrives fully fleshed, ready to claim her mother. Denver then realizes she is not equipped to fight a ghost, and it is only in the absence of the mother-daughter and sister-sister relationships that she acknowledges the importance and sanctity of her own body.

Denver's love then shifts from her mother to her sister, and then finally to herself, which enables her to claim her own body. She learns the importance of not loving anyone or anything more than she loves herself because extraordinary love, to the detriment of the self, is a weakness. This is a lesson Sethe had yet to learn even after being told by Ella early in her escape, "Don't love nothing" (92). Sethe loves, and her love is her most destructive weakness. Love is actually what dooms Baby Suggs as well. Though her enslavers had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue," she was left with her heart, which she used in service to other freedmen and women (87). Baby Suggs, holy, gave all of her years of freedom to the people on Bluestone Road, and she thought love was enough to protect her community, protect herself, and protect her family. Love was not enough, though, because love did not stop schoolteacher from coming to re-enslave Sethe and take her children. Baby Suggs was under the impression that white men had gotten everything they wanted from her after sixty years of service, but then white men came into her house because they wanted her daughter-in-law. This was the last insult Baby Suggs could take, so she, and her powerful love, took to her bed for the remainder of her life where she could rest in the spirit. This power of love touches all of the female characters in *Beloved* as the novel offers a "meditation on transformations of body and soul" (Jesser 325). Terry Paul Caesar explains, "In *Beloved*, what a woman is has become hopelessly lost in what a mother is, and what a mother is has become haplessly entangled in what a child is" (117). Sethe loves her children too much;

Beloved loves her mother too much; Denver loves her family too much; Baby Suggs loves her people too much. Because they love so much, that love becomes distorted. They love so much they lose themselves.

When Morrison is asked about the trilogy that includes *Beloved* and *Paradise* (the final text in the trilogy is *Jazz*) Morrison mentions the link between the three novels as love, but love functions in *The Bluest Eye* and *Home* just as strongly. Love is the driving force that allows these women to create their own identities and claim their own bodies because "love is identified as power" (Draga Alexandru 195). Love is the way in which women reclaim the vestiges of slavery, suffering, and subjugation and do not allow themselves to be denigrated by the violence acted upon their bodies. A child's love drives Claudia and Frieda to believe they can change history. The love of a brother brings Frank Money home from Seattle and back to Lotus, Georgia to save his sister. Love is why all of the women who took other women in—Miss Ethel, Mrs. MacTeer, Consolata, Baby Suggs, and Sethe—do so despite the risks associated with offering shelter to a stranger. Even the anonymous Indian woman in *Paradise* sees Pallas on the side of the road and takes her to a clinic where Billie Delia can find her.

The Convent is open for any woman who needs to find self-love. For example, when Mavis arrives at the Convent after escaping her children, husband, and mother, she encounters Consolata. In response to Consolata's invitation to stay, Mavis "parked, and the Cadillac, dark and bruised as blood, stayed there [at the Convent] for two years" (46). The blood Mavis left was the blood from her husband's, and even her children's attacks, and she left that blood outside. She came to the Convent in her weakened state and consolidated her pain with Consolata's. Consolata had been nursing her own hurts and disappointments for many years in the Convent with only Mother Superior to commiserate with her. When Mother Superior falls ill, Consolata seems to draw people to the Convent so that she might have company. It is not a coincidence that Gigi arrives on the day Mother Superior dies.

Consolata had kept Mother Superior alive until she could find new people for the Convent. Similar to the way in which Mother Superior kidnapped the abused Consolata on a street in Brazil, Consolata takes women from a variety of abuses to a safe haven in her home, which is why when Billie Delia arrives with a frightened Pallas in her arms, Consolata readily accepts her new charge. Though there were not many places a hurting girl could go without questions, the Convent was one of those places.

Cee thought her safe place would be working in a white doctor's house, but it turns out to be the most dangerous place for a Black woman in the 1950s. Because Cee could not return home, she attempts to carve out a life of respectability on the other side of town. She bought "everything a girl needed to be presentable" and found herself a job (55). This is how Cee ends up working in a doctor's home office and becoming subject to his foul experiments. Cee was trying to prove her grandmother wrong, since Lenore had told Cee from birth that she would never be a respectable woman because of the circumstances of her birth. When Cee is rescued from the doctor's office and taken to a safe place, Miss Ethel's house, Cee is chastised for her thinking so little of herself. Hill Collins explains, "In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and human, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (113), so when the women pepper Cee with questions/admonishments: "Men know a slop jar when they see one," "You ain't a mule to be pulling some evil doctor's wagon," "You a privy or a woman," and "Who told you you was trash?" (122), the reader knows love is at the root of the chastisement. Morrison also makes a sly connection to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because it is Janie's grandmother who tells that the Black woman is the world's mule, and it is the grandmothers here who tell Cee she is no one's mule. Cee had no choice but to listen.

Luckily for Cee, there were women who engaged her in conversation and spoke life into her. The conversation shifted Cee's perception of herself and reminded her of the innate divinity she carries.

Even without knowing Cee well, the women "see the need to value Black womanhood" (Hill Collins 113). Cee was still young, and in many ways, she was still in the formative years of her life, so Miss Ethel and her friends knew there was still time to fix what Lenore had broken. Conversely, Claudia and Frieda are such small children that no one feels the need to explain or discuss anything with them. Claudia and Frieda are often left alone often, so they have to seek the world for themselves. When Frieda's weakness leaves her susceptible to molestation by their tenant, Mr. Henry, she tells her parents what has happened. Unlike Seneca's foster mother, Frieda's parents act, but they never explain to Frieda what has happened to her. After she tells her parents, she tells Claudia. Frieda only knows Mr. Henry "picked at" her, and it is clear that Frieda does not yet have language for her experience (99).[x] In one instance, Frieda cannot speak to the reality of her experience because of the lack of words to explain it. On the opposite side, images that reinforce the white, heteronormative standard of beauty had not yet poisoned her consciousness, so there was both a positive and negative side to the girls' lack of language.

If Claudia and Frieda were going to come into a full awareness of their Black femaleness, though, they would need conversation to achieve it. As Patricia Hill Collins explains in "Black Feminist Epistemology," "For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (279). Claudia thought her size was the reason adults did not engage her, but it was her age, her femaleness, and her Blackness. She would have to overcome viewing those attributes as weaknesses before she could come into an awareness of her power. Claudia, Frieda, and even Pecola, needed conversation in order to develop knowledge, but "nobody paid [them] any attention" (19). This lack of language clarifies Claudia's ineptness at detailing the "why" of Pecola's trauma at the beginning of the text. Claudia intimates, "*There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since* why *is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in* how" (emphasis original) (6). Claudia, as a nine-year-old retelling this story, does

not understand why the seeds did not grow, why Pecola's father raped his daughter, or why Pecola's child died, so she tells the story as she knows it without emotions or suppositions.

Despite their immaturity and lack of language, we find in these girls is a solid commitment to each other despite what the outside world brings. Claudia and Frieda present a united front against the silencing of their insignificance and the weakness of their womanhood. Like the sisterhood of prostitutes—Miss Marie, Poland, and China—at least Claudia and Frieda have one another. Even though Claudia comes to the wrong conclusion about what is happening around her, she has a better chance of survival than Pecola does. As Gurleen Grewal explains, "The strong presence of an alternative culture at home passed on by her mother" makes it much easier for Claudia to resist the heteronormative, patriarchal standard (36). There was no one in Pecola's life to counter that which she learned from the dominant narrative about Blackness and femaleness except the "twin" reflected in the mirror. Pecola's school, classmates, and community abandon the girl, a girl who had already been discarded by her parents and brother. Pecola is most profoundly ostracized after her rape and finds "every time I look at somebody, they look off" (195). In Pecola's mind, it is because she has received blue eyes from God (and Soaphead Church), but it is actually because no one could bear to look at her. She was a symbol of failure, so she was ignored. Pecola decides the only person she likes is the voice in her head, which, of course, cannot help her cope with the breadth of her experiences; Pecola's mother was supposed to help her understand since "the mother-daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women" (Hill Collins 112), but Pauline and Pecola do not have a healthy relationship. Had Pecola's mother ever shared with her the life she lived before Pecola, Pecola's weakness might not have been her damnation. Pauline remembers being a young girl, like her own daughter. When she was two, Pauline's foot was pierced by a rusty nail, which left her with a limp and a crooked foot. Pauline decided that her weakness, her foot, had crippled her. Then she was introduced to movies, which offered a place where

"the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches" (122). Pauline became a victim of the construction of physical beauty, and that beauty looked nothing like the woman she was.

In "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison," Barbara Christian explains how the American standard of beauty destroys Pauline's sense of self-worth. Christian argues, "[Pauline] falls prey to destructive ideas of physical beauty and romantic love as the measures of self-worth" (66) because while she was dark-skinned with a limp and missing two of her front teeth, the women on the movie screen were white with perfect teeth and straightened hair. Even though the films were black and white, Pauline saw the colors she was missing in her own life, so she "let [her] hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly" (123). Pauline "lays the blame for her misfortunes on her incapacity as a Black woman to be beautiful" (Christian 66), and this acceptance of her unattractiveness as a weakness makes Pauline violent to those who remind her of how she must appear. Her husband, she fights daily, her son, she ignores, and her daughter, she abuses. Pauline "not only denies [her children and husband] love, but she denies them the opportunity to see love" (Harris 30). Even though divinity should be a positive force in Black women's lives, it empowers Pauline, but not those entrusted to her care. In Pauline's case, the dangers of valuing God while devaluing the self are on display.

Moving from the Margins into the Fabric

As each of these women recognizes her marginal status, and confronts her weaknesses, then she might finally be able to creep singly into the garment of society. The recognition of marginality typically happened for the woman at some pivotal moment in her life, usually after molestation, abandonment, rape, or some other physical abuse. Then, as the marginal woman moved through society, she confronts her weakness, typically in the presence of another woman. As we see with Sethe, it is Amy Denver who helps her to confront physical weakness. Billie Delia does the same for Pallas when she carries her to

the Convent and into Mavis's arms. Though it is Cee's brother, Frank, who carries her to Miss Ethel, it is Miss Ethel who does the healing work. When the women acknowledge and then consolidate their weaknesses—whatever those weaknesses might be—they can then fight against their constraints.

The renting of one's first apartment, purchasing of one's first home, or the applying of a job outside of one's hometown sees to be a frequent move Morrisonian women make in the reclamation of self. When Lily first meets Frank, it is after she had "circled an advertisement for a lovely [home] for five thousand dollars"; however, housing covenants restricting Black people from purchasing disallowed her from her buying the home. Instead, she is forced to remain a renter with a "second-floor one-bedroom apartment" (75). Because Lily wanted (needed) a house, she thought Frank would be of assistance, and when she learns he was not, her resentment toward him grows. When he leaves the apartment, she then realizes she can "clean properly, put things where they belonged, and wake up" feeling "a shiver of freedom, of earned solitude, of choosing the wall she wanted to break through, minus the burden of a tilted man" (79-80). She was free to make of herself what she wished, choosing a job that allowed her financial security as well as the ability to care for herself. Lily is not broken when Frank leaves; in fact, she is empowered by his absence. Then, she can create a life for herself outside of that which a relationship with a broken man demanded.

In Denver's case, in *Beloved,* her attempts to creep into the garment begin when she is just a child. The text begins the section, "Once upon a time," and then details Denver's foray into independence (101). Denver:

> Had known more and wanted to. Had walked the path leading to a real other house. Had stood outside the window listening. Four times she did it on her own—crept away from 124 early in the afternoon when her mother and grandmother had their guard down, just

before supper, after chores; the blank hour before gears shifted to evening occupations. Denver had walked off looking for the house other children visited and not her. (102)

When the schoolteacher, Lady Jones, invites her to come in and stop peeking through the windows, Denver is able to share "almost a whole year of the company of her peers and along with them learned to spell and count" (102). Denver has a distinct feeling of independence and accomplishment after her schooling because "she had done it on her own" (102). Denver's first experience with social independence would not be her last because many years later, Denver, again, steps outside.

The next time Denver independently leaves her home, she realizes she would have to "leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave behind the two [Sethe and Beloved] and go ask somebody for help" (243). She goes back to Lady Jones, telling her, "I want work, Miss Lady," and thus begins the next chapter of Denver's life (248). Denver feels that same feeling Baby Suggs must have felt when she names herself after her son, Halle, purchases her freedom. First, Baby Suggs looks at her hands, and amazed, she remarks, "These hands belong to me" (141). Then she notices, "her own heartbeat" (141). So when she says to Mr. Garner who kept calling her "Jenny," "Suggs is my name. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny" (142), she is also claiming ownership of a freed and free self. Mr. Garner responds, asking, "What he call you? (142). Succinctly, she responds, "Baby" (142). From that moment, she is Baby Suggs (holy). She is then offered a job and a house to create a new identity for herself. Both Denver and Baby Suggs experience what it means to be free. In their freedom, the women could define themselves however they felt in light of their new circumstances. They were Black woman, but they were not anyone's scapegoat. Baby Suggs finds her ministry; Denver, like Pauline Breedlove, finds a job.

After Pauline Breedlove married, birthed children, tended house, and learned physical beauty, she found she was not physically beautiful. At least, she did not fit the mold of the conventionally

attractive. Since attempting to become Jean Harlow failed, she finds other ways to reclaim her body. First, it is through fighting her husband. Battling him, Pauline was able to "display the style and imagination of what she believed to be her true self" (41). Instead of indistinguishable nights, she remembers the fights, and these regularly scheduled fights give her a sense of her own power. She finds God, and her church work affirms her in ways she never thought possible, but the last step in her reclamation process actually takes place outside of her home and her community.

Pauline Breedlove leaves her shabby home, ugly children, and worthless husband to enact a fantasy elsewhere. Pauline accepts a position working in a white family's home and even Claudia has to comment, "she looks nicer than I had even see her, in her white uniform and her hair in a small pompadour" (107). As a maid in a white woman's house, Pauline is able to live out the dreams she had seen on the movie screen. I have to wonder if Pauline ever watched *Gone With the Wind* from her movie seat because her position in the Fisher household is very similar to that which Hattie McDaniel portrayed. Pauline becomes the mother of a little girl who wore "a pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with bunny ears pointed up from the tips," and this little girl has hair that is "corn yellow and bound with thick ribbon" (108). Finally, Pauline has the child she wished Pecola had been instead of Black and "ugly." In the white woman's kitchen, where Pauline was the "ideal servant," she was tasked with bathing the girl, drying her with fluffy towels, and brushing her yellow hair (just like the baby dolls Claudia despised) (127). In that house, "creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers" (128). In that house, she "refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed" (128). In that house, the "slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face" (128). In that house, she received a nickname—Polly (128). All the things Pauline had been unable to experience in her own life were available in the Fishers' house. The movie

screen, and the circumstances of her own life, taught her Blackness was to be despised, and whiteness was the pinnacle of achievement. In the Fishers' house, she became a white woman.

Pauline finds the self she had been missing while working for the Fishers in a house near Lake Shore Park, where "Black people were not allowed" (105). MSNBC anchor and author, Melissa Harris-Perry succinctly explains in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, "Pauline hides from her shameful blackness and poverty by embracing her role as mammy" (128). In a world where "white women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' White men said, 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down,'" women like her were concurrently able to run "the houses of white people, and knew it" (138). In the Fisher house, Pauline had choices, opportunities, freedom, and respect, things she lacked in her own home. She witnessed a picture-perfect, two-parent household instead of her own home where violence and Christian dogma reigned. In the Fishers' house, Pauline transcended her own life and became a different woman, who even answered to a different name. She reclaims the woman whom she believes is her authentic self because in that house she is worthy, accepted, and divine. Pauline finds heaven on the other side of town.

This is the same reason Billie Delia takes the job in Demby away from the backbiting and conniving women (and men) of Ruby: she wanted to see a world more perfect than her own. With a job in Demby, Billie Delia is free to have relationships with two brothers without having to choose one. In a town that would force her to settle down, she now lives where the choice is only hers. Even the lovesick boys agree to "wait for her to make up her mind," but she admits, "she never could and that the threesome would only end when it did" (308). This type of amoral behavior would never be allowed in Ruby, and even her own mother tries to force her to make a decision. In Demby, she could choose to love two men, or be like the prostitutes of *The Bluest Eye*, who chose to hate "men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination" (*The Bluest Eye* 56). Billie Delia wanted to be free, and Demby

allowed her that luxury. As she reclaimed her life after years of accusations and insults, she found Ruby to be too close-minded and insecure for her.

Independence and the right to make choices is the reason Sweetie Fleetwood, after six years, tells her mother-in-law, Mable, "Be back in a minute" and walks out of her house (125). Having been imprisoned in her home with four sick children, Sweetie "opened the front door and left. Quickly" (125). She eventually arrives at the Convent, the place in which women can find whatever it is they need, including a sense of self. Sweetie's escape, like Billie Delia's, Denver's, and Pauline's, speaks to the legacy of Black women who choose for themselves the direction of their lives after spending years attempting to fulfill someone else's idea of who and what a Black woman should be.

For example, the men and women on Bluestone Road no longer approved of Sethe after she murdered her infant daughter. However, when Sethe is faced with the threat of a white man the second time, instead of going after her children, she attempts to kill the man instead of her child (264). Sethe does not stop loving thickly, but she does learn who the real enemy is. Sethe's love was possessive, maybe even to a fault, but her love was her own. She chose it; she expressed it; she owned it. Paul D teaches Sethe, though, she was her "own best thing," and she finally believes it (*Beloved* 274). Sethe, then, "acquires autonomy" (Babbitt 5). She "takes ownership of her children, and they become her property" (Byrne 33), but she had not yet claimed ownership of herself. Sethe believes her children *belong* to her, and Morrison illustrates the danger of an overwhelming sense of belonging, even through the relationship between Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved, and the mother who murdered her.

Beloved's return from the grave is the most intriguing reclamation of self because Beloved, though a woman, was a spirit, and she "exists as an embodiment of a connection between Africa and America" (Higgins 98). Whether angelic or demonic, her transition from life to death and back again signals an engagement with life beyond this life. Not only does *Beloved* illustrate spiritual practice

through each woman's journey back to herself, but there is very different engagement here because Beloved's ghost represents the millions of lives lost in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In Therese Higgins' collection, *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore,* Higgins' quotes an interview with Morrison in which the author explains that Beloved "is a survivor from the true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience" (85). The ancestors of so many African Americans should be angry, and they should return to wreak havoc on those who murdered them, but in the natural, this is not possible, so Morrison's ghost pitches fits in honor of all of those who cannot.

Beloved returns from the dead in a very literal sense, but Cee is just as close to death as one can be when Frank comes to her aid. However, she is a very different woman when she leaves Miss Ethel's house. Frank automatically notices, "Cee was different" (121). She was "not the same girl who trembled at the slightest touch of the real and vicious world" (127). The "new" Cee would never again be anyone's victim. After the touch of those women, Cee would "never need [her brother's] hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones" (128). The woman Cee had become was nothing like the woman she was when she arrived. That Cee was dead, but this Cee was alive. She became a woman who "would never again need rescue" (129). This Cee was more than capable of rescuing herself, and she was not afraid to say so. Cee's transformation is complete when she leaves Miss Ethel's home and goes back to build a place of her own. Her claim to divinity is clear; she is Black; she is woman; she is ethereal.

A Transcendent Female Identity

In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison explains her impetus behind writing *The Bluest Eye*. She claims she "was looking for that dead girl and I thought I might talk about that dead girl, if for no other reason than to have it, somewhere in the world in a drawer" (19). Before I explain the significance of the dead girl, let me quote a later section of the same interview. Morrison returns to the

conversation of the dead girl, sharing, "So what I started doing and thinking about for a year was to project the self not into the way we say 'yourself,' but to put a space between the words, as though the self were really a *twin* or a thirst or a friend or something that sits right next to you and watches you" (29). This conversation really intrigued me as I interrogated how Morrison attempts to show women reclaiming themselves. In fact, Morrison writes that through literature, she was about to reclaim *herself*. She was the dead girl.

Relating this idea of a "dead girl/twin" to her novels, there are several examples of the "dead" girl versus the live girl.[xi] Black women feel they have live outside of themselves in order to reconcile their public and private selves. In *The Bluest Eye*, of course, the most prominent dead girl with a twin is Pecola Breedlove, who I will return to in a moment, but there is also Pauline Breedlove, who becomes Polly in the Fishers' house. Her dead self is the poor, crippled Black woman, but her twin is beautiful, well-kempt, and powerful. In *Beloved*, the obvious dead girl/twin would be the eponymously named Beloved, but there is also the Sethe who arrives at 124 Bluestone Road and then the Sethe who murders one child and attempts to murder the rest. In *Home*, this dead girl/twin is the Ycidra who lives a life willing to please others, but then we meet the Ycidra who is competent, productive, and strong. In *Paradise,* all of the women of the Convent have a dead self, quite literally in fact, but then a twin appears who is healed of all of the dead girl's infirmities. In the novels, the women have a former self they need to discard, a self they need to bury, in other to become the reclaimed self necessary for their future.

Most critics and readers of Morrison agree that Pecola descends into madness in *The Bluest Eye*; this is because Pecola did not discard the dead version of herself. She cannot live as her twin; she is imprisoned to the mirror. The successfully transcendent women never returns to the woman she was at the outset of the novel, but Pecola does, which is why she constantly needs her mirror image to affirm

her because it was "a look in the mirror [that] confirm[ed] her own ugliness" (Mermann-Jozwiak 193). I attribute this to Pecola's weakness because even Claudia and Frieda struggle to establish their identity. Those girls, though, sacrifice Pecola to do so.

Though Claudia and Frieda claim to have wanted to save Pecola's life, they confess, "All of our waste which we dumped on her…she absorbed" (205). They felt "beautiful when [they] stood astride her ugliness" (205). As they worked their way into the creation of their own identities, they offered up Pecola for it to be so. In "Eruptions of Funk," Susan Willis explains, for Claudia and Frieda to come into adulthood, they must distance themselves from the funk of Blackness (34). Claudia and Frieda choose to become more like the "sugar-brown Mobile girls" who learned early how to "get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (83), and Pecola represented that funk, danger, and disaster. When other women found funk, they would "wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until dies" (83), which is what happens to Pecola; in order for Claudia and Frieda to live, Pecola cannot. She comes to represent the waste and weakness that Claudia and Frieda exchanged for strength and solidarity.

Unlike the sugar-brown girls of *The Bluest Eye*, in *Paradise*, funk is accepted, even welcomed. At Consolata's Convent, "they took people in—lost folk or folks who needed a rest" (11). Women like Billie Delia, Sweetie, Soane, and Arnette were able to find temporary rest in that place, if rest was their goal. If not, they found that other thing they might have needed as well. In that place, where women are free to dance, free to own "rocking bodies," they were able to find who it was they wanted to be in the world (157). After the women spend many years in the Convent living however they chose to live, Consolata takes control of the house. She tells them all they can choose to stay and become responsible,

healthy, and healed women, or they can leave her home. All the women choose to stay. Four women who before "instead of plans…had wishes":

> Mavis talked endlessly of surefire moneymaking ventures: beehives, something called a 'bed and breakfast'; a catering company; an orphanage. One thought she had found a treasure chest full of money or jewels or something and wanted help to cheat the others of its contents [Gigi]. Another was secretly slicing her thighs, her arms. Wishing to be the queen of scars, she made thin red slits in her skin with whatever came to hand: razor, safety pin, paring knife [Seneca]. One other longed for what sounded like a sort of cabaret life, a crowded place where she could sing sorrow-filled songs with her eyes closed [Pallas/Divine]. (222)

Despite how the women arrived, or even how they functioned in the early years of the Convent, Consolata is going to teach them how to become a self with which they can live. First, Consolata instructs them in how to recall their pain through "loud dreaming" (264). They "enter the heat of the Higgledy Piggledy," "they kick their legs underwater," and they dream until "there is no breath to scream or contradict" (264). In living each other's pain, the women begin to deal with their own. They no longer fear the men who had once harmed their bodies because they paint their pain on the basement floor of the Convent. When Seneca felt the need to cut into her body, she "chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor" (265). Seneca found release through the painting of the representative body, which lay in wait for abuse.

These new, free women can now dance again, like they once did at Arnette and K.D.'s wedding, but this time they are dancing themselves to life. Instead of embarrassing spectators, this is a cleansing dance. It is not unlike the dance of David before the Lord in the first book of Samuel, nor is it unlike the liturgical dances of the Christian church. These women are released of their issues, fragmentations, and

trials as they dance in the garden before the Lord while it rains, and they are baptized. Each of the women came before the altar of the Convent and left their burdens on it. Consolata takes them through a process in which they address each of the issues that once plagued them before they can be released of the guilt and shame that once imprisoned them. They confess their sins one to another before they are absolved of each infraction. The baptism in the garden is the final step to their rebirth, and then later, the women are raptured away to continue their work elsewhere. It is as if they become disciples of Consolata, sent out into the world to save, deliver, and set free. The women begin with their own families.

When these women, free in themselves, leave the Convent, Billie Delia, who found her own freedom through that place has only one question: "when will they return?" (308). Before they could return to the Convent, or even some other place, these women revisit the homes they once escaped. Mavis is no longer a woman who "couldn't defend herself from an eleven-year-old child, let alone her husband," she is the woman who walks up to her daughter, takes a seat, and has breakfast (171, 313). Instead of fearing for life in the presence of her child, she offers practical advice to her teenage daughter. As Sally watches her, she felt "something long and deep and slow and bright" (314). Similar to this, when Manley Gibson receives a visit from his daughter Gigi, he "went over every detail of what he had seen of his daughter" (310). She came dressed for war with "her army cap and fatigue pants. Heavy black boots, black T-shirt" (310). When he asks her if she is in the Army, she replies, "Sort of" (310). She is in Consolata's army. No longer was she the scared girl who watched blood spread on a young boy's shirt. She had been reborn.

When Seneca returns to see Jean, Seneca no longer even recognizes her. The pain and the memory are both gone. Seneca is made completely new. As a matter of fact, Seneca does not even return to see her sister—Seneca would not have known where to find Jean—but Jean sees her at a stadium.

What is significant here is that Seneca has cuts on her hands, and one of the Convent women, it seems, is tending to her. Seneca, who used to torture herself with razor blades, no longer marvels at her own blood. When the blood is cleared away, there were "just a few lines that might or might not leave marks" (317). Finally, it would not matter to Seneca whether cuts left scars.

When Pallas returns to her mother's house the first time, she is "beatific" (311). She is wearing a dress that "swirled about the ankles with every step" (311). Just as Pallas was silent after her trauma, this time it is her mother who is struck dumb. The woman tries to speak, but no words would form on her lips. The entire time Pallas is in her mother's home, the elder Truelove cannot speak. The second time Pallas returns, her mother just watches as her daughter locates a pair of "Huaraches, expensive leather ones" (312). As she watches Pallas drive away, it was a "violet so ultra it broke her heart" (311). Pallas's return marks her renewal because this woman who had once been unable to speak now has the power to strike others dumb. Not only that, she comes into the house, twice, confident in her aims instead of being unsure of herself and her place in the world.

Having been taught how to live by Consolata, who goes off to spend her life in the lap of Piedade, the "woman black as firewood" (318), these women will not only never be victims again, they will forever teach women how to claim themselves. The last lines of *Paradise* read, "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). The work of making one's self must be done for eternity, and Piedade watches as the next ship of passengers approaches the shore. The ship might be filled with former slave women like *Beloved*, or children and/or women stunted by childhood in *The Bluest Eye* or *Home*, or they might be women forced to live alongside men who see no value in women like those in *Paradise*. No matter how the women appear, there will be a safe space, a Convent, for them to enact their subjectivity,

but there is a process they must complete. First, they must acknowledgement their marginal status and how that status has worked against them, then they must consolidate their weaknesses with women working to work for collective goals, and lastly, they must find their independence as they work themselves into the fabric of the country. They must complete a woman's work to become "free. Dangerously free" (*The Bluest Eye* 159).

Conclusion

"We Black women are the single group in the West intact. And anybody can see we're pretty shaky. We are… the only group that derives its identity from itself. I think it's been rather unconscious but we measure ourselves by ourselves, and I think that's a practice we can ill afford to lose" (Giovanni 144). In Morrison's novels, and in the literature of Black women, self-definition is key to subjectivity. As a spiritual practice, self-definition is vital. The reclamation of the self, then, affords Black women the opportunity to exercise divinity through the exercise of personhood. It is the statement that "I am here, and I am doing whatever it is I choose to do in this moment without apology." When the girls of *The Bluest Eye* choose independent action, when they choose to be womanish, they are aligning themselves with the whole host of Black womanhood. Some women, like the Breedloves, internalized white supremacy and fail at reclamation, but so many other Morrisonian women succeed.

By the end of each of these novels, women have earned the right to claim themselves for themselves. They have stood up to marriages, bosses, and children in order to become the person called them to be. Their divinity was assigned at birth, but it was a treasure they would have to claim. It was not a simple process; sometimes it even required death or life after death, as in the case of Beloved. Sometimes, it required indescribable trauma to the mind, body, or heart, but each time it demanded the giving of the self back to the self. The women practiced their own brand of spirituality through the reclamation of the soul, the spirit, and the body working in tandem, one with the other. As the women

face the possibility of a new, unfettered freedom, they face the world confident in whom it is that God made them. Troubles may come, but they would not be troubled. As we watch the women dance in the rain outside of the Convent, they are embodying the fiercest sort of spiritual practice: the motion of the body in tune with the world.

The South in Her, or Nurturing Her Creative Spirit

Houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned the dignity of being; there we learned to have faith.

-bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance"

Where there is woman, there is magic.

-Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*

When author bell hooks reminisces about growing up Black in the South, she recalls trips to her grandmother's house because this was where hooks learned to clean, sew, cook, and take care of a home. At her grandmother's house, hooks watched women in service to their yards and gardens; she even watched women choose the perfect crop for a night's dinner. As I read Ntozake Shange's 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo,* I noticed the spirit of hooks' grandmother, and my own grandmother, in the preteen Indigo. One of the primary observations onlookers make about the young Indigo is that she has "too much South in her," which means she is very spiritually engaged with nature (Shange 2). The young Indigo spends far too much of her time planting seeds, conjuring potions, and playing with bugs and insects. For Indigo, though, these activities affirm the young girl as she seeks her place in a family of women because her innate genius manifests itself differently than the way it does for her sisters. As the novel works its way through the cultivation of Indigo's identity, her time spent in the garden remains crucial. Shange explains, Indigo "made herself, her world, from all that she came from" (Shange 2). When men seek to molest her or young boys trouble or threaten Indigo, she concocts potions

and notes them in the text (just in case the reader needs magic to protect against some offender). Indigo sees the ground as a salvific force, and she cherishes her work with and within the earth.

What makes *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* one of the most uniquely revolutionary novels I have ever read, though, is that it is equal parts workbook, cookbook, and novel. Indigo is the last of three sisters living with their mother in Charleston, South Carolina, which any rudimentary scholar of African American history knows is the site of the Gullah/Geechee people.[xii] The Gullah/Geechee people are the descendants of West Africans who were able to retain much of the language and culture of Africa in America despite the slave trade, and "they are the most culturally and genetically African among the descendants of U.S.-born slaves" (Matory 952). The Gullah/Geechee nation has a distinct African American voice, culture, and heritage, of which the family in Shange's novel is a part.

Black women, as a whole, are distinctly tied to the land, and it shows through the women's spiritual engagement with it in Shange's novel. Indigo, who is the spiritual child, writes potions, Sassafrass is a poet, and Cypress is a dancer, while their mother, Hilda Effania, is a weaver. The novel includes not only Indigo's herbal remedies, but it includes Cypress's, Sassafrass's, and their mother's favorite recipes. Hilda's family is a part of a long legacy of Black women who take to the land as the way in which they fully express the divinity of their personhood. In *The Bluest Eye*, *Home*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise*, Toni Morrison conducts a similar project to Shange's as she uses the land, or the earth, as a vital component of the Black woman's spiritual identity.

The Blackness of the Practice

As a means of organizing my engagement of spiritual practice within Morrison's texts in this first chapter, I primarily use "Ecofeminism and Christian Theology" by Mary Grey, which outlines the connection between Christianity and the earth. In Grey's essay, she first defines ecofeminism as the "union of two concerns—ecology and justice for women" (481), with the ecological focus that "explores

the interaction and interdependence of all life forms" and the feminist focus, which "focuses on the full humanity of women and the structural institutions, religious, and cultural systems and concepts of the human person that hinder this across the world" (482). From Grey's perspective, there are three existing levels by which to explore the relationship of women to nature, and they are by using patriarchal culture, social constructions, and, finally, through Christianity (483), and since those ways are lacking, ecofeminist theology offers a new way for women to experience the natural world.

Ecofeminist theology offers a "fusion of the environmental movement, feminism, and women's spirituality. That the earth and all living things are sacred is an underlying principle" (484). Women, instead of seeing the earth as something to be tampered, or trifled, with, see the earth as a worship partner. Just as the earth sustains life with the fruit it bears, women sustain life with the fruit they bear, a similarity that lends strength to an ecofeminist theology. In so doing, ecofeminists rethink the world, the human person, and the mystery of God (487). Most importantly, ecofeminist theology supports an ethics of caring, which we will see in this analysis through the actions of nearly all female characters. In "Black Feminist Epistemology," Patricia Hill Collins offers a subsection on the ethics of caring, which is "another dimension of an alternative epistemology used by African-American women" (281). Caring "suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (282). When Black women develop an ethic of care, they can then develop collective knowledge and divinity.

In many ways, the concerns of the ecofeminist mirror those of the Black female author because the connection to the divinity of the land is on full display. In Morrison, women create themselves from the things they are able to make with their hands and God's soil, so it is no surprise that Morrison acknowledges the earth as a primary vehicle of African American spiritual life and practice. Gloria Akasha Hull defines Morrison's work thusly, "Her deft insight allows her to explore what it means to

carry life-consciousness in non-human and vegetable form" (*Soul Talk* 51). Morrison is, for the most part, able to make the ground, nature, and the environment acquiesce to the demands of her characters.

It is important to note that there is a legacy of engagement with the ground as a stabilizing and divine force, not only the usage of the land for the cultivation of crops. For a master, or even a novice, gardener, there is nothing more affirming than to plant seeds in the ground and watch those seeds grow into either tall stalks of corn, bushels of roses, or ripe, juicy watermelons, which we observe through the majority of Morrison's female characters. Since Dianne Glave argues, "Men tended fields and women kept gardens" ("A Garden So Brilliant" 399), my primary focus is on the women of Morrison's novels; however, when the men engage the land as a significant marker, I break to explain the ways in which they recognize the divinity of the land as well.

For example, Cholly Breedlove plants seeds into his daughter, and it yields lunacy and an incestuous pregnancy—because he plants the seed of rape. Despite the trauma that sprouts from his—literal—seed, the process of reaping and sowing remains the same even in Cholly's life. He plants seed; the ground yields; his seed sprout. Patrice Cormier-Hamilton offers another reading of what ultimately happens to Pecola. She explains that the issue was not with the seed; rather, "Pecola's soul was denied nourishment," and was "starved by both [B]lack and white environments" (122). Neither Cholly, nor Pecola's mother, Pauline, offered Pecola physical or spiritual nourishment, yet her seed still sprouts; however, her crop—the child in her womb—is not viable. Conversely to Cholly's damning seed, when Black women in Morrison's novels enter their gardens, they are planting seeds of wellness, health, and spiritual awareness because women understand implicitly that her "understanding of the spiritual is based on her appreciation of the land of her origins" (Christian 72).

The act of creation in diasporic spirituality, which takes place through the gardens of Morrison's women, allows for each woman to tap into her own sense of worth and divinity. In "A Knowing So

Deep," from *What Moves at the Margin,* Morrison writes a letter to Black women intimating, "When you sculpt or paint, organize or refute, manage, teach, nourish, investigate or love, you do not blink… You are the touchstone by which all that is human can be measured. Porch or horizon, your sweep is grand" (32). Morrison uses the vehicle of Black womanhood in gardens to illustrate the depth, width, and breadth of African American identity. To some extent, Morrison is taking a cue from the King James Bible, where Genesis 2:8-9 reads, "the Lord God planted a garden in Eden…And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food" (KJV), because the women I have selected from Morrison's novels endeavor to embark on their own "creation" story. Not only do they plant vegetables that are good for food, but they build elaborate gardens that are pleasant to the sight. Taking the skills honed from their ancestral homeland, combining those with skills imparted through plantation work, and finally with the blessing of the divine one, these women are able to exact magic time and again, every growing season. Alice Walker uses her mother to explain growing magic. Walker writes that her mother "planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds" (241), and "whatever she planted grew as if by magic" (241).

In Morrison's novels, this engagement with environmental creation extends to an appreciation for nature and animals, and there seem to be five principal elements Morrison uses the earth for in *The Bluest Eye*, *Home*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise*, and those are: 1) sustenance, through fruits and vegetables, 2) beauty, seen in flower gardens, 3) creation, as they develop seedlings into plants, 4) marking, signaling time, seasons, or experiences, and 5) healing, seen through potions developed from the earth.[xiii] Through those five elements, the women of Morrison's novels are trained to know the land, mark their lives by the land, and finally make healing use of the land.

According to Grey, it is "patriarchal culture [that] has defined women as 'closer to nature'. It has been said: 'Female is male as nature is to culture. In other words, women are supposed to be closer to the body, matter, earth, sexuality and bodily processes" (482). The issue that arises, however, is that this closeness is perceived as "weakness, inferiority, and proneness to sin" (482). Instead of the women's relationship to the earth being a marker of weakness, I suggest that it is through the earth women obtain divinity. Women's closeness to the land does not subordinate them; it works to elevate womanhood to a plain a little lower than the heavens. As we read through the women's experiences with the earth in Morrison's novels, it seems the land will silently acquiesce to their work, if the land supports the work.

Morrison illustrates the way in which nature and womanhood work in tandem. Grey explains, "Because of the traditional responsibility of women for sustaining life—food, water, firewood, care of infants…it is clear that when nature cannot provide these conditions, the suffering of both are interlinked" (484). Similarly, when a woman suffers, the production of the ground suffers. Looking to the novels, it is the ground that Miss Ethel consults to heal Ycidra "Cee" Money in Morrison's *Home*; she is the focal point of the women's work. In *Beloved,* though, the ground offers its sustenance and resources in healing Sethe Suggs, but later when Beloved begins to hold 124 Bluestone under her spell, she perverts nature, and the land changes from being functional to only beautiful. In *Paradise*, the land offers its produce for the women of Convent to sustain and heal themselves, the Convent functioning as a "natural, regenerative, agrarian utopia" (Gauthier 396). In *The Bluest Eye*, natural remedies work for Aunt Jimmy, but the seeds Claudia and Frieda plant for Pecola do not sprout.

Morrison offers gardens as the primary means of sustenance for the women in three of the novels, the women of the Convent in *Paradise*, those in *Beloved*, and the women in *Home*, but the women in *The Bluest Eye* appear to have lost their essential connection to the ground, and it shows. Though some gardens are intended for their beauty, like the ones cultivated by the townspeople of

Paradise's Ruby or the white families in *The Bluest Eye's* Lake Shore community, the primary function of the land is growing edible foods. It is clear that gardening remains a central focal point in Morrison's work as she achieves an awareness of African Diaspora spiritual practices and brings this awareness to bear alongside her Christian ideology. In an interview, Morrison explains, "I tend to use everything from African or Afro-American sources" (461), and the practice of spiritual engagement is one such practice. Spiritual awareness manifests itself through the women's work with their hands, but the Christian positioning of the new world offers the women words for their work.

Learning the Ground

Seeing the land as capable of producing or reproducing its fruit is integral to knowing what the land can become if it is cultivated properly. In two of the novels–*The Bluest Eye* and *Home*—this is the most clear. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia and Frieda meet Maureen Peal, who "pierced the shell of a deadening winter," so they found themselves wanting to begin their exploration of the land earlier than usual (64). Even though it is still a cold day, they were "scruffing and poking at the earth, swallowing air, drinking rain…" (64). Alice Walker explains this as the phenomenon of the Southern experience, children and adults "feeling the soil between the toes, smelling the dust thrown up by rain, loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does" (21). Claudia has fallen in love with the land because she has seen what the land can become with the proper attention. Having watched her parents weed their garden, but never actually participating in the act of weeding, Claudia and Frieda hold that the ground will also produce for them. The two girls have learned—and the text gives no indication that this was not just an innate knowledge—that if they plant seeds, the seeds will grow, so the wonders of the dirt continually demand their attention. With no formal training as gardeners, the girls believe that with their fortitude alone, they can bring forth miracles from the earth by only their own magic.

When the girls are faced with the broken body of Pecola after Cholly rapes her, they believe the only way to fix what has happened is by presenting an offering to the land. After listening to adults recount bits and pieces of what has happened to Pecola (since adults never notice the girls, they are privy to several mature conversations), Claudia and Frieda decide they will "plant seeds out back of our house so we can watch over them. And when they come up, we'll know everything is all right. All right?" (191). What begins as "a magic package containing the packets and packets of seeds [Claudia and Frieda] were to sell for five cents each…" becomes a scramble to create some remedy to Pecola's coming destruction (188).

Despite the determination the girls have to be successful, what they do not yet know is their "soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear…" (206). The land in which Pecola was planted would not allow her to grow. Initially, Frieda had faulted Claudia for planting "the seeds too deeply," but it was "the fault of the earth, the land, of our town" (206). The girls' naiveté blocks them from this knowledge until it is too late. They simply believe that if they plant a crop, it will sprout. They do not yet realize the intricacies of gardening, the instruction required to be successful. They do not yet realize that the land and the women who tend it must work in tandem. Although gardening does require a bit of magic, it is still a very practical endeavor. The young girls had no idea how to work the land or even how to turn unyielding land in their favor.

Conversely though, in *Home*, Cee is educated under the tutelage of older, capable teachers. After she is physically healed, she becomes a woman of the land. As soon as Miss Ethel tells Cee she will not be able to have children because of a corrupt, racist doctor's experimentation on her reproductive organs, Miss Ethel "went into the backyard and stirred coffee grounds and eggshells into the soil around her plants" (130). It seems Miss Ethel presents an offering to the land to soften the news. Miss Ethel is

"an aggressive gardener, [who] blocked or destroyed enemies and nurtured plants" (130), and she aggressively treats Cee.

From Miss Ethel, Cee would learn how to build a garden in which:

> Slugs curled and died under vinegar-seasoned water. Bold, confident raccoons cried and ran away… Cornstalks safe from skunks slept in peace under paper bags… pole beans curved, then straightened to advertise their readiness. Strawberry tendrils wandered, their royal-scarlet berries shining… Honeybees gathered to salute *Illicium* and drink the juice. (130)

Cee learns Miss Ethel's garden was "not Eden; it was so much more than that " (130), so when Cee is released from the care of the neighborhood women, she takes up this selfsame work. We learn Cee is a new woman when Frank offers his sister a refrigerator for their shared home. Instead of being excited, she responds, "What we need with a cold box? I know how to can and anything else I need I go outside and pick, gather, or kill it" (127). He then realizes his sister is not the same young, impressionable woman he left before the Korean War. He left with a girl as his sister, but when he returns, she has become a spiritually grounded and structurally sound woman. As Joy James details, "Black women have tended incredible, secluded gardens within the expansive wasteland of this dysfunctional democracy" (2). Despite personal trauma, Cee decides to plant and cultivate crops since she would be unable to birth children. Through learning a "woman's work," Cee adds her name to the legacy of Black women who nurture through nature. As Grey explains, "women's responsibilities have been for the basic sustenance of life—feeding, bearing, bringing to birth and caring for the young, nursing and caring for the sick, young and elderly" (482), and Morrison's women make these responsibilities into spiritual practice.

The way Ethel taught Cee, Consolata teaches the Convent women, and there is no one yet who teaches Claudia, Frieda, or Pecola. Outside of the women's training being key to their usage of the

practical arts, it appears that the time and place of each text is integral to understanding the importance of gardening as it relates to whether or not the intention is for sustenance or beauty. *Paradise*, in which the women of the Convent use their garden for sustenance while the citizens of Ruby use theirs for beauty. Despite its setting in or around 1976, Ruby is by no means modern. *Paradise* centers on a small, all-Black town in Oklahoma with no electricity, police, and grocery stores, but Ruby does offer a bank, three churches, a feed store, a convenience store (for sodas and cigarettes), and a small pharmacy; Ruby has remained a stunted town, set in modernity, but living off the technological grid. The women in town, though, have left their gardens, going into the neighboring town for their groceries or to the Convent for their produce. For this reason, the women of Ruby lack the spiritual connection the women of the Convent were able to cultivate. The women of the Convent gained independence through their gardens, while the women of Ruby relied on their husbands and fathers for sustenance.

Though the citizens of Ruby prided themselves in only buying from the Convent what they could not grow themselves, the text makes a very different argument. On the gardens in Ruby, the narrator describes (quoted in length for its significance):

> The dirt yards, carefully swept and sprinkled in Haven, became lawns in Ruby until, finally, front yards were given over completely to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it. The habit [became an] interest in cultivating plants that could not be eaten or spread, so the ground surrendered to it. Exchanging, sharing a cutting here, a root there, a bulb or two became so frenetic a land grab, husbands complained of neglect and the disappointingly small harvest of radishes, or the too short rows of collards, beets. The women kept with their vegetable gardens in back, but little by little its produce became like the flowers—driven by desire, not necessity. (90)

Conversely, though, the women of the Convent grow the majority of their own food. Their work allows the women of the Convent an opportunity to share in each other's friendship and company, especially after Convent matron (or mother) Consolata institutes a new regimen for the women. She forces the initially scattered, lazy, and unproductive women to work instead of allowing them to come into the Convent and leave at will without ever contributing to the upkeep of the home. The women must cook, clean, shave their heads, and follow her regulations. This new set of Convent women are ones the men of Ruby attack because these independent women are dangerous to the status quo the patriarchs of Ruby instituted wherein women were dependent.[xiv]

When the patriarchs of Ruby ambush the Convent, they call the women "slack" because there are unwashed dishes. These women of the Convent, though, are not slack. When Consolata "discovered the wild bush heavy with stinging-hot peppers," she had the foresight to develop one of the lucrative Convent businesses from harvesting them. It is in the very first chapter of *Paradise* that the narrator explains the peppers' worth: "For a pricey price you could buy a string of the purply black peppers or a relish made from them... The relish lasted years with proper attention, and though many customers tried planting the seeds, the pepper grew nowhere outside the Convent's garden" (11). In addition to relish and strings of miracle peppers, the Convent produced a barbecue sauce that "got a heavenly reputation based on the hellfire peppers" (242). Consolata, in her garden-work, had stumbled upon the one crop that could not be duplicated, the one that would continue to bring even the most reticent customers back to the Convent for the peppers, even the customer who would one day ambush the Convent to take the women's lives.

The men of Ruby united against the women of the Convent: Deacon, Steward, and K.D. Morgan, Arnold and Jeff Fleetwood, Harper and Menus Jury, Wisdom Poole, and Sargeant Person—all members of the original Ruby families— have decided that these women are too dangerous, because of their self-

sufficiency, to remain in the Convent. The women of the Convent, despite Ruby citizens who "seldom stopped to buy anything other than peppers" were able to produce year after year enough to maintain their home, grounds, and garden (241).

When Mavis Albright arrives at the Convent, she finds a sprawling garden in the yard, even though she does not initially notice it. The garden offers Mavis an introduction to her new life. While speaking to Consolata, the older woman explains, "People be out to buy [from the Convent]." Mavis responds, "Buy? Buy what?" Consolata answers, "Garden things. Things I cook up. Things they don't want to grow themselves" (40). After this brief exchange, Mavis then looks around the garden, seeing, "flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables…A part of the garden she originally thought gone to weed became, on closer inspection, a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond," so it seems the men of Ruby have the "slack" women confused with their own women (40-41) because even the younger generation of Ruby residents, who "ought to be somewhere chopping, canning, mending, fetching," have taken to congregating idly at the town's center (111). This loss of industriousness for the original tasks germane to the upkeep of Ruby—growing their food, midwifery, sweeping up around the community oven—led its residents to have time to engage in different sorts of activities, which frustrates the town leaders. One theorist, Patrice Cormier-Hamilton, posits "naturalism arises from the collapse of man's conception of an order in the material world" (112), and since the women of Ruby no longer followed the order of planting and growing edible crops, it seems the men of Ruby lash out in anger.

The women who live and work in the Convent have tapped into their spirituality in that they are able to return to the earth as the site of divinity. The women have no need for grocery or convenience stores; they, as opposed to the women in Ruby, grow everything they need to survive. The nuns of the Convent taught Consolata that she must learn how to care for herself and those in her charge, so Consolata learns how to grow, cook, and clean. The women of the Convent are not slack; these women

are spiritual. Consolata understands "that the earth and all living things are sacred" (Grey 484), so she treats the women as if they are worthy despite what the world says. Under the covering of the Spirit, Consolata is able to make a life for herself, and even four other women, solely off of the production of the land.

In *The Bluest Eye*, though, there is not much dialogue about the availability of either individual or community gardens, and this absence eventually becomes a symbol of the coming community devastation. In fact, there is only the reference Frieda makes to her parents "over at the garden weeding" after she is molested by Mr. Henry that speaks even to presence of gardens. There is no clear indication of the MacTeer family picking food from their home garden, which means their relationship to the land might be nil (99). It seems that by the industrialized, TV-laden, ice cream shop 1940s in Lorain, Ohio, gardening was less important than it was in Ruby or the Convent.[xv] Losing the connection with the ground means Claudia would not have been able to see the change in the earth that might have foretold the coming aberration since "nature's timing is the major structural technique Morrison uses to dramatize the unnatural inversion" and perversion of normative order (Christian 73).

In the novels in which the women are more mature, though, the earth seems to offer a forewarning to coming danger to which Claudia does not have access. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs feels a change in the air before the slave catchers arrive. In *Paradise*, Lone smells the rain coming, decides to harvest mandrake, and then stumbles upon the men plotting murder at the Oven. As Lone DuPres—one of the elder Ruby women—explains, "[God] did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears… His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity's sour juice and paid attention to His world" (273). These women were in tune with the land, and God responded through natural means to ensure their survival.

In *Home*, women, again, are familiar with the land and its ability to produce. In a fond memory of her time spent in Lotus, Georgia, watching the women of the town, Ycidra "Cee" Money recalls, "the relief and pride they all took in having their own garden and their own laying hens" (46). Coupled with that, Cee notes, "If someone had an abundance of peppers or collards, they insisted Ida [Frank and Ycidra's mother] take them. There was okra, fresh fish from the creek, a bushel of corn, all kinds of food that should not go to waste" (46). From these moments, Cee recognizes that her womanhood demands that she be an integral part of her community, and that includes offering support in the way of material goods, which Cee produces when she makes a quilt with the other community women.

Morrison offers a mirror example of community care in *Beloved* when Beloved and Sethe engage in a destructive love affair with each other. Denver, Sethe's youngest daughter, decides she needs to become the head of the household as her mother has relinquished her duty. Denver then visits her old teacher, Mrs. Lady Jones, asking her if she has "a little extra" (148). Mrs. Jones gives her rice, four eggs, and some tea. After Mrs. Jones' donation, every few days Denver found food outside of her gate including "a sack of white beans… a plate of cold rabbit meat, [and] a basket of eggs" (249). Whatever her neighbors were able to spare, they shared. These families, communities, and friends are able to see beyond the other's faults and meet their needs. There would be no lack in any house because the land (and the Lord) would provide. These women are, first, creators, and they are facilitators who do whatever small part they can to protect the lives of those around them. Though it appears Denver is unable to do her own cultivating of crops, her mother can, but she chooses not to. After her escape and relocation to 124 Bluestone Road in Ohio, Sethe no longer does gardening work she would have performed at Sweet Home. Instead, she accepts a job in a restaurant where her boss allows her to take food home for her daughter daily. Although she does not garden, "every dawn she worked at fruit pies, potato dishes and vegetables…" (39), so while her neighbors had to grow with their hands, Sethe

contented herself with creating dishes from what others grew. Only when Sethe acquiesces to Beloved's demand for all of her time and attention does she return to her garden. She declares, "I'll plant carrots where she can see them, and turnips" (201). Sethe is not concerned with eating the turnips and carrots; she is concerned with exposing Beloved to the beauty she was unable to see as she rested in her grave. Even Beloved joins the competition to find beauty when she "filled basket after basket with… dandelions, violets, forsythia" presenting them to Sethe (241). The situation in the house is so off-kilter that when Paul D returns to 124, he stands "amazed by the riot of late-summer flowers where vegetables should be growing. Sweet william, morning glory, chrysanthemums. The odd placement of cans jammed with the rotting stems of things, the blossoms shriveled like sores" (270). Paul D finds a home that has ceased to function, its residents having escaped to flights of fancy and playing dress-up in carnival clothes. The house has devolved into child's play; the women do not work, cook, or eat. Beloved and Sethe only care about each other and how they can please one another to the detriment of Sethe's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It is not until the women of the community gather together to exorcise the ghost Beloved does 124 Bluestone Road return to some semblance of normalcy. The women ultimately reclaim the land from the force of evil, Beloved, who came to threaten all they had built.

Marking Lives By the Land

Sethe has a memory of being on the Sweet Home plantation with her "crawling-already" baby daughter in tow. She remembers a patch "close to the house where the quick things grew: beans, onions, sweet peas. The other [garden] was further down for long-lasting things, potatoes, pumpkin, okra, pork salad" (192). In those memories, Sethe is recalling the time long ago when she was married, happy, and free from the ghosts of time past. In this same recollection, she remembers the "peas still had flowers," which is early in the growing season (192). For Sethe, the engagement with the earth marks the time.

This memory, of the plots of land and peas with flowers, in particular, eventually leads to Sethe's recalling the day she found out schoolteacher instructed his pupils to list the slaves' human and animal characteristics, including her own. This moment is a defining one for Sethe because she recognizes how little schoolteacher and the other whites on the plantation thought of her since the death of Mr. Garner and the sickness of Mrs. Garner (her master and mistress). Sethe, who had formally been treated like a human woman, becomes a slave when schoolteacher arrives, a slave and a research project.

When Morrison offers images of the land, she illustrates the importance of the land to the narrative. From the opening of the text, Morrison assures the reader that the land is just as important as the story being told. The very first line of *The Bluest Eye* reads, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (5). This is the "botanical aberration" I mentioned earlier. It focuses the weight of the retelling on the absence of a particular flower. Reading further, we learn "not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year" (5). As Claudia MacTeer closes this epilogue, she lets us know her story is all about "Pecola and the unyielding earth," so of course the text centers on what the earth would and would not produce (6). Neither Claudia nor her sister could ascertain why the flowers would not grow, so she has no answers to give readers. Based on her lack of adult understanding, her memories are typically related to the way in which the land marks seasons or how she chooses to categorize her memories. She does not yet have the same spiritual relationship with the land that older Black women were able to cultivate, so she uses the logic of the seasons to mark moments in her life.

Critics have discussed Morrison's inclusion of the seasons as framing for the novel (Grewal; Dittmar; Steptoe). Since Claudia is a young girl, she knew and ordered her life through the seasons, so in light of the "botanical aberration," she was forced to confront a fall that did not produce what she was used to it producing. The season came, but the marigolds did not. At nine and eleven years old, she and

her sister decided that it must have been their fault that the land did not respond to the seeds which they had planted. The focus of the novel then moves from its natural focus to a logical engagement; if the land does not produce, then whose fault must it have been? Linda Dittmar adds, "the four seasons organization adds another complication" to the narrative (143). Because the "march of the seasons is reassuringly predictable," nothing could have predicted what happens to Pecola or her town. Even the changing of the seasons responds to the disaster that happens to be Pecola near the end of the summer. Pecola's rape happens at the same time Claudia is recalling the "tightness of a strawberry" (187), and just as the strawberries were breaking through their vines, Cholly was breaking through his daughter's hymen, recalling what was "absent from his [first sexual] experience" (Rainwater 108). Focusing on the seasons as the grounding for the novel allows the reader to assume an unfettered understanding of Claudia's world. As Cormier-Hamilton describes, Morrison illustrates the "danger of indiscrimate *internalization* of white Western mores…and the importance of *self-discovery*" (115), which we see most clearly through the process of Claudia's self-awakening in *The Bluest Eye.* There is no complication in her retelling; if one is familiar with the changing of the seasons, one can follow Claudia's narrative because "time is a unified entity" (Christian 73).

For example, when Claudia falls sick in autumn—the first season of the text—she recalls what follows the changing of the seasons, as it relates to the differences reflected in her body. Though her body is in pain, she falls asleep dreaming of plums and thinking about love "thick and dark as Alaga syrup" and a taste in her mouth "sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen" (11). Claudia seems to enjoy her oneness with the land much more than any of the commercial items that were supposed to bring her joy. After destroying her latest baby doll, she reflects that she would prefer an experience for Christmas, in which she would "sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs… and since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward,"

and if anyone has ever had a ripe peach, she would know what Claudia means (22). It is not these experiences, though, that her parents offer in the fall of 1941. They believe it is dolls, movie stars, and plastic cups that Claudia would cherish. Part of the reason her parents do not realize what would please Claudia is that adults never ask her questions. She bemoans, "Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information" (10), so though Claudia escapes to flights of fancy with thoughts of plums and peaches, her parents do not notice.

As she marks another new season—winter—she notices how the season shows in her father's face. As we open chapter four, she intimates:

> My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides them. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the sweep of the Erie…(61)

This is how Claudia knows that the season has changed: her father's face has changed to one where he will not "unrazor his lips until Spring" (61). His only concern during the winter months is making sure his children have the supplies necessary to bear the harsh winter. He has become the protector, shielding his girls from the dangers of the outside world, but as children, Claudia and Frieda only "waited for spring, when there could be gardens" (62); however, when the spring begins to show itself in chapter six, Claudia recollects that "forsythia and lilac bushes meant only a change in whipping style" 97). Claudia is marking what was one of the most significant years of her life, and in it, she focuses on the pain brought by the changing of the seasons, and the beauty, which is how she closes her recollection of the seasons. In her last season change, which takes place in chapter ten, she says, "I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer—its dust and lowering skies" (187). By the time the

fall comes, as the text has worked backwards from the opening, Pecola is pregnant with her father's child. In the course of a year, Claudia's memories of the seasons have moved from pleasant, juvenile cursory interrogations to disheartening, inexplicable nationwide failure of the land.

It is not only Claudia who uses the earth to note the passage of time and the significance of events. Pauline Breedlove has fond memories of the passage of time through nature. First, Pauline recalls leaving the South with it being the last time she "seen real june bugs" (112). She remembers the green from the bugs lighting up the night sky, and when she meets her future husband, Cholly, she intimates, "I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry-picking…" and she could "feel that purple deep inside" (115). Then she recalls, "that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out the fields" (115). When Cholly touches her, "it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together" (115). Pauline falls in love with Cholly because he made her feel all the colors she left behind when her family left the country for the more industrialized North. When they have sex, she feels "those little bits of color floating up… and it be a rainbow all inside" (131). The way in which Pauline remembers meeting the love of her life is by the way the earth responded to their love: recollections of june bugs, lemonade, and berries.

Unripeness is key in this text, even as the text describes Cholly's rape of Pecola. There is a "tenderness" that "would not hold" and the "tightness of her vagina" that "was more than he could bear" (163), signaling that he had begun to look at his own daughter like she was a wild muscadine on the vine, which functions as a misrecognition of the land and his child. This time, he would break the shell of the muscadine without interruption. The unripeness of Pecola's body matches Cholly's recollection of his teenaged sexual experience, and Elihue "Soaphead Church" Whitcomb's forays in pedophilia as well. Both men exploit the immaturity of their partners, unlike Claudia, who acknowledges and respects

nature's process. Morrison offers these contrasting images of the men and Claudia because the women tend to value the earth while the men value only what the earth offers.

Converse to the unripe images characters use to mark their lives, there is also the image of a ripe tree beaten in Sethe's back. When Sethe meets Amy Denver, Sethe is pregnant, in labor, and escaping slavery. After she is sexually assaulted by men at Sweet Home, and then beaten mercilessly for reporting it, she decides she must leave the plantation even if she loses her life in the process. The beating leaves a web of markings on her back and a white girl, Amy Denver, describes the open, pus-filled wounds as "a tree. A chokecherry tree. It's red and split wide open, full of sap…" She then tells Sethe, "You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom" (79). Amy Denver's explanation of the tree on Sethe's back actually calms Sethe and helps Denver tend to Sethe's wounds. This description is the same one Sethe repeats to a fellow escaped slave, Paul D, close to the beginning of the text. She recalls, "That's what she [Amy Denver] called it. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves… Could have cherries too now for all I know" (16). Compartmentalizing her injuries, seeing them as the growth of a tree on her back instead of the innumerable whips of a lash, helps Sethe cope with her trauma.

Glenda Weathers, in the article, "Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance: Literary Landscapes of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison," interrogates Morrison's placement of trees in her novels. From Weathers' perspective, "Tree images convey multiple ideas; they posit knowledge of both good and evil; however, the fruit of trees must be tasted to provide protagonists the self-knowledge necessary for personal growth, redemption, and deliverance" (202). The tree of Sethe's back both marks and matures her, and brings her into contact with the woman who would be her savior.

All of these spiritual engagements with the land privilege creation, first explained in the opening chapter of the Bible in the book of Genesis, but women exist contemporarily as the primary means of creation. Not only are women capable of creating with their bodies—through the housing and birthing of children—women extend that creation to the land on which they live. As Grey explains, "Women reveal something of the mystery of God by being able to reverence the gifts of creation" (488). In this way, women are embodying the very spirit of God as individual creators. Alice Walker even remembers, "it is only when my mother is working in her garden that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator" (241). We find Claudia, Frieda, Pecola, Sethe, and Beloved "ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty," as Walker muses in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (241). As the women plant seeds into the ground, similar the way in which a man would plant his seed in her womb, the women are able to create new life when the seeds sprout. In this way, women mimic creation. Just as God ordered the universe in the way He imagines beauty, so do the women who take responsibility of the earth.

Making the Land Work

From sustenance to beauty, and then from creation to marking, the characters again and again use the earth as a means of unearthing divinity. As women turn to "an *ecofeminist eschatology,*" which means, "rather than presuming that this world is disposable, that we merely pass through on our way to eternal bliss, [we] develop an ethics of care, which extends to all forms of life" (490). This last section is the most important because in each text, the characters use the earth as a means of healing or salvation. Both the religious and even those who claim religiosity—but make a mockery of faith like Soaphead Church—use herbs for the concocting of potions. It is the African American slave tradition to locate herbal, natural, and earth-derived cures for common ailments, especially since slaves were rarely, if ever, permitted to visit a doctor. Instead, most medicine, like we shall see shortly in the discussion of

Cholly Breedlove's Aunt Jimmy, is proactive, intended to prevent the sickness before it takes hold. In the direst circumstances, then a healer may be called, but this is only after all home remedies have been tested.

In Africana spiritualist circles, an older woman or man operating in the power of the ancestors typically does this healing since as Makgathi Mokwena explains, "a crucial component of traditional African healing is the accepted notion of the importance of ancestors in regulating the lives of the living, as expressed through traditional healers" (89). In *The Bluest Eye*, when Cholly Breedlove first recalls his Aunt Jimmy, he remembers how he would watch her "eating collard greens with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth" or he would smell "her when she wore the asafetida bag around her neck" (132). According to Maisah and Frank Robinson's article, "Slave Medicine: Herbal Lessons from American History," asafetida was used to "repel all illnesses and plagues, both known and unknown" (Robinson 1). When Cholly's Aunt Jimmy still falls sick, the older women in the neighborhood suggest a new medley of cures: "Don't eat the whites of eggs." "Drink new milk." "Chew on this root" (136), but the text later says Aunt Jimmy ignores the women's recommendations, instead choosing to rely on Biblical intervention.

Conversely, when Aunt Jimmy gets even sicker, and the scriptures do not work (136), M'Dear, the neighborhood ancestor and healer, was summoned. Jillian Jimenez, in "The History of Grandmothers in the African-American Community," explains "grandmothers were the family and community healers, offering homemade potions and herbs, along with other folks practices, such as casting spells to cure anyone in the slave quarters or local community who was ill" (528). M'Dear is the village grandmother, and even the town preacher accompanies M'Dear to Aunt Jimmy's home, which illustrates M'Dear's importance to the community. The woman instructs Aunt Jimmy to "drink pot liquor and nothing else" (137), and in two evenings, Aunt Jimmy begins to regain her health. M'Dear did not offer Aunt Jimmy

any specific remedies, but she drank a concoction full of the various pot liquors brought by the different women: “Bowls of pot liquor from black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips” (137). There were no rules to what the women brought. They came bearing whatever gifts they had to save Aunt Jimmy’s life. These women were actors in their own lives; they refused to sit idly by and watch Aunt Jimmy die, so they brought whatever they could to save her. The women then take charge of their inherent divinity and tempt fate by saving Jimmy. It works for a short time, but death comes for Aunt Jimmy anyway. It is not the ultimate result that is of primary importance, though, it is the action of the women. They bring herbs, soups, potions, and liniments to cure their friend of whatever might be ailing her.

Similarly, in *Home*, when Frank brings Cee to Miss Ethel’s home, Miss Ethel first prescribes “calamus root,” and when that is found to be ineffective, “the women took turns nursing Cee and each had a different recipe for her cure” (119). In *Beloved*, when the situation with Sethe and the ghost, Beloved, becomes dire, Miss Ella (one of the community women) decides to intervene. She was “a practical woman who believed there was a root either to chew or avoid for every ailment” (257), so the presence of this uninvited ghost with a human body interrupts the sanctity of this Ohio town. When Miss Ella, trained in the domestic arts, realizes that she could not see another woman in need and not tend to her, she finally leads the exorcism. Similarly, when Amy Denver comes upon Sethe with open wounds she first offers to “break them blossoms open” and then covers her back with “two palmfuls of web” (80). Even the youngest healer, using only very practical resources, can orchestrate a healing. Now, the women in *Home* are well-versed in how to heal. They birthed children, cared for family, and intervened for friends. Amy Denver, on the other hand, had no such training. Instead of letting her naiveté prevent her from stepping in, Amy Denver takes to the woods to find what she could to be of assistance. She nurses Sethe’s back and rubs her feet, which was what Sethe needed for the next leg of her journey. The

next phase of healing would happen when she arrived at 124 Bluestone Road, but in the meantime, Amy Denver gave her enough care to make it.

Lastly, in *Paradise*, though the women in the Convent primarily grow for sustenance, and the women in Ruby grow for beauty, there are also women like Lone DuPres and Consolata—who can be considered "grandmothers," though they have no children—and grow herbal remedies. As Soane Morgan sits in the kitchen drinking from a steaming cup, Deacon walks in and asks her what she is drinking. She responds to him that it is nothing, but he says, "Give me some of it, then," (105) which she does not. The concoction is not explained in that section, but it is later in the text when Mavis and Gigi begin fighting in Mavis's stolen Cadillac. When Mavis yells that she is the one who makes up Soane's "tonic," Gigi replies, "It's just rosemary, a little bran mixed with aspirin" (167). The mixture, developed by Consolata, came from, it seems, her consultations with Lone, who noticed that Consolata was gifted in the spiritual arts.

Lone DuPres introduces Consolata to spiritual powers the younger woman did not know she possessed, so she initially fears their manifestation. Consolata was more comfortable working with the earth, but she was not ready to work with the spirit. Since she was a practicing, devout Catholic, she tells Lone she only needs her faith in God, but Lone counters that she needs more than faith; she needs "earth, air, water" (244). Lone is attempting to help Consolata locate the spirit of God within her. Lone tells Consolata to not distance God from the things he created and that includes all of the elements. Lone, though, does not explain to Consolata why she had been chosen for the gift of healing, but she does tell her not to despise it. Though Consolata's "secondary" gift gives her the power to resurrect the dead, she has to sacrifice her sight to receive it. Despite her ocular weakness, though, the earth, air, and water, coupled with her faith, allow Consolata to leverage her talent for gardening into a recipe for prosperity. Through blindness, old age, and increased fragility, Consolata is not hampered in her ability

to produce. Eventually, in addition to various fruits and vegetables, Consolata is able to create herbal remedies for physical ailments.

Most of the women in Ruby thought the Convent "otherworldly," so they went over for remedies only in the direst circumstances. When a child was close to death or a woman wanted to be rid of a child, she consulted the Convent. The women continue to seek out the Convent for medicines/remedies, but inside of the town's limits, they had less of a need for Lone and her services. Lone taught Consolata, but the women of Ruby shunned Lone. Some thought her crazy; others simply thought she was too old. She recalls the younger women who "laughed at her clean bellybands, her drops of urine. Poured her pepper tea in the toilet" (271). Lone has become a relic of time long gone in Ruby, a town that, ironically, prides itself on being traditional and unadulterated by technology. Though the women in Ruby do not appreciate Lone, it is she, the root-worker and teacher, who is privileged to watch the women of the Convent as they use their garden for the last time. When the women seek to escape the men's shooting rampage, they run out of the house and through the garden. Lone watches God as He "swept up and received His servants in broad daylight" (298). This rapture, however, is not the end of the Convent women, because as the text draws to a close, we see the pepper bushes "in full flower," which is, of course, symbolic for what it to come for the Convent women (303). The women were not carried anyway to heaven, though the text does not clearly explain what happens. What we know as readers is that murdered women's bodies disappear and then those murdered women reappear at their homes and are temporarily reunited with their families.

As an analog to biblical narrative, Jesus is dead for three days before being resurrected and transfigured without wound or injury. Then He returns to the earth for a short period of time to comfort his friends and loved ones before departing the earth and returning to heaven. Before the women return,

it is the Reverend Misner who sees the pepper bushes signaling that the end has not yet come. As Richard Misner and his girlfriend, Anna Poole, visit the Convent, they see the garden in disarray:

> Shriveled tomato plants alongside crops of leafy greens reseeding themselves with golden flowers; pink hollyhocks so tall the heads leaned all the way over a trail of bright squash blossoms; lacy tops of carrots browned and lifeless next to straight spikes of onions. Melons split their readiness showing gums of juicy red. (305)

At the sight of what has happened, Anna can only sigh at the "mix of neglect and unconquerable growth" (305). Anna's observation, of course, is a metaphor for the proud women of the Convent who stood alongside the men of Ruby as unconquerable growth while the town of Ruby slipped into neglect as the men were distracted. After the attack on the Convent, the town of Ruby seems even more close to destruction than it ever was, with families at war with each other, but the women of the Convent reappear at their own homes with their families with a very different story. The women of the Convent are whole, healed, and stable, but the men of Ruby are broken and have dishonored their calling. The women used the land and won; the men took on God's creation and lost. The women worked through the power of God; the men believed they were God.

V. Conclusion

The women in Morrison's texts offer an engagement with spiritual practices and a privileging of nature. They value, nurture, and cherish it, and use it as the foundation of their creation. The women of *Paradise* who live in the Convent are most successful at this, but the girls of *The Bluest Eye* also notice the capability of the land to be a redeeming force. In *Home*, the older women utilize the land as a saving grace for Cee before they teach her how to harness its power for herself. After escaping from slavery, Sethe refuses to work the land like she was required to do on the plantation, but she remembers what the land provided her through her journey from slavery to freedom. Each of these women is changed by her

interaction with nature as a spiritual component of God's glory on earth. They are able to recognize God's presence and honor Him through their service.

The men of Ruby who took on the women of the Convent are left battered and broken after their attack. All of their bruises remained intact, though the women were healed of all infirmities. It seems the land honors those who honor it. Morrison does not detail whatever becomes of the men who abused Cee, both Principal and Dr. Scott, but we know Cee becomes a stronger woman that either of them would have thought possible. She returns to her roots and her responsibility to create her own life, and not allow else to determine who and what she could be. From the land, she learns how to take care of herself and even other people, like Consolata, Claudia, Frieda, and Amy Denver do as well. The land can either be divine or devastating, but it is up to the gardener (and the master gardener) to determine how and if the land will yield.

Come Together in This Meeting Ground, or I Stand As Ten Thousand

She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it.

-Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 307

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, it seems the most prescient observation about Hagar Dead is found in the epigraph above. Guitar, the unofficial sage in the novel, is watching Hagar as she falls to pieces after being unceremoniously discarded by her cousin/lover, Macon "Milkman" Dead, Jr., but Guitar wants better for Hagar's life. He wonders, "Hadn't anybody told her the things she ought to know?" (307). He then reflects on the lives of his two sisters, and he remembers the "litany of their growing up" (307). As budding Black women, it included:

> Where's your daddy? Your mama know you out here in the street? Put something on your head. You gonna catch your death a cold. Ain't you hot? Ain't you cold? Ain't you scared you gonna get wet? Uncross your legs. Pull up your socks. I thought you was going to the Junior Choir. Your slip is showing. Your hem is out. Come back in here and iron that collar. Hush your mouth. Comb your head. Get up from there and make up that bed. Put on the meat. Take out the trash. Vaseline get rid of that ash. (307)

The women Guitar remembers represent the fullness of the Black female community in that there are women who critique and criticize but also women who lovingly straighten. Reading the commands above, some are observations, others are questions that require response, and others are suggestions. This section reminds me very much of Jamaica Kincaid's micro-story, "Girl," which includes lines like, "Don't sing benna in Sunday school; This is how to sew on a button; This is how you smile to someone

you don't like too much" (Kincaid 4). In Kincaid's text, and Morrison's as well, the ultimate goal is to become a proper woman. In "Girl," the proper woman is defined as the kind of woman the baker would let feel the bread. In Morrison's novels, it is a woman who was able to make up her life (307). In "The Power of Self-Definition," Patricia Hill Collins explains how "Black women writers led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women's relationships with one another" (114). In these relationships, Black women of all ages learn how to navigate the world with their pride intact.

As I examine four novels by Toni Morrison in this chapter, *The Bluest Eye, Home, Beloved,* and *Paradise*, I am exploring the idea of fictive kinship and linked fate, which I will explain using Melissa Harris-Perry's *Sister Citizen*, as crucial to the spiritual practice of community gathering across Morrison's work. Additionally, I use the "Combahee River Collective Statement" as grounding for the necessity of Morrison's women's community activism because "the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us" (6). There is spiritual work at play when Morrison engages Black women gathering together as a community because the women are able to accomplish as a community more than they would ever be able to accomplish singularly. What makes this practice spiritual is that one of the primary spaces in which Black women gather is the Black church, and it is the primary space in which women develop fictive kinship and recognize their collective divinity.

In novels written by Black women, the authors frequently return to the relationships between protagonists and other Black female characters as central, so I rely on those examples to center my study of Morrison's work. Black women's relationships with each other are key (Wallace (1975); Smith (1978); Wilkins (1996); Few et al. (2003); Terhune (2008)). In communities of Black women, the spiritual practice of gathering together, each woman in her own strength, allows the collective community to become even stronger. As an extension of this spiritual work, Morrison allows these women to come together in the novels to attempt to make miracles, as I will explain in depth in the

coming pages. When Morrison's women gather together, they are unstoppable against the forces of evil seeking to attack their either birth-given or created families.

As I structure this essay, I will begin by looking at the historical and spiritual basis of Black women's communities, expand that to the literature of other Black women, and then focus specifically on the work of Toni Morrison through the four novels here. This does not mean that these four novels are the only ones in which Morrison practices the gathering of community as a central spiritual undertaking, but I believe these four novels make the most concrete statement about the value of the community. One of these novels, *The Bluest Eye*, will actually show how the community can lead to the destruction of a central character, which will also be explored while explicating Morrison's *Paradise*, though the outcomes are different. It would be unfair to conduct a comprehensive analysis while only focusing on the positive communities in the text when, in some cases, the negative communities are just as intriguing. Each of these different communities believes they are doing what is right in the sight of God, which makes them all the more interesting to analyze. God left humankind on earth with power, and one of the means of utilizing that power is through community association, so however those communities work is necessary to this study.

The Importance of Generations

In the Black community, the older women function as models that shape the younger generations into womanhood. These younger Black women, the unnamed little girl in "Girl," the young woman, Hagar, in *Song of Solomon,* and Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* are examples of the necessity of community. In "Girl," the mother is the young girl's primary example; she issues all the directives to organize the young girl's life, explaining to her what she needs to do at the different junctures of her life. Hagar, though, is much older, and Guitar even comments that most of the instruction she needed should have occurred years before. The community had not attempted to correct

her behavior or steer her into the right direction because her mother and grandmother sheltered her. Hagar missed how "women talk to one another," so she missed the lessons (Hill Collins 114). In short, Black women's "friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being" (114). Without these friendships, Black women are left vulnerable and unprotected.

With this absence of community in Hagar's life, she cannot figure out how to live without the one man she ever loved. She stalks him and attempts to kill him, but she realizes that she cannot take his life, so she sacrifices her own. In the tragedy that becomes the legacy of Hagar, one thing is clear: the community is central to the successful development of Black female characters in literature. In "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," Alice Walker recalls having grown up poor in the South. In this recollection, which is a bit of a melancholy one, Walker explains, "What the black Southern writer inherits is a natural sense of *community*. Something simple but surprisingly hard, especially these days, to come by" (17). As Walker defines this unity, she recalls that when a baby was born in their community, the midwife delivered the child, and as payment, she might receive "home-grown or homemade items [such as] a pig, a quilt, jars of canned fruits and vegetables" (17). In Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, Lone DuPres, the last midwife in the town of Ruby, reminisces on when women needed her services after they had discarded her wisdom, practice, and remedies for the comforts of the nearby hospital.

In both of the examples I mentioned, the community is slowly being lost. It is indicative of a very personal relationship when a stylist or doctor comes to one's home in order to provide service. Some of the niceties might be sacrificed for at-home service such as the comfort of a hospital bed so a new mother could be "easeful," as Pauline Breedlove explains in *The Bluest Eye*, but the level of intimacy far exceeds that of a salon or a hospital. What that intimacy allows is a relationship to develop

between the person offering service and the person receiving the service. On a broader scale, there is a kinship that is developed. Melissa Harris-Perry, MSNBC anchor and political scientist, defines this relationship between unrelated Black women as fictive kinship, which explains "the connections between members of a group who are unrelated by blood or marriage but who nonetheless share reciprocal social or economic relationships" (102).

Fictive kinship, then, is the relationship many Black women feel towards other Black women solely on the basis of being Black women together. It is the feeling Black women get when they walk into a room and see another Black woman and automatically gravitate towards her. It is the same feeling Black women feel when in the midst of a conversation, one participant will exclaim, "Giiiiirrrrrlllllllll," knowing that one word holds several distinct meanings. Fictive kinship also explains how Black women, who have been close friends for a number of years, begin to call each other "sister." As women existing at the intersection of race, sex, and sometimes class, Black women will partner with other Black women for kindred spirits on the journey, or as Michele Wallace argues:

> We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. (67)

Harris-Perry explains that "fictive kinship, or linked fate, and common sense allow black women to draw emotional comfort from other women's courageous and exemplary lives" (103). This section of Harris-Perry's book is called "Shame," though, because Black women share each other disappointments and embarrassments in the same way we share each other's joys and achievements. When a Black woman fails, her sister-friends believe they have failed as well; conversely, when a Black woman succeeds, her kin succeed as well. In the community circle, each member shares joys and trials.

The idea of developing a community circle begins with the African American tradition of coming together to worship in whatever spaces were available. During the institution of slavery, there might not have been a church available in which Black Americans were allowed to worship, so they prayed in the fields, in the outhouses, and in their own sheds. Slaves would gather wherever they could, even for a brief minute, to give thanks to God for sparing their lives another day, so even as slavery began to grind to a close, the practice of creating community was strengthened by the freedom to congregate at will. All-Black communities began to develop as former slaves moved from the plantations to small settlements with other freedmen and women. Black people, both by choice and by force, continue to seek out Blackness in order to form communities that offer spiritual and social support.

In this spiritual practice of coming together in this meeting ground, Black girls affirm and build new relationships with older and/or other women or girls who will function in their lives as ancestors, othermothers, sister-friends, and neighbors. Patricia Hill Collins includes othermothers in *Black Feminist Thought,* where she defines them as "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (192). She further explains that these women "traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood" (197). Othermothers function to shape the lives of Black girls outside of their home. Sometimes, these othermothers stand in the gap for a young mother by babysitting, rearing, or supervising the life of the child. In other words, Black Americans tend to see "the larger *community* as responsible for children… giving othermothers and other nonparents 'rights' in child rearing" (197). What this means is that the entire community has a stake in the successful rearing of the Black children so just about anyone can correct or chastise the child. This type of community development is, as Hill Collins explains, an "African-influenced understanding of family" because there is a village mentality, which means if a person is a part of the community, then that person is

automatically a part of the lives of the children in that community. Extending from there, that person has a responsibility to the children of that community. However, even in an all-Black or largely Black community, not all relationships will be positive, though. Some Black girls might become acquainted with non-community women who will resist the development of a relationship with other Black women. These negative influences are important to this spiritual study as well because both the negative and positive women of the community help structure these narratives as realistic depictions of Black communities.

As critic Sunanda Pal explains in her article, "From Periphery to Center: Toni Morrison's Self-Affirming Fiction:"

> Communities of women in Morrison's novels act as support systems facilitating the survival of Black women in a hostile environment. These communities though replete with differences and complexities represent a specific culture and a specific value system. What is refreshing about them is that they are presented from the subject position of Morrison as an African American woman. (2443)

From Pal's perspective, the communities first function as a support for other women despite the differences of the women who make up those communities, but these women are decidedly linked to their African American heritage, culture, values. Additionally, Morrison allows these women, some fractured, some unsure, all imperfect, to still occupy the subject/protagonist/central position in her work. From Morrison's view, their imperfections make them perfect for the starring role in the text, especially in the four novels under interrogation here.

The Creation of Community

As an example of how communities function outside of Morrison's work, I look to her friend and fellow scholar/writer, Gloria Naylor, in her debut novel, *The Women of Brewster Place.* In the novel,

there are seven women living in an inner-city housing project, in the midst of all the ills that come along with living in an inner-city housing project: drugs, alcoholism, violence, gang activity. The women, who are different ages, from different backgrounds, and have different life experiences (one is a teenage mother, another two comprise a lesbian couple), are all living together in one neighborhood, and they unintentionally form a sort of community. Of course, this community-building is not without its challenges, because with the lesbian community comes homophobia and Christian dogma, but at the very end of the novel, the women work together for a common goal, which is the point of the community.

After the rape of Lorraine, the girlfriend of Mattie, Lorraine is dazed and lying in an alleyway. When a drunken man, Ben, stumbles towards her, she believes that he is one of her attackers, so she murders him by bashing him in the head with a brick. After his death, the community attempts to come to terms with the loss. As a means of a emerging from the mourning, the community decides to follow-through on having a block party they had planned before the murder. During the party, one of the women, Cora, notices a small child, Sonya, playing with a bloodstained brick. To make sure this never happens again, all the:

> Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands; the water pouring under their chins, plastering their blouses and dresses against their breasts and into the cracks of their hips. The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place past overturned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. They came back with chairs and barbecue grills and smashed them into the wall. (186)

Having lived for years walled into the projects and kept away from the rest of the city, the women of Brewster Place finally decided that they were no longer be excommunicated from the world. They

claimed their place as members of the larger community and, literally, broke out of their prison. What is important here is not just the work these women complete, but it is necessary to note that all the women of Brewster Place worked together to accomplish a single goal. In Morrison's community the work is similar. As Sunanda Pal explains, "Morrison's communities of women, through their act of nurturing, help in restoring an off-centre individual to the centre" (2443). In so doing, the women move themselves from the margin of the world to the center of their universe. The women of Brewster Place recognize their own power, power given by God to change their circumstances.

What makes the women of Brewster Place's work even the more spiritual is that Naylor's women are following African American religious tradition by gathering together. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, the twentieth verse reads, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (KJV). These women believe they have a God-given right to freedom. By extension, in Morrison's novels, when the women gather in a positive way, they are gathering in the name of God to do the work of God. This work is key to the development of personal identity, community morale, and spiritual worth as women grapple with the challenges they face for no other reason that the arbitrary assignment of their sex. Because of the weight of these challenges, women must choose to align themselves with like-minded others who are just as dedicated to community uplift. As I mentioned earlier, those community partners can be delineated into particular categories: ancestors, sister-friends, othermothers, and neighbors. In Toni Morrison's article, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she makes the case for the necessity of the ancestral presence in African American literature (and in the African American community). She writes that in some novels, the ancestor might be a grandmother, grandfather, or a neighborhood healer, but that person is always present. "There is always an elder there," she writes (62). Additionally, "these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and

they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (62). The ancestor should work as a center to the novel, functioning as the metaphorical glue holding the community together. In the absence of this ancestor, though, the communities become fractured.

In Morrison's estimation, "The presence or absence of [an ancestor] determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray" (62). From Morrison's perspective, it is the ancestor who shapes the character's development in the text, but I expand that to include the other members of the community as stakeholders as well. The presence of the ancestor is important; however, in Morrison's view, the ancestor in *Song of Solomon* is Pilate Dead, but in my reading, she is not the benevolent, instructive force in Hagar's life. Pilate and Reba spoiled Hagar so thoroughly that a single broken relationship led to her mortal demise. As an ancestor, Pilate should have been able to rescue Hagar and give her the structure that she so desperately needed. As an ancestor, Pilate failed. Guitar, who is a young man, is the levelheaded, clear-eyed thinker in the text. He is the one who observes what has become of Hagar and wants to intervene. Pilate and Reba just want to buy Hagar more clothes and beauty products.

Hagar's issue is, as Guitar explains, that she did not have a community to guide her; however, this does not meant that the ancestor is unimportant. Nor am I implying that Black men are not central to the personal development of Black women. If Hagar had been able to interact with her father, she probably would not have been so thoroughly crushed by Milkman's spurning (and she likely would not have started a relationship with her first cousin, either). In the Black community, though, mothers can function as the head of the household and raise intelligent, successful, God-fearing children because most of these women have the entire community functioning in the background as a support system. In the church, there might be the male deacons, trustees, preachers, and the pastor who all offer positive

examples of Black manhood to the child or even godparents who function as a second family for the child who might be a married couple. If the home situation is not ideal, then the child should be able to look to the community for examples.

In the communities Morrison creates, though, sometimes those examples, role models, or teachers are not available. As scholar and critic, Trudier Harris, asks in "The Worlds Toni Morrison Made," "What happens to an individual who, by virtue of actions, personality, or looks, is pitted against his or her community so thoroughly reconciliation is not a possibility?" (326). What happens when the community refuses to participate in the life of one of its own? In *Song of Solomon*, the girl is destroyed. Similarly, this happens in *The Bluest Eye*, as I will detail later. Philip Page explains, "The community is thus two edged, supportive and necessary, yet divisive and petty" (32). In some instances the community can act as saving grace, but in other instances, the community is the reason someone needs a savior. Sometimes, "neighborhoods both nurture her central characters and threaten to constrict them" (Page 32). Morrison uses the communities as a backdrop to the lives of Black women, and sometimes Black men, who are attempting to carve out both individual and collective identities. Sometimes, the communities are supportive, other times the communities resist the collective identity.

As we look at the Morrisonian communities, I want to look at a similar community to that which we find in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* In Z.Z. Packer's 2003 collection of short stories, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, she writes of a Girl Scout camping trip in the first story in the series, "Brownies." In "Brownies," a troop of Black girls goes to summer camp at a place called Camp Crescendo. When the girls arrive, they see another troop of "white girls, their complexions a blend of ice cream: strawberry, vanilla" (1). As soon as the Black girls see the white girls, they begin to make disparaging comments very similar to the ones Claudia makes about her white baby dolls. Instead of "round moronic eyes," though, this troop smelled like "wet Chihuahuas" (*TBE* 20) (*DCE* 3). The Black troop views the white

troop as a threat to the sanctity of their camping space, so they decided to "to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909" (1).

None of the girls make a move against the white troop until one of the girls in the Black troop, Arnetta, accuses one of the white girls of calling Daphne, another Black troop member, the n-word. Then the girls find out that the white group is actually mentally delayed. This, of course, causes problems for the Black girls because the white girl they accused was mute. The girls are punished by having to leave the camp, which ushers in a significant change. On the bus ride back to town, a different community develops. When one of the quieter girls, Laurel, begins to tell a story, Octavia, one of the troublemakers, tries to interrupt her. Instead of cowering to Octavia, Daphne interjects and says, "Go on, Laurel," which gives Laurel the courage to continue her story (29). Daphne and Laurel then form a separate community from the one of the troublemaking girls in the troop. Similarly, when Claudia and Frieda see boys on the playground accosting Pecola, the girls intercede. Even as a twosome, their action is successful, which is why later, the girls believe that by working together, they can save Pecola again; however, their opponent that time is much more powerful than boys on the playground.

What Claudia and Frieda do for Pecola is show her care. In this chapter, I will explore four aspects of the community: opening of the home, showing care, engaging in gossip, and the gathering of women. From the ancestors to the othermothers, and everyone in between, women function to illustrate the above four endeavors of the community. Including these four as the central ways in which the community functions, Morrison is engaging African American women's heritage. In so doing, she illustrates the conflict between the personal life of the characters and the public life that is supported by community membership. In other words, how these women treat those in their own homes directly affects the way in which they treat people outside of their home. If they are not neighborly to the person

who sleeps in the next room, they are typically not neighborly to the person who sleeps in the next home.

The People and Their Communities

As Carol Terhune intimates, "Reliance on support networks within the Black community and the formation of support networks has proved to be a critical coping strategy for Black women" (550). Black women create communities as a means of protecting themselves from outside threats, oppression, and subordination. Since "kin networks and or social support systems help in alleviating feeling of isolation," these dissimilar Morrisonian women create lasting friendships and secondary families (550). For clarity's sake, as I begin this engagement, I have categorized the characters thusly, the ancestors: Consolata, Piedade, Mother Superior, Baby Suggs, Miss Ethel, M'Dear, and Lone; the sister friends: Claudia and Frieda, Maureen Peal, Seneca, Gigi, Billie Delia, Thelma, Miss Sarah, Amy Denver, and Denver; the neighbors: Rosemarie Villanucci, Patricia Best, and Arnette Fleetwood; othermothers: Mavis, Ella, community women in *Home,* Aunt Jimmy, Maginot Line, China, Poland, Mrs. MacTeer, Soane, Dovey, and Pauline; non-community women: Geraldine, Beloved, and assorted women in *Beloved* (before the transition) and *The Bluest Eye*. Additionally, the figure on the next page offers a visual of the way in which I have decided the women's associations.

One character in particular, Pauline, is an othermother but not a mother to her own child; however, she is still included because of the work she does to nurture outside of her own home, which I will explain. Another, Mrs. MacTeer, is a mother to her own children, but she also functions as an othermother to Pecola, partly because of Pecola's own mother's preoccupation with someone else's child. In *Paradise*, there are four ancestors because Consolata is the presence for the young women in the Convent, but Mother Superior was Consolata's ancestor, and Piedade (Pity) becomes an ancestor of women in pain. Lone is the ancestor for the people of Ruby, even though they no longer appreciate or

reverence her, but she is the benevolent, instructive figure. Even though Amy Denver is a "whitegirl," she becomes a sister-friend to Sethe as she escapes from slavery and becomes to some extent, an othermother to Denver, as Sethe gives birth on the way to Ohio.

Table 1: The Women of the Communities

Figure/ Novel	Ancestors	Sister-friends	Neighbors	Othermothers	Non-community women
Paradise	Consolata, Piedade, Lone, and Mother Superior	Seneca, Gigi, Billie Delia	Patricia Best Arnette Fleetwood	Mavis, Soane, Dovey	
The Bluest Eye	M'Dear	Maureen Peal, Claudia, and Frieda	Rosemarie Villanucci	Aunt Jimmy, Maginot Line, China, Poland, Mrs. MacTeer, Pauline	Geraldine, sugar-brown girls, Community women
Home	Miss Ethel	Miss Sarah, Thelma		Community women	Lenore
Beloved	Baby Suggs	Denver, Amy Denver		Miss Ella	Community women

Sethe and Amy Denver form a community based on their immediate circumstances, "depending on one another, because they had nothing and no one else" (Walker 16). In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Alice Walker is not attempting to explicate Morrison's text, but the example fits with the narrative. Walker, though, is retelling the story of Southern Black sharecroppers, planters, and farmers who were trying to create a life despite the pervasiveness of poverty. As such, the community came together in a variety of ways to ensure that there was no lack in anyone's home. They would do what

they could, and God would do what He would. They developed a community based on the similarity of circumstance, understanding that God would see them through the harshness of life.

Before the members of the community can begin the work God ordained them to do, Morrison first creates the communities. In *The Bluest Eye*, she develops at least four different types of positive and negative communities, the one of the transplanted "sugar brown girls" like Geraldine, the poor families migrating from the South like Pauline and her family, the Northern colored folks, and then the small-group communities like Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola and also Aunt Jimmy, Miss Alice, Mrs. Gaines, and the other women. As Morrison explains the communities of "sugar-brown Mobile girls," they would "remove the dishes from the table as soon as the last bite is taken [to prevent conversation]; wipe the doorknob after a greasy hand has touched it [to prevent grime]; A sidelong look [at her husband] will be enough to tell him to smoke on the back porch [because he has no say in this house]" (84). Most importantly, "Children will sense instantly that they cannot come into her yard to retrieve a ball" (84). This is the type of community Pauline attempts to become a part of, but they brutally rebuff her just like they would do anyone who did not attend a land grant college. They are a closed community. There is no room for an uneducated woman with missing teeth and dark-skinned children. For this, according to Linda Dittmar, "Morrison condemns [them] with special anger" (148). Morrison has no kind words for these women because the "sugar-brown" girls represent a privileging of inauthentic Blackness and a demonizing of the community spirit.

Pauline expects, having relocated herself, that she would be able to replicate what she saw as a child traveling in "shifts, lots, batches, mixed in with other families" to Kentucky (111). They left, as Pauline says, "down home" to seek better employment and living opportunities in another place, and they found "a real town, ten to fifteen homes on a single street, with water piped right into the kitchen" (112). In this new place, her mother was able to plant flowers, keep animals, and decorate her own

home. Pauline learned from her mother how to keep a house, so when she meets Charles "Cholly" Breedlove, and they relocate again, she believes this new experience will be similar to the last. However, "Northern colored folk was different too [like she and Charlie]. Dicty-like. No better than white folks for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, 'cept [she] didn't expect it from them" (117). Pauline expects to find open and welcoming neighbors, but she finds people who looked like her but wanted nothing to do with her. Therese Higgins argues, "What Morrison creates *The Bluest Eye* is the antithesis of a traditional black community… once all the 'isms' of American white culture take their places—racism, sexism, and materialism—the African American experience becomes complicated" (169). Eventually, Pauline gives up on trying to be a part of their social community. She, instead, becomes a part of the religious community and uses religion to ostracize those who were not as religious as she.

In *Home*, Frank Money has no expectations of finding a warm and inviting community, even though he is a war veteran who should be celebrated; however, his war was not even a recognized engagement by the United States government, so no one takes his tour of duty seriously. Even as Frank prepared for his journey home to Lotus, Georgia, he remembered "its unforgiving population, its isolation, and especially its indifference" (16). Frank thought that when he left Lotus for Korea, he would never return. In his opinion, "Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. At least on the field there is a goal, excitement, daring, and some chance of winning along with many chances of losing" (83). What he remembers about Lotus was his loneliness, but his love for his sister drives him back home. When he finds that she is sick, he returns home despite his reluctance. Instead of taking Cee to the hospital, Frank drops his sister off with a group of older women. After they heal her, his opinion on the community changes. Though he is not privy to the healing process, he is able to watch them "sorting pieces [of quilts] while they discussed [Cee's] medications and the most useful

prayers Jesus would take notice of" (141) after she becomes stronger. This image of the community is much different than the solitude of his grandmother's house. He watches those women, even from afar, as they organized and orchestrated the care of his sister. They, their prayers, and their gardens were the only hope that his sister would be well again. The women, who gather together, unlock the power of a forgiving God, who even forgives Cee for not valuing her existence.

Frank, who initially has a negative view of community, changes his opinion based on the women who show him a very different community. In *Beloved*, Morrison offers two kinds of communities, one is the Sweet Home plantation community, and the other is located on Bluestone Road in Cincinnati. The primary difference between these two communities is that one is enslaved, and the other is free, but sometimes it might have been hard to figure out which was the slave population. At Sweet Home, while Mr. Garner was alive, he taught his male slaves how to be men. They were "allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to…" (125). On Bluestone Road, which was supposed to be full of free men and women, though, there were some who felt differences between the ways in which others had been enslaved or freed. When Baby Suggs's neighbors are discussing her life, they remark, "[she] had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back" (137). Most damningly, she:

> had not even escaped slavery—had, in fact, been *bought* out of it by a doting son and *driven* to the Ohio River in a wagon—free papers folded between her breasts (driven by the very man who had been her master, who also paid her resettlement fee—name of Garner), and rented a house with *two* floors *and* a well from the Bodwins—the white brother and sister… (137)

Baby Suggs was not like the rest of the community because she had not had to escape in the middle of the night. There was no need for Stamp Paid to leave her messages instructing her where to go when she crossed the Ohio River. The other former slaves accepted her when she first joined the community, but when she threw an elaborate party for Sethe, the community turned on her. The community turned on the both of them. As Terry Paul Caesar argues, "Sethe is in effect 'thrown' to whites…" (114). 124, Sethe and Baby Suggs' house, used to be a "cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised, or soothed", but that was before the shift. This idea of confused communities, the one who is supposed to be enslaved acting free while the free population acts as if they are still enslaved happens in *Paradise* as well. The community that is supposed to uphold a standard is actually the one that is crumbling while the alternative community flourishes.

In *Paradise,* Ruby is "the one all-black town worth the pain" because "all the others had knuckled or merged with white towns" (5). Ruby was special; it was important. It was a community founded and formed by the sons of men who had also formed their own all-Black town. In Ruby was the spirit of Haven, these families' first attempt at creating a Black enclave. The Old Fathers, who function as ancestors for the Morgan men, had scouted out land, looking for the place they could build their town. "They stood at the edge of cornfields, walked rows of cotton. They visited print shops, elocution classes, church services, sawmills; they observed irrigation methods and storage systems. They looked at land, houses, roads" (108). After all of this surveillance, they created a town that lasted even though the Great Depression. God led them to this new place, in a sort of Exodus-like manner. They were led away from one place, their Egypt, and taken to a Promised Land that God would show them.

These men, who had been "refused by the world in 1890 on their journey to Oklahoma" developed a new plan to create the world in which they wanted to live. They planned a utopia where Black men could be leaders over everything in their purview. When other all-Black towns refused to let

the families settle with them, the Old Fathers and their families became "a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them" (189). When they found new land, which God led them to, they built their own community, brick by brick. In the early 1950s, they would do it once again. The second group, the New Fathers, "consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved farther west" (194). These people, who built their community in "beauty and isolation" were unwilling to let anything corrupt what their hands had fashioned (160). What this means was that the men of Ruby refused to let any threat come into Ruby, and they would be the ones who decided what that "threat" looked like. It usually took the shape of a woman, either the first light-skinned woman to marry into a family, a naïve child who pulls down her panties, or a strange woman in high heels who steps off of a bus. When the men find a community chockfull of women, they then know their target.

Ruby prided itself on being a very religious community, but the women in the Convent seemed to have no religion. In "Programmed Space, Themed Space, and the Ethics of Home in Toni Morrison's *Paradise,*" Shari Evans argues, "Each woman's entrance and interpretation of the Convent initially keeps her as isolated as the town of Ruby, but this isolation is not sustainable" (393). In the Convent, there were "lively, free, unarmed females" who handled themselves however they chose, and these women created their own communities, whether it was by the picking up of hitchhikers on the way West, as Mavis does, or the gathering of women in a former Convent, as Consolata does. These women presented a distinct threat to the men because they could not be controlled. The New Fathers of Ruby wanted to not only make all of the decisions related to the town they had created, but they also wanted to monitor the behavior of all those around them.

Consolata's Convent women have a different conception of power and autonomy, so the men of Ruby take action against them. According to Magali Michael in "Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison's *Paradise,* "Morrison's *Paradise* explores coalition processes that are more accommodative,

caring, and loving, rather than exploitative, and that are aimed principally at survival and at moving toward a new, alternative form of non-hierarchical justice, rather than at maximizing power and winning" (644). This caring coalition is comprised of the Convent women, and to the men, they are dangerous. The women of the Convent refused to be subordinated to any men, anywhere, so these respectable, upstanding, "Christian" men gather at the door of this unarmed Convent full of women, and "they shoot the white girl first" as the very first line of the text reads (3). It might be happenstance that the white woman was the first killed, but it could be by design as well. The single largest threat to Ruby was whiteness, in whatever form it took. Nine men descended upon the Convent, representatives of the nine 8-rock families, and they attempt to dig out the rot they believed had been planted by the Convent. It is ironic that Christian men would launch an attack on a Catholic Convent, which once had pictures of Jesus on the walls. The men believe these women are depraved and indecent, threats to the sanctity of Ruby because the second largest threat was wildness. The Convent, in the Ruby men's estimation, is the antithesis of all they had created in Ruby, so the women are "hunted because their freedom from the past rejects the constrained protection from racial and sexual violence that a community like Ruby seemingly offers" (393).

Morrison offers these very mirroring images of communities in Ruby and the Convent because not all affiliations, even of Blackness, are positive. Some members fight so much inside of the neighborhood that they can never accomplish anything. Other communities are so tightly guarded, like Ruby, that they begin to implode once the members of the community begin to grow old enough to venture out. Other communities hate their own reflections so much, that they hate anyone who carries a similar face, like in *The Bluest Eye.* Even in the midst of self-hate and self-destruction, though, there are flashes of what the beloved community could look like. Morrison, in the midst of the negative larger communities also creates smaller micro communities. In all of the novels, these micro communities,

sometimes numbering in the single digits, tend to be much more focused and productive than the larger bodies. Because the spiritual work of the community must still be completed, even the two or three who gather must still complete it.

Functions of the Communities

Communities function in multiple ways in Toni Morrison's novels, and one of the first is that members open up their homes to those who need a place to rest and recuperate between continuing their journey. Homes are opened to both male and female characters, and some of the homes are owned and occupied by both male and female characters, so this particular function is not limited by sex. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is Mr. Henry Washington who was "living over there with Miss Della Jones on Thirteenth Street;" that would be coming to room with the MacTeer family (13). Henry Washington's relocation to the MacTeer home is a little different because he was a boarder that they took in, and he paid to live there. He was to pay five dollars every other week while he lived there, but when the MacTeers open up their home a second time, it is for a "case." Mrs. MacTeer explained to her girls that a case would be coming to live with them, "a girl who had no place to go" (16). Instead of placing Pecola in a foster home or an orphanage, she would remain in the same community to which she had become accustomed until the county could decide what would happen. Claudia and Frieda were to "be nice to her and not fight," so in the time that the three girls roomed together, they became sister-friends (16). Pecola's new sister-friends work to shelter and protect their charge in whatever way they can.

One day, Claudia and Frieda stumble upon Pecola in the middle of a circle of boys, who have made Pecola their victim of the day. Surrounding her, the boys yelled, "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked" (65). Of course, the insults were meant to both victimize and embarrass Pecola, even though her father's behavior had nothing to do with her, and genes determined her skin color. On the playground, though, even frivolous insults can do serious damage, so Claudia and Frieda spring into

action. Frieda hits one of the boys over the head with her schoolbooks and tells the boys to quit. Then Claudia joins, telling one of the boys to shut up and counters with her own insult. Then Maureen Peal shows up, and the boys break up their violent circle. The three girls work in tandem to save Pecola from the boys, forming a sort of trinity on the playground. Even as children, these girls embody the nature of spiritual work as they gather together in Pecola's name. As an unofficial part of the MacTeer home, the girls began to look after Pecola, making sure that she was safe and protected, or at least as safe and protected as they could offer.

Similarly, in *Home,* the Reverend and Mrs. Locke open their home to Frank Money as a brief stop on his journey to Georgia. He arrives at their door, shaking, and they still invite him in. After warming him up with hot salty water and crackers, they offered him a place to sleep, clothes to wear, breakfast in the morning, and money to travel. As a last parting gift, they give Frank the name and address of another place on the way where he could find further assistance. For her part, Mrs. Locke packed "six sandwiches, some cheese, some bologna, and three oranges into a grocery bag" because, since Frank was traveling as a Black man through the South, she knew he would not be able to stop anywhere along the way and would need provisions. Lastly, the family offers him a good-bye "as though good-bye meant what it once did: God be with you" (19). Before he leaves, this family covers him in prayer until he gets to the next safe place.

Frank finds safe places in Black communities over and over again as he continues his journey. He comes across another man, a man named Billy Watson, who offers Frank another night's sleep. The two men meet in a bar along with other men and have a long conversation about their lives and where they had been so far. One of the men remembers, "Me and my brother slept in a freight car for a month," while another recalls, "We lived in an ice house," and another counters, "I slept on so many floors, first time I saw a bed I thought it as a coffin" (29). As the men go around and around, adding to the

community tale of misery, Franks feels comfortable enough to ask about the best place to rest. Billy Watson tells him, "Come home with me. Stay over. Meet my family" (19). Instead of allowing Frank to stay in the YMCA for the night, Billy Watson, who functions as an angelic presence, offers this complete stranger a room in his own home because "an outsider passing through was welcomed—even, or especially, if he was running from the law" (46). In each of these places, homes were open for anyone looking for rest or rescue. The communities gather to protect the vulnerable.

When Paul D unexpectedly arrives at Sethe's house, she does the same thing. She says, "Won't you stay on awhile," inviting him to live with her, her daughter, and the ghost of the house (*Beloved* 11). If someone needs a place to lay his or her head, it was supposed to be available. That was the unspoken rule. This is why when Stamp Paid returns to Bluestone Road and finds Paul D living in the church, he is upset at everyone in the community. Stamp Paid tells Paul D:

> You pick any house, any house where colored live. In all of Cincinnati. Pick any one and you welcome to stay there. I'm apologizing because they didn't offer or tell you. But you welcome anywhere you want to be. My house is your house too. John and Ella, Miss Lady, Able Woodruff, Willie Pike—anybody. You choose. You ain't got to sleep in no cellar, and I apologize for each and every night you did. (230)

Stamp Paid did not know that Paul D had chosen to be alone in the church cellar, so he wanted to be clear that whatever Paul D needed, he could have in their city. Even the adult Beloved arrives at Sethe's doorstep after the carnival and is given a place to live for as long as she needs a home. Sethe asks only introductory questions of the woman, and even when Sethe finds that Beloved will offer no help in the home, she does not ask her to leave. No one had to be alone or homeless unless they chose to be, which Morrison illustrates again in *Paradise* when she creates an entire Convent open and available for all of the women of Ruby and the surrounding areas with the Convent functioning as "a type of paradise to all

who enter" (Higgins 253). The biblical edict in Matthew 11:28 to "come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden" undergirds Morrison's usage as the home as a spiritual space of shelter and refuge.

Some of the women who need rest from their toil do not even realize how weary their bodies are until they arrive at a safe space. When the women of the Convent arrive at Consolata's door, they were all on their way someplace else. Because Consolata never asks any questions nor does she make the visitor feel unwelcome, they choose to stay even though they never intended to stay. When Mavis Albright arrives at the Convent on her way west, Consolata first helps her locate gas for her car and then offers her a place for however long she might need to stay. To Mavis, Consolata simply says, "Come inside," while Grace's (Gigi's) arrival is concurrent with the death of Mother Superior, so Consolata tells the girl to "be a darling. Just watch," as Consolata slept on the floor since she had been unable to rest while Mother was dying (38) (70). The third arrival at the Convent, Seneca, actually comes following Sweetie Fleetwood, one of the Ruby women. Sweetie escapes her home, which had become a hospital where she nursed four sickly children, and starts walking down the street. Seneca sees her and follows her to the Convent. When they both arrive, the ladies simply say, "ooh" to the frozen women on the doorstep before bringing them into the house (129). Pallas also comes with someone else more familiar with the Convent. Billie Delia Cato escorts Pallas to the Convent, telling her, "This is a place you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me. Nicer than [the people in Ruby]—well, very nice" (175). When the two get to the Convent, Billie Delia hands her to Mavis, who accepts the girl and takes her to Consolata. Consolata then offers Pallas her lap to hear her story before finally saying, "Stay as long as you like and tell me the rest when you want to," and Pallas stays (176). The Convent functions like 124 Bluestone Road because the Convent is a way station where no one asks questions. Consolata accepts her visitors, feeds them, clothes them, and then allows them to stay.

Consolata is building her community of women with those who had been discarded elsewhere. She uses the rejected stones to make a corner stone (Psalm 118:22).

Women of all ages had walked the road to Consolata's Convent at different junctures in their lives. As Lone DuPres reflects on the road leading to the Convent, she remembers:

> …it was women who walked this road. 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. 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)

For generations of women, that road was the link between the lives they were escaping and the lives that were about to begin. As the Convent was a community, the openness of the doors allowed desperate women to find safety and peace for as long as they needed. Consolata attempts to offer peace, but not all of the women receive it initially. For the first several years, there are squabbles between the women because Mavis and Gigi are jealous of one another. They each wanted Consolata to and for themselves, so the first resident, Mavis, felt put upon when a new woman like Gigi showed up.

Mavis was not there when Gigi arrived because Mavis had returned to her hometown to observe her home and children. By the time Mavis comes back, Gigi is sitting outside, totally naked, except for a hat. Mavis immediately begins to look for Connie (Consolata), and when she finds her and begins

complaining, Connie soothes the possessive Mavis, and tells her, "Soon you'll like her" (77). Mavis, though, is not so sure. She internally responds, "No way… This house is where we are. Us. Not her" (77). Later, the two women continue their arguing and fighting, even getting out of the car on the side of the highway to physically attack each other. Through all of that, though, the girls eventually learn how to coexist even if they did not necessarily like one another. They learned how to share their home with the other women who needed it. The dynamics of the Convent make it a place that none of the women would want to leave, so despite them always being free to leave, they chose to stay. In the Convent, they were separated from men because men had injured, insulted, assaulted, mistreated, and abused them. Some of the men were boyfriends, others were husbands, some were strangers, but all have damaged the bodies of these women. Even though the women of the Convent, with the exception of Pallas who had to be carried in, were strong enough to walk, they were still broken.

Ycidra Money, though, arrives at Miss Ethel's house in her brother's arms and her "toes scooted the gravel as the tops of her feet were dragged down the narrow road" (115). Frank, who found safety in the homes of Black men and women on his own journey, knew Miss Ethel Fordham's home would be a safe place for his sister to recuperate. As soon as he brings Cee into the house, Miss Ethel instructs him to "go snap those beans, Smart Money, I got work to do" (116). Miss Ethel did not need a man. Men were, after all, the ones who had hurt Cee, so the presence of a man would hinder Cee's healing. The work of the spirit, saving those with infirmities, Miss Ethel needed to begin alone and especially without a man. Cee had let men take parts of her: first, a boyfriend who steals her grandparents' car, and then a white male doctor who toys with her reproductive organs. In Ntozake's Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, she references a similar issue. In this instance, the lady in green is calling out to a man who "almost walked off wid alla [her] stuff" (49). She yells, "hey man/where you going wid alla my stuff/this is a woman's trip & i need my stuff" (49).

The man in Shange's poem attempted to take everything from the woman that was important to her: her "delicate leg & whimsical kiss," her "calloused feet & quik language," and her "memories" (50). Of course, she is speaking in a metaphorical sense about a lover who did not appreciate her, but the important line is that a man attempt to take her identity. Her "stuff" allowed her to be who she was, and a man could not be allowed to jeopardize that, so even in *Home*, *Paradise*, and *Beloved*, the women need space away from men to complete healing. A home space in which "the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds" (*Beloved* 199). In the community, women should be allowed to embrace their personal freedom, which sometimes the presence of men prevented. As I have argued in the chapter on the Black women's body, Morrison allows Black women the freedom to express the divinity of their very presence.

The Necessity of Care

The freedom of the home, even in the context of the community, is an integral aspect to the availability of care. As Magali Michael explains, "Caregiving becomes an active and activist response to the diverse social inequities women have faced" (653). When the women are free from the constraints of societal and communal concerns, they free themselves to work a cure. Even in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia has early memories of the care her mother and sister show her. When the family returns from a trip to the coal company, Claudia coughs. Her mother hears her, chastises her for not wearing a hat, and then directs her to get into bed. Mrs. MacTeer then tells Frieda, Claudia's older sister, to "get some rags and stuff that window" (10). When Claudia lies down, she notices, "It takes a long time for my body to heat its place in the bed," so she cannot move even one inch to the left or the right (11). When her mother comes into the room, she vigorously rubs her daughter's chest with Vicks salve, before sticking some into Claudia's mouth and ordering her to sweat.

This experience was not a very pleasant one. Claudia is confined to the bed, freezing, sick, and sweating; however, while recuperating, she realizes her mother is "not angry at me, but at my sickness" and the weakness that allows for sickness (11). Because Claudia was just a child, she did not yet understand the luxury of succumbing to sickness, and eventually she would learn how to refuse it. In the meantime, though, when she thinks of autumn, she thinks of "somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (12). In this community, caring for a loved one or a neighbor was not out of the ordinary, and Claudia's mother, Mrs. MacTeer had raised her children well. While Pecola is living in their home, she begins her menstruation in the presence of the two girls, and they immediately try to assist her. Even though neither girl had started her own cycle, they both know they have to do something. Frieda remembers what her mother and a friend told her, so she tells Claudia to get some water to clean the steps while she tends to Pecola. Frieda takes Pecola around the corner of the house, and when Claudia rejoins them, she sees, "Frieda on her knees; a white triangle of cotton was near her on the ground. She was pulling Pecola's pants off" (30). As Frieda worked to affix the triangle to Pecola's dress, Rosemary Villanucci, their neighbor, interrupts and yells for Mrs. MacTeer because the girls are, in her estimation, "playing nasty" (30). Even though Mrs. MacTeer initially believes Rosemary, she sees that the girls were only helping Pecola with her sanitary napkin. Mrs. MacTeer then takes Pecola into the house to finish the job. Just like Miss Ethel tells Frank Money, Mrs. MacTeer tells the girls to stay out as well. Claudia and Frieda do not yet know the limitations of their youth, but they still extend care when they can. The girls begin their spiritual work, and they are practicing on Pecola; however "they have no means by which to aid, let alone save a victim" (Higgins 179). They believe that if they care, it will override all those who do not care about a little Black girl.

Woman care is also extended to Aunt Jimmy, Charles "Cholly" Breedlove's aunt and Pecola's grandaunt. When Aunt Jimmy attends a camp meeting (church service) that "took place after a

rainstorm…the damp wood of the benches was bad for her" (135). When she told her neighbors she was not feeling well, they came to see about her. Some "made chamomile tea; others rubbed her with liniment" (136). The women came and did whatever they thought possible to heal her. Even when the women finally call the neighbor medicine woman, M'Dear, they did not leave Aunt Jimmy by herself. When M'Dear instructs the women to bring pot liquor, they do. As they tend to Aunt Jimmy, the women recall their own sicknesses, and offer ways to make sure sickness does not take hold again. Aunt Jimmy, Miss Alice, and Mrs. Gaines remembered "childbirth, rheumatism, croup, sprains, backaches, piles. All the bruises they collected from moving about the earth…" (138). As they shared best practices, they were able to encourage each other than the next sickness would not be the last. Though Aunt Jimmy does die, ironically, not from the cold in her womb, but from eating peach cobbler, the women were still successful at caring for their patient. One sickness, they healed, but the other one, they could not anticipate. Through their gathering together, though, the women are able to heal, even if only temporarily.

Sometimes the function of the community even exceeds the parameters of a typical neighborhood. For example, when Frank leaves the Lockes' house, they tell him to get in touch with another preacher, Reverend Jessie Maynard. Though Maynard was not very cordial to Frank, he did offer him assistance. Reverend Maynard "copied out some addresses and names of rooming houses, hotels where he would not be turned away" (23). Morrison, here, includes a reference to Victor Green's travelers' book, which was published from 1936 to 1964. The book "was intended to provide African American motorist and tourists with the information necessary to board, dine, and sightsee comfortably and safely during the era of segregation" (USC Library). Having the travelers' book at the ready meant that Frank would be able to rest without incident. He would be taken care of at every juncture before he reached his destination.

Interestingly enough, Frank likely did not have high expectations for open homes, similar to the way in which he felt about God, because his grandmother-in-law was offended by the presence of her own husband's family in her home. When her husband, Salem's, family arrives, she calls their presence "impossible." She whines, "There was no privacy at all. Waking up early for a leisurely breakfast, she had to step over the sleeping or nursing or snoring bodies scattered throughout her house" (87). Lenore was not a woman who embodied the sense of community. She kept to herself, and she looked down on everyone around her, including her own family. Lenore did not like people, outside of herself, and she only tolerated her husband and her maid, but she comes to need her neighbors. Lenore—who had shunned her neighbors and "made sure [they] knew their level and hers" because she had a "fairly fat savings account" (91)—was not abandoned after she suffered a stroke (92). The stroke left her with impaired speech and a careful gait; however, "the churchgoing and God-fearing neighborhood women brought her plates of food, swept the floors, washed her linen, and would have bathed her too, except her pride and their sensitivity forbade it" (92). They knew she did not want them to care for her, but they did it anyway because it was what God would have wanted them to do. They knew she despised them, but they could not ignore her need. The women form a sort of reluctant community tending to those in need, even the ones who would not return the favor.

The women who tended to Lenore offered no conversation or laughter. They did not become friendly with their charge; they completed their work and they left. For Cee, though, they reserved a different kind of care. When the women tended to Lenore, they worked with pity in their hearts. Cee, though, they loved, so they worked and had conversation with her. All of the women knew they had to correct the low self-esteem drilled into Cee by her failed relationship, work tragedy, and loveless childhood, so they talk to her, and about her, and take responsibility for her. They even make her take

responsibility for herself. With Cee, the women saw a wounded child who needed to learn how precious she was in the sight of God, so they set out to teach her.

Cee needed to be nursed back to health, but this community offers more practical help, as well. This town not only heals, but it will deliver. Frank hears a story of an unnamed man who needed help running away after white men force him to fight his father until one of them was dead; the boy then has to escape from the town before the police arrive. Three Black women, Rose Ellen, Ethel Fordham (the same Miss Ethel who tends to Cee), and Maylene "collected some change for him so he could go off somewhere" (139), and the men "pulled together some clothes for him" since he was covered in blood from the fight (139). Again and again, the Black communities in Morrison's novels sacrifice their own health and safety to ensure passage for someone else. They understand their call to service, and they gather together whenever the need arises.

When someone needs to escape, be it Frank Money from the mental institution/hospital, the unnamed boy from the sheriff who would have arrested him for killing his father, Mavis Albright who had a warrant issued for stealing her husband's car, Gigi who witnessed a murder, or Sethe Suggs, who escaped from slavery, Morrison puts other characters in place so that these outlaws do not have the face the world alone. Amy Denver stumbling upon Sethe in the woods was not a surprise; she was the angel Sethe needed. As Amy tends to her physical wounds, Sethe is in need of a healing for her emotional scars as well. Amy Denver rubs the life back into her feet, covers her back with spider webs, and talks her through her trauma. Then, just as quickly as she came, she was gone. Later, when Miss Ella hears, "124 was occupied by something-or-other beating up on Sethe, it infuriated her and gave her another opportunity to measure what could very well be the devil himself against 'the lowest yet' [when a father and son repeatedly raped her for a year]" (256). Miss Ella cannot ignore that Sethe needs help, so she "convinced the others a rescue was in order" (256). In *Paradise*, Billie Delia finds herself alone in the

midst of the community after an incident when she was a young girl (she pulls down her panties in the middle of the street to ride a horse). Most of the adults shun her and encourage their children to do the same. They think Billie Delia must be what Black woman today would call "womanish" because of what must be wanton disregard for propriety. Though most of the women feel this way, two sisters-in-law, Soane and Dovey Morgan, do not. They continued to treat her with "easy kindness—stopping her in the street to adjust the bow on her braids, praising her work in their kitchen gardens" (151). They became othermothers to Billie Delia, making sure that although she might have been ostracized, she would not have to face Ruby alone. Later, Consolata and Mavis face a similar challenge at the Convent, when a pregnant teenager (Arnette) arrives with a child she had been trying to abort. Despite the mop handle she had inserted into her vagina, the child did not die immediately. The child was born prematurely, and Mavis and Consolata attempt to save him. They "cleaned his eyes, stuck their fingers in his throat, clearing it for air, and tried to feed him;" however, it only worked for a few days, and the child died (250). They could not reverse all the harm she had done. Later, though, Consolata again faces broken and wounded bodies, but this time she would not fail.

As Channette Romero argues, "The more accepting, inclusive spirituality that Consolata advocates helps these women to overcome their own personal traumas and to create a more nurturing, healing community not based on the divisions and exclusions of Ruby (418). Consolata looks at the women in the Convent, and she sees their need for a healing. They had spent years at the Convent, but they were still the same as the day they arrived. Consolata then begins to prepare a meal, centered on "two freshly killed hens" and then she prepares the hens for roasting. Interspersed in that section, which happens over several pages, the woman recall their shame and disappointments, under the covering of Piedade, the ancestor called Pity. Piedade had helped Consolata when she was left broken by Deacon Morgan, and Piedade would now do the same for the women Consolata brings. Pallas remembers her

latest call home to her overbearing father; Gigi sits in a tub and thinks back over her life; Mavis recalls her last trip home; Seneca reflects on when she began cutting herself. While this is happening, Consolata continues with dinner. She lets the roasted hens rest, cuts potatoes, and then makes a dessert of stuffed yellow apples, while the women recall their pain. After the dinner is finished, she calls all of the women to the table and tells them to stay in the home if they want to be healed. The meal preparation is a sort of Last Supper for all the women of the Convent because they would never be the same again. The women are shedding their old lives, old scars, and old issues and becoming new, whole, and healed women under Consolata's care.

Of course, all of the women stay long enough to be healed because the community had been assembled, and they all were comfortable in that place. Sometimes, though, the community can make its residents profoundly uncomfortable, as we see with Billie Delia and the incident in the street. Small communities also mean gossiping women. As Sunanda Pal explains, "[Morrison] explores the dynamics of culture conflict," and Morrison offers this whenever she includes gossiping women (2443). *The Bluest Eye* opens, "Quiet as it's kept there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (5). In the afterword, Morrison explains her choice to offer these private conversations. "The words are conspiratorial. 'Shh, don't tell anyone else,' and 'No one is allowed to know this.' It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained" (212). In the Black community, these conversations occur frequently. Sometimes, they are merely commentary on community happenings, like when the women are discussing Miss Della Jones who was "too addled now to keep up," so Mr. Henry Washington needed a new place to live (13). Especially poignant, though, is their later comment when they find Miss Della will eventually be unable to keep her home. They ask, "Don't she have no people" (14) because not having people was worse than being unable to

manage a home. The gossip here is considerate and careful. They care about Miss Della's well-being. It is when their attention turns to Pecola that we see the full extent of the damage gossip can do.

In what could be considered a consciousness-raising session, in the same vein as those that Black women have historically facilitated, Claudia and Frieda overhear a tragic story. As the girls go door-to-door attempting to sells marigold seeds for school, they "began to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story," one that they later realized was about their sister-friend, Pecola. After overhearing the whole conversation, the girls learn that Pecola was pregnant, and her father was the father. What strikes the girls is the women's observation that "she [Pecola] should carry some of the blame" because she must not have fought back against her attack (189). The girls "listened for the one who would say, 'Poor little girl,' or 'Poor baby,' but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been" (190). Claudia then observes, "Our sorrow was more intense because no one seemed to share it. [The women] were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story." As Claudia intimates, "The damage done was total" (204). Because the community did not approve of Pecola's family, they also did not approve of her. She became a topic for gossip, and no one was going to intervene on her behalf.

Morrison offers a similar example of a Black woman in need of intervention in *Beloved.* The difference between Pecola's life and Sethe's, though, is that her neighbors on Bluestone Road were too initially too jealous, instead of ambivalent, to send ahead a warning. Stamp Paid observes, "Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, like meanness that let them stand aside" (157). In a community proper full of former slaves, no one thought to tell the family that included an escaped slave danger was coming. For all the prevalence of gossip, in this moment, the community is silent, which leads Sethe to commit murder.

Before arriving in Ohio, Sethe recalls the loneliness of the Sweet Home plantation. At Sweet Home, she had no female friends, so she had to rely on what she remembered from earlier interactions with other women. Conversely, on Bluestone Road, there were all kinds of Black people willing to open their arms, their hearts, and their homes. While Baby Suggs was alive, "strangers rested [at 124] while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them" (87). This was a "community of other free Negroes" where anyone could be loved, protected, and fed. Even though Sethe and Denver had been shut up in the house with Beloved's ghost, the community had not forgotten that they existed.

After Sethe murders her infant daughter, is jailed, and then released, the community no longer welcomes Sethe's company, and the children ostracize Denver when she tries to attend school. Despite their exclusion from communal events, Sethe and her daughter are still their neighbors. The men and women of Bluestone Road may not have known Sethe—she had only been on Bluestone Road twenty-eight days before the slave-catcher came to pick her up— but when Denver journeys outside for food and work, she finds:

> all of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing. Others remembered the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt. One remembered the tonic mixed there that cured a relative. One showed her the border of a pillowslip, the stamens of its pale blue flowers French-knotted in Baby Suggs' kitchen by the light of an oil lamp while arguing the Settlement fee. (249)

Despite Sethe's individual actions, the memory of Baby Suggs and her preaching ministry causes Sethe's formerly hard-hearted neighbors to offer baskets of food and the possibility of a job to Baby

Suggs's granddaughter. The legacy of 124 Bluestone Road was more important than the desperate action of Sethe in the face of slave-catchers.

Community and Unity

In *The Bluest Eye*, there are the larger, transplanted Black communities who settled in towns more northern or western than the ones from which they hailed. When they arrived, some of these Black migrants created new communities in which they ostracized those who were different. In others, like Mrs. MacTeer, her house became a way station, similar to Baby Suggs's house in *Beloved*, where people could find shelter for the night. Similar examples exist in *Home* and, of course, *Paradise* as well. In some instances, there is one woman, like Miss Sarah in *Home*, who forms a kinship relationship with a new employee (Cee) and risks her job when she finds that new employee's life is in danger. In another text, it might be a white woman who forms a temporary relationship with an escaped slave, helping her wounds heal, and showing her the way to freedom. In another, it might be two women, Soane and Dovey Morgan, who reach out to a young girl and prevent her from living her teenage years on the margins of her community.

The familiar refrain through each of these examples is that women, especially Black women, stood up for one another. They disregarded their own personal comfort and opened their homes, hearts, and minds to another woman. When these communities of women come together, they gather in the name of whoever it is that needs assistance. I have offered several examples throughout this entire project where women have sheltered and counseled other women, but it is gathering together in God's name that is the most important aspect of the community. At some point in each of the texts, the women have to leave the comfort of their homes to save the life of a woman in trouble. In these last examples, the women do exactly that, operating under the presence of the Holy Spirit, these women attempt to work a miracle.

The gathering together of the community is the principal spiritual practice at play in the literature of Toni Morrison because she is critiquing the "construction of an ideal community or nation based on separateness or distinction" (Romero 419). In Morrison's work, we recognize the need for communal engagement with individual persons. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia and Frieda find Pecola to be a troubled young woman from the moment she enters their house. They watch her as she drinks milk, mesmerized, from a cup adorned with the face of Shirley Temple. They see her on the playground as boys attempt to surround and abuse her, and they speak up to rescue her. When the girls are selling their seeds, and they overhear the story of what has become of Pecola, they know, without a doubt, that they have to act. Just like they assembled on the playground, they assemble again. Pecola, who had once been called a "crazy fool" by her mother before being told to "get on out" needed an intervention (109). However, Claudia and Frieda were the only ones who believed that Pecola deserved salvation. The older women in the community felt "don't nobody know nothing about them anyway. Where they come from or nothing. Don't seem to have no people" (189). I mentioned earlier how important it was to have people when the women were discussing Miss Della Jones, and now it was an indictment against the Breedloves that they had no people. Because Pecola lacks people, the community refuses to come to her aid. She was not one of them. She was the other.

Though we believe Claudia and Frieda embraced Pecola, despite her not having "people," in hindsight, Claudia finally had to admit they were "not strong, only aggressive; not free, merely licensed; not compassionate, polite; not good, but well-behaved" (205). Claudia and Frieda felt powerful only beside the powerless Pecola. In the final pages of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia concedes she had not truly wanted to save Pecola because she felt she was worth saving; they wanted to save Pecola so they could say they had. Pecola became "the thing [they] assassinated", and in the final moment when Claudia could accept the blame she deserved, she, instead, says, "it was the fault of the earth" (206). Claudia

shifts the blame from herself and her community to the earth. *The Bluest Eye* is the only novel in which the community does not gather together to save a life. In fact, as Therese Higgins argues, "Where there should be love, acceptance, and aid, there exists only coldness, mockery, and abandonment" (181).

In *Home*, though, the women do not allow their bruised thing to die. Maybe it is the maturity of the women in *Home* that makes them so different from the girl children of *The Bluest Eye*, but when Cee is delivered to Miss Ethel's house, the women do not shirk from their responsibility. In addition to the women's maturity, though, they are covered by faith. Claudia and Frieda thought they had to say magic words over the seeds they planted to make them grow. The women in *Home* have no magic; they have working hands. These women "didn't waste their time or the patient's with sympathy and they met the tears of the suffering with resigned contempt" (121). They abhorred weakness, so when Cee arrives, they first address "the bleeding: 'Spread your knees. This is going to hurt. Hush up. Hush, I said'" (121). "Next the infection: 'Drink this. You puke, you got to drink more, so don't.' Then the repair: 'Stop that. The burning is the healing. Be quiet'" (121). When the healing is complete, they invite Cee into their sewing circle to make her first quilt. She is rewarded with an induction into the circle of virtuous women who work their faith along with their hands.

As the next gathering of women makes their way to Sethe's gate, they have healing in mind, and the African Americans in *Beloved* are only successful because "they help each other" (Higgins 204). When the women hear the story of Beloved's return, it "took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated" (255). Once they were sufficiently angry with the baby ghost who returned as an adult woman, they "fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through" (255). Some of the women were like Pecola's neighbors, and said, "Guess she had it coming", but instead of allowing such comments to stand, Ella counters, "Nobody got that coming" (256). Miss Ella could not allow "the possibility of sin moving on

in that house, unleashed and sassy" (256). Miss Ella calls the woman to action, thirty in total, and the "thirty women [who] made up that company…walked slowly, slowly toward 124" (257). As a means of preparation, the women covered themselves in prayer. When they got to the house, Denver watched as "a woman dropped to her knees. Half of the others did likewise. Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it" (258). Though Mr. Bodwin arrives and interrupts their prayer circle, they had prayed and sung long enough for Sethe to receive the first part of her healing. The text says, "Building voice upon voice until they found [the right combination…that broke the back of words]…It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (261). The first part of the healing was Sethe's release from the ghost of Beloved, but the necessary work was not yet done. Sethe still needed to learn how to control her impulses.

When Mr. Bodwin arrives—he is there to pick up Denver so she can begin working—it reminds Sethe of the last time a white man had come riding up to her house, so she strikes out across her yard to cut his neck this time. Of course, this represents a shift in Sethe because instead of murdering her helpless child, she goes to murder the man who endangers her child. Miss Ella sees Sethe coming with the ice pick and stops her from stabbing him, so this gathering of women serves to save two lives, both Sethe's and Mr. Bodwin's. When the women finally disperse, the reincarnated Beloved is gone, and Sethe is back in the house with Denver. Sethe, though released of her burden, is left mourning because that burden released was that of her child. Paul D later returns to 124 and offers Sethe someone new to put her story next to (273). As the final key to her rebirth, he tells her that she is her own best thing. In as many words, Consolata has to say the same thing to the women in her care. Before she can deliver them, they need to know there is safety in the Convent and that their lives are gifts they must cherish.

Conclusion

In "We Are Ugly, But We Are Here," Edwidge Danticat recalls growing up in Haiti during the Duvalier regime. She remembers the Duvaliers driving through shantytowns and throwing coins from their cars. What she also remembered was the frequency of death in the midst of extreme poverty. With the uncertainty of life ahead, women celebrated their ability to live another day. Danticat explains that the women had strong knowledge of African spiritual tradition, and "our foremothers believed that when they died their spirits would return to Africa" (n.pag.). As women in desperate circumstances, "they greeted each other" wherever they might find one another. Instantly, they developed a community based on the similarity of their experiences. As a form of greeting, they would say, "How are we today, Sister?" The other woman would respond, "I am ugly, but I am here" (n.pag.). Despite brokenness and poverty, they continued to have life. It might have been an ugly life, but it was the only one they had. Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple* speaks similar words. As Celie is preparing to leave with Shug and Squeak for Tennessee, Celie tells Mr. _____, "I'm pore. I'm black. I may be ugly and can't cook… But I'm here" (214). When Consolata met each of the four women who arrived on her doorstep needing a place to live, she opened the door without hesitation. She does not demand their backstory or even that they have a plan for their lives. She offers them shelter, an open mind, and a stocked kitchen. Whenever the women need to talk, Consolata is there to listen. When the women need to cry, Consolata is there to wipe their tears. Eventually, Consolata realizes she is doing the women a disservice because they are not being healed.

Like the real women Danticat remembers and the fictive woman Walker creates, even ugly women, ugly experiences, and ugly lives deserve a place. Ugly women still have a voice, dreams, and goals, and there should be somewhere that the women feel safe enough to reach them. Even if, like Miss Ella, a woman had experienced "the lowest yet," that woman could still go on to become a beacon of

hope in her community. Even if, like Cee, a medical doctor had used a woman as his personal live cadaver, that woman still had something to offer to her community. Consolata understands that these women have a purpose, and God endowed her with the power to bring their purpose forth. Consolata faces the women and tells them that in the coming time they spend with her, they would be healed. She begins with a sermon, and then she engages the women in dreaming, which allows them to relive their own trauma and the experiences of the other women. After the women have finished their "loud dreaming," they shave their heads, eat "bloodless food" and drink "water alone to quench their thirst" (265). In the months that followed, they became different women. Instead of the loud, boisterous, and troubled woman who arrived, these women had an "adult manner" and a calm demeanor (266). The healing of the women in the Convent takes much longer because there was much more work to do, and Consolata, unlike the other women, was working alone. Consolata, working through the covering of Piedade and the calling of God, shifts the atmosphere of the Convent and allows the women to find peace in their lives through rebirth.

Consolata taught the women how to deal with their pain and how to conquer it. She creates a community filled with unrelated women and brings them an awareness of the self that would not have been possible otherwise. In each of the other developed communities, a group of women worked on a single woman, but in *Paradise*, Morrison offers the reverse, a single woman acting on a group of women. In this, Consolata becomes a Christ figure, who works salvation over her disciples. She is the "new and revised Reverend Mother" who takes a group of orphans and creates a family (265). Morrison offers the Convent as the antithesis of Ruby, showing how powerful freedom can be allowing for a "more ideal view of community not predicated on Biblical traditions of exceptional, isolated communities" (Romero 423). The men of Ruby believed their power was only present in the weakness of their townspeople, but Consolata makes the Convent strong by making her women powerful. In this,

the gathering of women together is the most distinct of the spiritual practices because it brings back a time when the entire community would come together in a meeting ground (like Baby Suggs and her church in the Clearing) in order to worship God in spirit and in truth. Having been released of their trauma, Cee, Sethe, Gigi, Pallas, Mavis, and Seneca all develop as better women than they were before they experienced trauma. From Melanie Anderson's perspective in "What Would Be on the Other Side: Spectrality and Spirit Work in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," "The Convent women have achieved a similar state of being [to the disappeared Beloved] in that they are free to move wherever they are needed for healing" (316). Even Aunt Jimmy, who dies shortly after her healing, was able to experience one last taste of peach cobbler before she died.

Unfortunately, there would be no salvation for Pecola Breedlove; however, in the telling and retelling of her story, Morrison avoids new iterations of Pecola Breedlove. Like the last pages of *Beloved*, which teach, "This was not a story to pass on," neither was Pecola's undoing. For generations, Black women would not be able to look at blue eyes and blonde hair in the same way. Even some forty-odd years later, Black men and women are still reading and sharing Pecola's story. In the same way the stories of the Bible are shared throughout the generations, spiritual practice is a practical action, and Morrison expects the reader to leave *The Bluest Eye* feeling the weight of condemnation. However, she admits, "It didn't work: many readers remained touched but not moved" (211). Instead of feeling pity for this hopeless Black child, readers must be moved to act because "as singular as Pecola's life was, some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all girls" (210). Leaving Morrison's novels, readers must feel the call to action, a responsibility to shift the atmosphere, and a drive to gather together in protection of the vulnerable. The examples are present, and with the covering of the Spirit, it can be done.

The Strength Life Demanded of Her, or How I Found My Way to God

I look at her and think for the thousandth time how fine it is. So many like her and more coming. Eyes scrubbed clean with a Fuller brush, young black women walking around the world who can (and do) say, "I write is what I do. I do this and that too—but write is what I do, hear? Women who don't have to block what they know; keep secret what they feel; who welcome their own rage and love because it has a voice, place, point, and art—and the art is hers, not somebody else's. She wears on her head the "hat" she made—not one she bought made by someone else. (37)

-Toni Morrison

In an interview with Gloria Naylor in 1985, Toni Morrison reflects after the close of the interview on the future of Black women writers. Through Morrison's work at Random House, she had been privileged to nurture Black female artists and even to ensure the publication of their work. In fact, Morrison was instrumental in the publication of works by Toni Cade Bambara, even editing a posthumous collection of her work; Gayl Jones, whose first novel, *Corregidora*, is integral to my second chapter; and noted Black feminist, Black Panther, and scholar Angela Davis. When Morrison decided to leave Random House in 1983 and focus on writing and teaching full-time, she must have been fraught with trepidation at leaving her seat at the table. It is important for Black women to occupy positions of power in publishing companies because they can personally "green light" the work of up-and-coming Black female artists, so having a conversation with Gloria Naylor, whose first book was published the year before Morrison left Random House, was encouraging for the elder artist.

It has now been fifty years since Morrison went to work at Random House, forty-plus years since the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, and thirty years since Morrison sat down with Naylor to engage the

younger author in conversation. In that time, there has been a rising and falling tide of Black female writers. Off the top of my head, I can think of Gayl Jones, Pearl Cleage, Z.Z. Packer, Ayana Mathis, Tananarive Due (whose style is most similar to Octavia Butler's) as popular Black female authors. Additionally, Edwidge Danticat has secured a space for Haitian American novelists while Chimimanda Adichie is staking her claim on Nigerian American literature. These women who followed in the large, intimidating footsteps of Morrison faced a world in which Black womanhood might be noticed, but it was not revered. Black women, to some extent, are still absent from the highest rungs of publishing companies, but Black women still endeavor to tell their stories—to tell *our* stories.

In the telling of Black America's stories, artists tend to rely on authentic markers of the Black experience, and as I have argued, one key marker is spirituality. In fact, Cleage's latest novel, as of 2011, is titled *Just Wanna Testify*. Testifying in the African American church is a common occurrence in which a member of the congregation, or even a nonmember, raises his or her for a preacher's acknowledgement. When acknowledged, the testifier then comes before the congregation and tells the story of the goodness of God in his or her life. In fact, in one church I attended, the testimony begins with a call-and-response. The testifier says, "My God is so good." The congregation responds, "Why?" Then the testifier goes on to explain how God has been good to him or her. In most Black churches, there is some iteration of this testifying process since the telling of one's story is a vital component of one's spiritual journey. What this means for the Black writer is that from childhood, she would have learned how necessary it was for her to share her story however she could.

Throughout this project, I have not only explored Toni Morrison's oeuvre, but I also examined novels by Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Edwidge Danticat, and Alice Walker. In many ways, this similarity of Black womanhood extends further than the written page, even though it does not necessarily speak to a monolithic sense of Black womanhood. When Patricia Hill Collins writes

about Black women, she mentions the diversity of Black women's perspectives and experience. As such, as I conclude this project, I return to the impetus behind it—my own journey to an awareness of Black feminist spiritual power.

As I look back at the past me and look forward towards the future me, I realize that I continue to write to save my own life, as did and do my foremothers. Because I am not selfish, though, I also write to save the lives of girls like me. I write to save the lives of girls like Quvenzhané Wallis, Gabrielle Douglass, and Willow Smith—all Black girls who have been criticized by mass and social media for simply being Black girls— and who all, in their own ways, look like the me I used to be before I found that writing could save my life. I write to save their lives: to let them know that they are not alone, and that they do not struggle alone. Through Black women's engagement with theory and pedagogy, I have learned how to save the life that is my own and to save lives that are like my own. What I do here is the chronicle the process of saving my own life, grounding my study primarily in bell hooks' spiritual work, *remembered rapture*, with support from Barbara Smith's anthology, *Home Girls* to explain how I came to examine African American spirituality in the novels of Toni Morrison.

I begin this exploration with a statement of my own politics as a Black woman because my own politics explain the way in which I approach saving my life. What are the spaces I occupy? How do I define myself in relationship to my personal and professional and practical experience as a Black woman? I address questions such as: what did it mean to be a Black girl in my community? Then I answer the question: how does a Black woman come into an acceptance of herself as fully formed, complicated, and whole? I then move to interrogate the role of the Spirit as a guiding force in the saving of my life. I address how religion helped to center and ultimately save my life, and then how this life-saving work can lead to saving other young women's lives. As a means of closing, I interrogate the relationship between life-saving work and women's liberation work. Ultimately, I not only find in this

project a beginning of the lifelong commitment to passionately purposed Black feminist work, but I also find a necessary collapse between the work we do in our personal lives in order to save our own lives and the professional work we do to create academic lives.

My Politics

I realize I am speaking from a particular politics of location: I am a young Black woman from a working-class background, graduate of a predominately Black inner-city high school and a predominately Black, consistently high-ranking university. I am pursuing a doctoral degree in the humanities at a very large, very white, and very typical southern American university. I am also a called and licensed Black female minister in the Southern Baptist church. My defined standpoint as a result of my world-positioning renders me different from the typical or rather stereotypical image of an academic: I am not white, nor male, nor married, nor Ivy-trained. I am a Black girl who is as familiar with Ace Hood as I am Amiri Baraka. I have as many albums by Jay-Z in my iTunes as I have books by James Baldwin on my bookshelf, and I choose speech over silence. I have never been the shy, silent type. From the time I was old enough to talk, I was speaking my piece/peace. If I had an opinion, which I always did, I thought I was justified in sharing it. My outspokenness kept, and continues to keep, me battling against those who want to silence me. As a young girl, I could find no space to be the quirky, Standard-English-speaking Black girl I needed to be in my home community. What was necessary for me to come to an awareness and acceptance of myself was first for me to encounter Black women artists: Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* at fourteen years old and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* at seventeen, to see the possibilities of Black womanhood, and then I needed to move away from the place of my birth and rearing to find room for the fullest expression of myself away from people who would expect me to be more like someone else.

As I came into the reclamation of my self, I realized that to pick up a pen and write was to exist in a world that continually silenced voices like mine.

Troubling the Water

My life as a writer began when I was a child and took to keeping diaries. bell hooks had a similar introduction to writing, and she believes that writing was the way she saved her own life. She writes of her childhood as "time in anguish, as a dark time" (30), and her grandfather telling her, "There is light in darkness, you just have to find it" (3). She finds the promised light through writing. hooks intimates in *remembered rapture* that she wrote to "kill the self [she] was without really having to die" (80). In this, hooks echoes Morrison who also discusses how writing allowed her to find her own "dead girl" and give her a voice.[xvi] hooks found herself at odds with her family because she was different from her brothers, sisters, and parents. She writes that in the beginning of her literary career—as a young Black girl—she would fill up diaries and journals and then destroy them because she thought "growing up was not supposed to be hard and difficult," even though her life was both (6). Her earliest writing was a "release. It took the pain and terror away," but it was not yet a "place of reconciliation and reclamation" (6). Her silence, difference and giftedness locked her into silence.

She could find no place to be herself within her family or heal her own inconsistencies; "secrecy and silence" were too central (81) in her home, so she healed outside of her family dynamic. hooks' need for a space of personal subjectivity is one I understand as a gifted and talented Black girl. I see the world through complicated eyes, and question things most would ignore. Because of my questions, and because I never thought I should keep my questions to myself, I did not always feel comfortable around my family; however, unlike hooks, my parents never tried to break me. In the chapter "class and the politics of writing," hooks remembers her parents "often spoke about the necessity of breaking [her] spirit" (98). In America, it is easier to live in this country never questioning the hegemonic norm, so

hooks' parents raised her to never challenge what is accepted as fact, like structures of racist and sexist oppression, though they were ultimately unsuccessful. Asking too many, or the wrong, questions in this society could likely get a Black girl killed, but without contextualization of the reason hooks' parents felt the need to break her spirit, her parents broke her in a different way.

In her parents' attempt to break her down in order to keep her safe, hooks ultimately finds she needs to repair her spirit in order to save her life. In an American society in which a travesty like the murder of Emmett Till can happen without consequence, hooks' parents believed they were doing the best they could with their child by silencing and rendering invisible her difference, her spunk, and her intellectual passion. hooks, who had noted the ambiguities of her upbringing: the times her parents "threatened to take books away and even burn them" and the "times when mama pleaded with daddy and saved money to buy a book [she] longed for" (106), came to recognize how her parents' own politics of location had affected her own. Her parents had never seen Black women writers, leaders, or critical thinkers, so they did not expect their daughter to become one.

My own experience coming of age in a family where I did not always feel like I belonged was a challenge that I actually managed relatively well. I refused to accept hooks' moniker "misunderstood outsider" in my own life (92), and since my mother never discouraged me from reading, I used reading and the library to escape my family. Instead of visiting with my aunts and cousins, I would catch the bus to the local library and spend hours in the imaginary worlds of Charlie Bucket and Amelia Bedelia. In the library, I was able to be myself because the books did not judge me like my cousins did, similar to the way hooks wrote in her journal because the blank pages of her journal never called her "crazy" or "ocky," as I was often called.

My relationship with my family precipitated my choice to leave the place of my birth: Miami, Florida, and move to Tallahassee, Florida for college. In August of 2001, I packed everything that I

owned and moved to Tallahassee. I was leaving for college at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University and never returning to Miami. The city held many negative memories for me, and I was hesitant to consider returning for any longer than two weeks, this included Christmas break and summer vacation. I left Miami believing that I would never come home again, but in time it seems like memories soften and hard and fast rules no longer apply. The way I felt about home in August of 2001 is not exactly the way I feel about home now. Though it seems that even the strongest convictions get weaker over the passage of time, the girl who left Miami that August is not the same woman who now returns every so often. The woman who drives down Interstate 75 from Tampa to Miami is a Black Women's Freedom Theorist, a college-educated, relatively financially stable, independent junior scholar as opposed to the unsure, awkward, self-conscious young woman who left. For me, like the women of Barbara Smith's anthology, *Home Girls,* home holds the motivation behind my personal mission to enact Black women's liberation. Black women complicate ideas of home, and I look to explore the necessity of a safe place to call home in the midst of Black women's liberation theory (also known as womanist theology).

Home is ultimately not only a place of individuals; home is a collective, and this is what makes Morrison's work so important. Black women have "home girls," and we always have. Most, if not all, Black women have very close women friends with whom we share deepest secrets and critical concerns. As Renita Weems writes, "No matter how far we as Black women stray from one another, eventually we learn it will be a Black woman that we will turn to for comfort and advice" (100) because the community of Black womanhood is a shield from the outside world. In a world that grudgingly offers a space to women who are not middle class, white, and heterosexual, we liminal women continue to create spaces in housing projects, college dorm rooms, and social organizations. In time, though, I have learned that my original home may not be the place in which I will spend the rest of my life, but it can still be a

home space. It took over a decade for me to realize that I could, again, go home to Miami, but I could only go after I knew who I was and also who I was not. It seems that we actually can go home, but we might be going home to a place we have never known, to people who have never known us.

A Space for Beauty

For people to see the Black woman as she is requires that they see beyond the standard of beauty emblazoned on magazine covers, television screens, and print advertisements. It only takes five seconds of searching the images on Google under "beauty" to see that Black women's faces are not represented, but I had been surrounded by Black women my entire life, even before the internet existed. If Black women, of varying shapes, sizes, and colors, surrounded me and I knew they were beautiful, why do I need Google to affirm my beauty? I am writing some forty-odd years after the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and I still have trouble locating full expressions of Black beauty in the media. I have to say that the absence of Black male commitment to the Black women I saw daily must be a reason. Though I thought Black women were beautiful, they were not beautiful, or smart, or funny, or amazing enough for the men they were dating to propose. The men offered them sex, money, and babies, but not exclusive commitment, and this was common in the relationships I saw. I had seen these women bent over on the dance floor at a ball, but never cuddled at a wedding reception.

Maybe, though, the sex, the money, and the babies were what my aunts needed to:

> ease the fear
>
> & growing self-pity (313)

about which Michelle Clinton speaks. Maybe in the absence of "enough," sex could become enough. For strong women, I guess, a little can become a lot. A little attention, a little compassion, and a little time satisfies our need to have a piece of something instead of a lot of nothing. Even Betty Wright sang about this concept in 1988's "After the Pain." She croons, "You know one thing time has taught me? Having a

piece of man is better than not having a man at all, so I'm gon' just take what I got and work with it. You understand what I mean?" Betty Wright is a part of my aunts' generation, and that was a prevailing sentiment of Black women across the country: accept whatever a man is offering until you can "return to the same well-versed competent woman you are" (314). We live from moment to moment, from hearts afire to hearts broken, ultimately forgetting that it takes more than a moment of pleasure to forget a lifetime of pain. Still we try. We try because we still believe we need to be Black goddesses, ones who do not feel the pain of rejection when discarded or ignored by Black men.

Poet Kate Rushin does not want to try to be a Black goddess anymore. Juxtaposing Clinton against Rushin, I appreciate the difference between the women's perspectives. Michelle Clinton is encouraging Black women to continue to present a front of strength while "on the verge of crying" (312), but Rushin proudly declares, "I am not a Black Goddess" (315). She says this over and again in her piece, imploring her reader, "Look at me," (315) and to not only look at her, but also see her. Rushin wants to be recognized for the woman she is, not the woman others expect her to be. She concedes that she is full of:

> contra? Contra? Contradictions? Contradictions?
>
> No No Contra Dictions. (316)

Rushin is not a "Black Goddess" as many women were want to call themselves in the 70s and 80s, she is a "Black woman" (317), and that is all she wants to be. How much less stress would Black women have if we stopped trying to be goddesses and just started to be our divine selves? Morrison offers these images of common women who are also divine in her novels.

Though Rushin and I both agree that we are not goddesses, she follows saying:

> There is
>
> healing in my hands (317)

so while we admit that we do not have superpowers, we do recognize that we are powerful. Luisah Teish examines the Black women's common power in "Women's Spirituality: A Household Act." In Teish's essay, she travels to New Orleans in order to locate Black women's spirituality in an old graveyard. Because "the loving and healing matristic qualities of the feminine principle have been shrouded in obscure symbolism" (318), Teish must rediscover Black women's contributions to faith. Her project intends to "reveal the strength of African Women and the contributions they have made to world culture" (319). She endeavors to concretize "woman-oriented magical practices which can be used to harness power and direct it toward social change" (320), and she does. Teish conducts cultural anthropological work visiting the crypt of a Voodoo Queen, talking with the woman's neighbors, and communing with her spirit in order to report a well-researched study of the Black women's Voodoo tradition. Though my project does not address Voodoo, I do analyze the way in which Black women embrace their own divinity and spirituality through Christianity.

Even in reading her piece, again I saw my aunts and even my grandmother, remembering how they had spoken about "roots" and "conjuring" in the backyard over a pot of greens. I also acknowledge Morrison's fictional women, who take to the land when a cure is needed, and even the young Indigo in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*. Some women "kept the practices, but lost much of the accompanying theology," but not the women I know (324). My aunts and grandmother did not know how to work roots, but they knew people who did. Women who could make a man leave or make a man want to stay. I know women who could appeal to God for an intervention. I know women who can fall on the altar in prayer earnestly invoking the presence of God. When Alice Walker recalls a woman like this, she writes a poem, "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse." The woman in Walker's piece petitions "the Man God" (339), and she expects this Man God to move on her behalf. In all of these narratives, women acknowledge the presence and power of God to change their circumstances.

The woman, whom Alice Walker finds in a letter within Zora Neale Hurston's belongings, asks God for a variety of debilitating punishments on her behalf. Among her variety of plagues she wishes to befall them are: "their fingernails shall fall off and their bones shall crumble, their sight shall fail and their seed shall dry up, and the children who may come shall be weak of mind and paralyzed of limb" (339), among a host of other ailments. This woman does not only want revenge; she wants annihilation. She wants to see pain, suffering, and destruction, and she believes that the "Great One" would honor her cries. Because the people with whom she was affiliated had "dragged [her] in the dust and destroyed [her] good name; broken [her] heart and caused [her] to curse the day [she] was born" (340), she wants them to see and feel the pain she feels. Instead of Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye* telling God, "You let them [the little children] go wanting… You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God," it should have been Pecola finally standing up to God (181). If she had been able to trust God to honor her petition, she would not have needed to resort to Soaphead's faux religion. Black women's faith is strong, but God's silence while Pecola prays causes her to seek drastic action. As women engage their own spirituality, they appeal to God in whatever way possible to encourage Him to move on their behalf, and even though Pecola appeals to a medium of God, she believes God will work through this man on her behalf.

Performing Spirit Work

This brings me to the role of the spirit and religion in my mission to save the self that is my own. Bear with me as I recall my life in faith, and return to hooks as my touchstone. I have always been a part of the Christian family. I remember being a little girl sliding on white socks with ruffles and shiny black shoes. Then I remember being older and having to stop at the corner store by the church for peppermints and stockings (I was rough on my clothes, so I always needed new stockings). I remember being nine years old, getting baptized at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. I remember having a dollar to put into

church and separating my dollar on the envelope, so I could give a dime to every ministry. I remember sneaking out of church before the benediction to go to the ice cream truck. I remember finally being old enough to sit in the balcony of the church and pass notes to my best friend.

When I moved to Tallahassee, I remember going away and leaving church behind. I remember locking myself in my room so no one would ask me to go to church. I remember the day I finally said, "Okay," put on my clothes and went to the church. I remember when I joined, twice, because my friend wanted me to join the church with him after I had already joined the week before. I remember becoming a "church girl," joining five different ministries and spending all of my free time at the church (Monday for Bible Basics, Tuesday and Thursday for choir rehearsal, Wednesday for prayer meeting and Bible study, Friday for collegiate ministry, Saturday for women's ministry, and Sunday for Sunday school and church service).

I remember when I dreamed a dream that God was calling me to preaching ministry. I remember scheduling a meeting with my pastor and accepting my call to preach. I remember leaving the church because I was disappointed by the inner workings of ministry and seeing that pastors were people, too. I remember sitting at home, refusing to go to church, like I had years prior when I was a freshman. I remember God speaking to me, telling me to get up and go somewhere because I would not be spending another Sunday at home. I remember driving around for about thirty minutes and ultimately finding my way back to my very first Tallahassee church home. I remember moving to Tampa, searching for churches, and finding a new church home. So as far as I can remember, I have been a part of the faithful. Even when I was outside of the church, for whatever reason, either youthful ignorance or mature discontent, I was still a part of the family of faith. From birth, I had been raised in the faith: my grandparents had attended the same church for as long as I had been alive, and my entire family attended that church. My mother was active in ministries, and even in the house, she would play gospel music on

Saturday mornings as we cleaned the house and prepared for Sunday dinner. I remember her singing, "Nearer My God to Thee," and "I Won't Complain," as she cried out to the Lord, sometimes in English, sometimes in tongues. I remember closing my room door, trying to block out her singing, but, of course, being unable to do so. No matter how hard I tried, I could not escape the role of religion in my life and upbringing, so when I arrived at Black feminism with its precepts and perspectives, I wondered where God was in the midst of Black women's standpoints.

How could I reconcile the role of religion with Black women's liberation movements? How do I condemn patriarchy as the cause of the Black woman's ills while still recognizing that the first major patriarchal institution was the church? What is the role of the Black female minister in the Black feminist movement? In bell hooks' *remembered rapture*, I noticed that she kept returning to her personal space of inspiration, the motivation behind her artistry, and that motivation was a spiritual calling to write. I come to the role of spirituality in saving the life of the Black feminist activist and writer from bell hooks to me.

In *remembered rapture,* bell hooks is engaging with the writing process. She is explaining how she uses words and why she decides to use words in order to make sense of the world. It would be through writing, first the confessional and then the professional, that hooks would find her light. In the beginning, she had the word, but she had not yet made the connection between the word and the person writing the words. In her shame at feeling despair, writing was not liberatory, but the process to liberation had begun. The more she wrote, the more comfortable she became with writing, with her political stance, and with her self. She realizes, "confessional writing enabled me to find a voice" (6). Like those in the Catholic church, who visit a listening priest, or those outside of the church who visit a listening friend, hooks found a willing ear in the pages of her journal.

hooks' sanctuary, her safe space, her nonthreatening place was in writing, but before she could be redeemed, she had to set herself free. She explains how she had to confront her "shadow-self" because as long as she felt ashamed of herself, she was "stuck in the woundedness" (8). hooks' isolation with writing is akin to Paul who wrote letter and letter after being imprisoned during the early persecution of the Christian church. In fact, Paul wrote the bulk of the New Testament of the Holy Bible as he traveled across the world spreading the gospel of Jesus and setting the Christian house in order. While Paul wrote to order the church, hooks writes to order her life. As she became more comfortable with her voice, she began to explore topics more related to the liberatory struggle of Black women from under the dominion of patriarchal power structures, in contradiction to her parents' pressure to raise her as non-confrontational. Because writing had served in her own life to function "in a therapeutic manner," hooks finds that the act of reading her writing could also serve as therapy for another woman. Had it not been for reading the writing of other women, hooks would never have known the "way that sexism had always interfered with women's creativity," and the way that women continued to enact artistic subjectivity despite that interference (15). She learned to be unafraid because she found women writers who were also unafraid, women who were able to experience the "ecstatic" through the literary arts (35).

The ecstatic, I find, is directly related to the spiritual as the filling and overflow of the Holy Spirit mirror a feeling of total ecstasy; in hooks' definition, it means "to stand outside" of one's self (35). She writes, "in those moments when I am immersed so deeply in the act of thinking and writing that everything else, even flesh, falls away," she is in ecstasy (35). The feeling she explains comes to me in those moments when I am one with God, and I feel his white hot presence all over me. I lose control of my arms, legs, and mouth, and His spirit takes over my body in a visual representation of praise. The Spirit is a transformative force in my life since it forces me to humble myself in the presence of a God I

cannot control. In my life, I try to orchestrate every piece of my day, my being, and my existence, but with God, I have to relinquish that control. I submit to the calling of God by allowing him free rein over my expression of praise like hooks allows herself to be dedicated to writing as her "desired and accepted calling" (37). She finds God through writing and she loves Him fiercely. hooks actually directly compares writing to "monastic spiritual practice" because she finds that through the pen, she can "move the spirit" (38). God is a God who manifests Himself through everything and everyone everywhere.

When hooks allows herself to be guided and led by the Spirit of God, she also allows her writing to transcend the natural to become spiritual writing. She does not state this, but I see her reference to the "confessional anecdote" as reminiscent of the African American religious tradition. She writes that she uses anecdotes to "illustrate an idea… and bridge the gap" between audiences, and this is the same methodology of a minister of God's word (65). Each Sunday, preachers take very personal stories to illustrate the depth and breadth of God's love for His children. Preachers make connections between the life of Jonah and the life of the contemporary believer. We are told that Jesus took up His cross, never said a mumbling word in His own defense, and ultimately sacrificed His life for the body of believers. In many ways, for hooks, writing allows her to do the same. The confessional engages with readers on a new level because there is no distance from the speaker and the reader. She engages the personal, she engages the "I" that academic writing dissuades "scholarly" writers from using. She, like James Baldwin of a generation past, uses the revelation of the Holy Spirit to guide practical writing. As I sit and think about the role of religion of the Black women's freedom movement, I think about the man who influenced Toni Morrison to bridge the fictional with the faithful.

Toni Morrison considers James Baldwin one of the strongest Black male novelists in history. In her eulogy to him published in the New York Times and reprinted in *What Moves at the Margin*, she writes, "I stand on moral ground but know that ground must be shored up by mercy" (90). Morrison

offers mercy time and again in her novels to her protagonists, antagonists, and supporting characters alike. For many readers of Morrison and Baldwin's literature, the preacherly quality is ever present. The sermon is there, but only willing listeners hear it. Though James Baldwin claims to have left the Christian church, the church never left him because God was already inside of him. His pen became his pulpit, and his writing took on a prophetic quality that is yet unmatched. Morrison uses her pen as her confessional, sharing stories with blank pages that sometimes she could not bear to speak aloud in her own voice. In my writing and reading, I stand as a minister who can either allow the Bible to act as a means of subjugation or liberation. Morrison offers a prime example of how to do the latter.

What I think Morrison intends to do is ultimately focused on is the right of women to make choices about their own lives. Women want to be a part of the conversations on laws and law-making; we want to hold dominion over our own bodies and our choice whether or not to reproduce. I recognize that patriarchy can be disempowering, but I do not believe that it has to be. If God is my father, and I am His child and a child listens to and respects her father, then I can listen to and respect my God. I am dependent on God for the sustenance of my life, but I depend on myself to enact that sustenance given by the provision of God. Morrison's expression of faith through her reliance on the divinity of the Spirit to gift her with words is the same faith on which I rest to travel this academic journey. The Spirit in her is the same Spirit in me with individual manifestations. As long as God continues to take care of me, I will continue to let Him order my steps.

Because I cannot separate my personal faith from my professional activity, I choose to merge the personal, the political, and the professional through my teaching and writing, but the most important connection is the one we have made with the Spirit. Like my foremothers and forefathers of faith, the gospel of Jesus and the Black church as an institution allowed us to "make radical sense of our history, and to build communities of resistance" (hooks 108) because the Black church was usually the first

place I saw Black artistry, leadership, and autonomy. Every Sunday, churchgoers enter the sanctuary to see well-dressed deacons, deaconesses, and lay members orchestrating service in various ways. Each and every leader in the church is a person of color, and in my church, my pastor is not only a person of color, but she is a Black woman with a doctoral degree. Seeing a space in which Blackness is not reviled or derogated, but rather celebrated and rewarded, is so necessary for the building of a "beloved community" of Blackness (109). There are other politics of the Black church that do come into play: sexism, colorism, heteronormativity, and classism, but Blackness in leadership is not an issue in the Black church. hooks, who was familiar with community worship, was "reminded of the importance of community by participating in collective spiritual worship" (116), and she finds that the collective practice of spirituality allows her to find the God within herself.

In hooks' quest, she came to see the innately and fiercely personal nature of spiritual practice, sharing, "I began to think of spiritual practice as a way of being that was private, that I did not need to share with others" (112) because ultimately, one's relationship with God/Jesus/Allah/Buddha is personal. We come to know God for ourselves, through ourselves, even though we are usually introduced to Him through another. Faith is built, typically through our parents and elders until we experience Him personally. hooks finds that she must seek God for herself, and through spirituality, she is able to merge the personal with the professional because she sees her work in the spirit as an extension of her political position. Writing was a "journey that was both spiritual and political" (113), so as she created separate spaces for the personal and the political, she merged them both with the professional. She "answered the call of voices deep within" and engaged in liberatory artistry (114).

Ultimately, similar to hooks, I also "endeavor to evoke, build, and sustain a sense of community" like that I see "strongly developed in theory and practice by religious and/or spiritual people" (121) because the space of the church is where I first found activist work. I saw Black women engaging in

missions, Black men who sought the Lord in prayer, Black mothers of the church who held babies while young mothers shouted loose imprisoning shackles. I watched as the church raised money to build a larger temple for the people and solicited donations for a struggling family.

In the Black church, I found the Black beloved community that was missing in my own community that had been racked by integration, housing inequality, the rise of the projects instead of single-family homes, and the staggering effects of the crack cocaine epidemic. As Maya Angelou pens in "Glory Falls," "We grow despite the horror that we feed upon…" (248). Even in the direst of circumstances, the Black community still revers and respects the Black church. See, in the very-imperfect church, I found representations of a perfect God, one who saw my faults, like He saw the faults of my brothers and sisters in Christ, and still my met my—met our—needs. The Black liberation struggle is one founded in the tradition of the Black church—a knowledge that trouble does not last always—and we do not believe He brought us this far to leave us. I invoke the Spirit in personal, political, and professional practice because the God I know is an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God. If He will be with me anyway, why not invite Him in?

The ways in which my relationship with God merges my personal, political, and professional life occurs without overt statements of faith. I do not announce my faith in the classroom, but I do believe that the God who orders my steps is present with me at every juncture of my day, including the moment I walk into the classroom. My faith, which is vitally necessary as a Black woman living in America, allows me to not be disheartened at the slow process of diversity in the American academy. When I find myself discouraged and disappointed by the structures that continue to limit my progress, structures directly related to my race, sex, and class, I return to my knowledge of "Love as a transformative force, as the ultimate expression of godliness" (hooks 117), and I choose not to be angry. I instead listen to the

still, small voice that whispers, “It will all be worth it,” and I continue to press toward the mark. I have no other choice.

What my life has become is a testament to work of love, the spirit, and the transformational power of Black women’s work in the life of a Black girl. Before I knew there was language for my individual experience, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, and Toni Morrison were grounding their experiences through poetry and text. With their covering, I learned that I was not the anomaly: my lived experience may be my own, but it is not exceptional. Realizing that I am a part of the tradition of Black womanhood, I use my experience to serve as a mentor and guide for Black women who will follow me into adulthood and even into the academy. As I situate my teaching within my personal enactment of my own defined standpoint, I recognize the integral relationship of the spirit to my practice.

As the foundation of the examination into Morrison, I let the above questions and journey inform my need to find Black women’s ministry in contemporary American literature. Black women were influential in the church from its inception, even though their large-scale contributions were likely ignored. Instead of allowing Black men’s ignorance to discourage them from their work, Black women took up unconventional pulpits and mantles of influence. For some women, they turned to their gardens; for others, they interrogated their relationship to their bodies; for others, they looked to guidance from the Lord for answers; and then some women united with other women in the struggle to locate a space in which they could be their fullest selves. Morrison mirrors this in her work, and I mirror it in my own. Through this project, I hope Black women, Black men, white women, white men, and all readers of this project see themselves reflected in its pages. This is not a singular work, though authored singularly. The ancestors, my foremothers, my grandmother, and my mother guide me as I write. Just as their covering protects me, I hope it enveloped you as well.

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[i] Ana Fraile-Marcos does recognize that *Paradise* is a religious novel, but she does not examine the particular Blackness of that religion. In "Hybridizing the 'City upon a Hill' in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," Ana Fraile-Marcos writes the citizens of Ruby believe it is "an earthly paradise as a consequence of its engagement with the foundational Puritan myths and rituals at the core of American identity" (3). Fraile-Marcos attributes the Ruby residents' Puritanism to Bhabha's theory of mimicry as a site of resistance (4). The citizens of Ruby adopt Puritanical codes and racism but use them against other Black Americans, which is why the men of Ruby view the Convent as a "disruptive evil" (5). This evil, Fraile-Marcos, surmises can only be cured though American Puritan ideology. She claims, "much scholarship illustrates the importance of that religion and, more specifically, the interpretation of biblical texts by the New England Puritans had in the creation of what we now perceive as American identity, literature, and culture" (6). In the same way, generations after the first Puritanical settlers felt the "burden of measuring up to the forefathers' heroic deeds," which directly relates to the journey of the New Fathers in *Paradise* (7). The Puritanical tradition, though, helped the Old Fathers because "the adoption of the oppressor's (civil) religion can be fundamental in their quest for freedom" (8). In short, if Moses led the Israelites on an exodus out of Egypt, then African American slaves could do the same.

Though Fraile-Marcos focuses on Morrison's usage of religion in *Paradise,* she instead hones in on American Puritanism as her first location of Morrison's religious acculturation. She ignores the African American spiritual legacy bequeathed in slavery. Fraile-Marcos does not expand or extend her study into those religious practices and values brought over with the slaves into the New World. Those practices shared over time by the slaves with their children, grandchildren, or even those linked only by a similarity of slave name. Fraile-Marcos also does not address Morrison's usage of any religious symbols in Morrison outside of those present in Puritanism, even neglecting to acknowledge her title's roots in biblical scripture. In an article a year earlier, Fraile-Marcos also engages Morrisonian spirituality.

In "The Religious Overtones of Ethnic Identity-Building in Toni Morrison's *Paradise,* Fraile-Marcos claims, again, that the "rhetoric of Puritan origin soon became an integral part of the national 'civil religion' of the country" (97). In the article, which has much of the same argument as the later version, Fraile-Marcos explains Black nationalism movement as one in which Black Americans were "God's Chosen People with the messianic role of achieving their own—and, also others'—redemption" (98). Fraile-Marcos, however, argues this mission was complication by the dueling twoness of African Americans, in the vein of Du Bois, who felt both Africanness and Americanness. In Fraile-Marcos's estimation, *Paradise* is a "representation of African Americans' 'Americanness' at the very basis of the process of their ethnic formation as African Americans" (99). She calls the Ruby citizens' value system "eminently white" and "Puritan" (99), even though the citizens of Ruby value the deepest Blackness possible.

Fraile-Marcos claims through this adoption of Puritanism, the men and women of Ruby are able to become American citizens, but I would argue the citizens of Ruby never attempted to do

this, as they pay no taxes, have no police officers, nor electricity. She claims the novel includes an "appropriation of certain Biblical elements…used by the Puritans… in order to create identity," (100) though Morrison writes the Old Fathers were barred from entry by other Blacks, not whites, and they used those experiences to craft Haven, their first attempt at an all-Black town. Looking for Haven, the Old Fathers, in Fraile-Marcos's estimation, are reproducing the "jeremiad rhetoric" but not the story of the Exodus (102).

In a 2004 article on *Paradise*, Sarah Appleton Aguiar writes of Ruby as a "re-created Eden" where no one dies. Aguiar, unlike Fraile-Marcos, does not necessarily focus on the religious symbolism or even undertones of Morrison's *Paradise*, but she does mention "The Convent's 'stinging hot peppers' may be equated with the fires of Hell," but instead of religion, she centers on life and death in the novel (515).

In addition to the exploring life and death in the Convent and in Ruby, Aguiar also references the presence of sin in *Paradise.* Aguiar recalls Sweetie calling the Convent "sin," but she does not address how the idea of sin came about in Ruby (516). Even when Aguiar surmises, "Consolata's rituals seem to engender a *separation* of the spiritual and the flesh, she does not attribute any of this to Morrison's religious engagement in the text (516). Life and death, then, for Aguiar are not functions of God, nor are the actions of men in Ruby those ordained by God; rather, the men of Ruby act only through Morrison's power, trading the lives of the women in the Convent for the lives of the citizens of Ruby. Because Morrison deemed *Paradise* a novel about religion, critics looked for religious significance in the text. Fraile-Marcos, though, attributes it to the Puritanism while Sarah Appleton-Aguiar instead focused on life and death. Sabine Bröck's "Postmodern Mediations and 'Beloved's' Testimony: Memory Is Not Innocent," fails to include a conversation of testimonials as a function of the African American church, but it does address the Blackness of witness testimony. Members of the Black church who might not have a voice elsewhere can come before the church at the appointed time and offer their testimony, which can be directly correlated to Beloved's walking out of the water into 124 Bluestone Road to tell her side of her life and death story.

Bröck, though, does not read testimony in this way. She reads testimony as a legal, not a spiritual endeavor. She writes of the "overlapping and closeness between Jewish Holocaust memory work and Black and Third World Diasporic texts" (35). She argues Black and Third World writers are attempting to "transcend amnesia" as it relates to their particular histories (35). Testimony, here, is better suited for the courtroom than for the church sanctuary. Witnessing, then, "becomes the key trope for their recuperation of narrative, in that it would ensure and inscribe acts of remembering" (36). Witnessing is not, then, the members of a church going out into the community to their spiritual journeys; however, Morrison writes her characters as primary witnesses of their own trauma who engage in testimony through the text.

[ii] A cursory search on either the MLA Directory of Periodicals or a JSTOR search pulls results that privilege analyses of Sethe's mothering, Pecola's stunted girlhood, Pauline's preoccupation with white women's beauty, Beloved's return from traumatic slavery, Consolata's sermon in the Convent, and Baby Suggs' sermon in the Clearing. Though I will be using many of these studies, I am expanding on them by applying the arguments to the lesser, marginal Morrison characters.

[iii] Three significant volumes address Morrison's inclusion of African spirituality in her novels as mine does; one is a critical work by K. Zauditu-Selassie: *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* and the other is *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* by La Vinia

Delois Jennings. Zauditu-Selassie engages Morrison's first eight novels and uses dance steps to explain Morrison's inclusion of African spiritual references. Her foci are ancestor worship, the invisible work of God, and African traditions of flying, masking, healing, and community transformation. Since Zauditu-Selassie is a Yoruba priestess, she uses that background as the foundation of her critical perspective; thus, she even includes a glossary of unfamiliar terms. Zauditu-Selassie argues the Africanist perspective more so than the African American perspective.

Jennings focuses on traditional cosmologies—origins of the universe—in the West, witches, elders, and medicine women. She also includes the Vodun religion of the West Africa and Haiti as integral to Morrison's work. Jennings has traveled to Haiti and Ghana, so like Zauditu-Selassie, there is a lived experience of African spiritual tradition that undergirds her work. In the six chapters of Jennings' work, she addresses the cross and circle cosmogram, which is used to symbolize cosmology, and its West African historical background, the "witch" symbol in *Paradise, Sula,* and *Beloved*, and the frequently discussed conjurers in the three novels as well. Additionally, Jennings explains that Morrison uses an African conception of an infinite past, as she moves from the present to the past in her novels through flashbacks. Jennings also uses Alexander's idea of the "fourth face" of God to explain the presence of evil in the three novels through a God with human characteristics ordering the lives of His people.

In a volume more closely related to my own, Therese Higgins' work in 2002 titled *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: the African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, has ten chapters on *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise.* The first chapter discusses spirits in African life and then their presence in *Song of Solomon, Beloved, Tar Baby,* and *Jazz.* She also addresses folklore, folktales, and traditions in Morrison's novels as sites of spirituality. The second part of the project addresses communities as a vital site of engagement, which I will also do in my study of Morrison's work though our conclusions are not quite the same. She mentions the failure of the community in *The Bluest Eye*, but not the success of the community in the healing, though temporary, of Aunt Jimmy. She also explores the power of the larger community in *Beloved*, but I mirror that power with the smaller communities of *Beloved* and *Paradise* as well as the larger ones.

[iv] According to Frances Smith Foster, "Topsy the child is black with big eyes, long skinny legs and at least fifteen short plaits. The older Peaches is luscious, sly, and loose. Caldonia, the matriarch, fat, loud, and emasculating. [Aunt Chloe] has donned a flowered dress and rundown shoes" (433). These stereotypes have continued in different iterations over the generations since Foster's writing.

[v] See these studies for more information on political activism in the Black church. Frederick Harris. "Something Within: Religion as a Mobilizer of African-American Political Activism."

(1994); R. Khari Brown and Ronald E. Brown. "Faith and Works: Church-Based Social Capital Resources and African American Political Activism." (2003); Scott Fitzgerald, Ryan Spohn. "Pulpits and Platforms: The Role of the Church in Determining Protest among Black Americans." (2005); Sandra Barnes. "Black Church Culture and Community Action." (2005); Sandra Barnes. "Whosoever Will Let Her Come: Social Activism and Gender Inclusivity in the Black Church." (2006); Robert Gaines. "Looking Back, Moving Forward: How the Civil Rights Era Church Can Guide the Modern Black Church in Improving Black Student Achievement." (2010).

[vi] In the Black church, the Mother Board is an association of older, revered Black women who have given their lives in service to others. As a result, they are rewarded with special status as an integral part of the ministry.

[vii] Mary Church Terrell's creed became the oath for one of the largest organizations of African American women in America, Delta Sigma Theta, Sorority, Incorporated.

[viii] Ironically, Carmichael was taught by Morrison, and one would think he would have a higher opinion of Black womanhood.

[ix] In a very real sense, Morrison includes this spirit in order to place alternative African American religion in her text. Beloved is not only the spirit of Sethe's murdered child, but she is also the spirit of the lost men, women, and children of the American slave trade.

[x] There is a benefit to the lack of language, though. As Ntozake Shange explains, it was language that taught her to hate herself. She declares, "I cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as s/he learns to speak of the world and the 'self'" (19).

[xi] In a way, Morrison is offering a nod to W.E.B. Du Bois who spoke of the double consciousness in the African American soul. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* he calls this duality a "twoness" that "one ever feels" (5). It is "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (5). As Richard Hardack expands on Du Bois, Hardack writes, "The immediate effect of double-consciousness is then experienced in an alienation from their own bodies" (456).

[xii] "165,429 enslaved Africans disembarked in the Carolinas and Georgia between the late 1600s and 1866. Among their descendants are the approximately 500,000 people who speak the distinctive Gullah/Geechee language today in the Sea Islands… The Gullah/Geechee people descend from the enslaved Africans who built and sustained the lucrative rice plantations of the marshy coastlands… between Cape Fear River in North Carolina an the St. John's River near Jacksonville, Florida…" (Matory 952)

[xiii] Since *The Bluest Eye* is primarily a novel about children and recollected through the thoughts and voice of a child, most of the nature imagery Claudia uses marks either a season or an experience in her life. She had not yet learned how to use the land to her advantage, so her experience with the land is as immature as she is. The same holds true for both Cholly and Pauline, too, because both have memories tied to an engagement they had with the land as children.

[xiv] When the nine designated men of Ruby arrive to attack the women, they find a table "fourteen feet long… at one end a full pitcher of milk stands near four bowls of shredded wheat. At the other end vegetable chopping has been interrupted: scallions piled like green confetti nestles brilliant disks of carrot, and the potatoes, peeled and whole, are bone white" (5). The men

come into the house expecting debauchery, mayhem, and lawlessness, but instead they find a typical morning routine, which could have taken place in any of their own houses. As the men delve deeper into the Convent, though, their prejudice begins to show as they observe "dusty mason jars and what is left of last year's canning" (5). Instead of these men believing the women's industriousness is clear, they call the women "slack" because they had not started washing the jars (5).

[xv] Even though *Paradise* is largely set thirty years later.