

**Transgressive Love and the Effects of Such Boundlessness:
Love and Violence in *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise***

By

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Abstract

In many of Toni Morrison's novels, we—the readers—as well as the fictional communities within the literature itself must reckon with despicable violence(s) born from and justified as *transgressive love*. This kind of “love” reaches beyond the socially understood and agreed upon boundaries that constitute acceptable, healthy love; yet, by the end of the novel, the boundlessness of the characters' *transgressive love* manages to reconcile the act of violence as something understandable, ultimately worthy of richer contemplation, and possibly even deserving of sincere forgiveness. Why does Morrison grace the forsaken with such generous humanity? How does Morrison alchemize such an effect? How is this literary technique experienced by the readers and the fictional communities as witnesses? By thoroughly examining a selection of Morrison's novels—*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987), and *Paradise* (1997)—I argue that *transgressive love* functions as the dominant relational mechanism shared between characters. I explore the idea of *transgressive love* by examining an act of father-daughter rape, a mother who murders her child, and a massacre of a house full of women. While the most obvious path to simple contemplation would be to blame the perpetrator of the violent transgression for their actions, as readers, we must dig deeper into the embedded context and history that has led the characters to such a vile intersection of love and violence. So, with an interpretive model informed by both the fictional community's candid response, as well as the scholarly commentary and reviews available on Morrison's work, my thesis stands as a testimony to the possible reconciliation and further understanding available within unthinkable violence, reframed as boundless love. Through Morrison's evocative depictions of *transgressive love*, readers and fictional communities alike learn to grapple with love so egregious, so boundless in nature, and so fiercely desperate, it cannot help but hurt.

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Introduction

In instances of extremity, must we allow all that has been done in love to still be considered well-meaning? Misplaced love in small doses—like terribly chosen gifts, eccentric comments of pride, and those of the like—can be easily assimilated into acceptable, albeit unwanted, actions of love; but the mere notion of a more violating, transgressive love is difficult to navigate, let alone accept, for those involved and those observing. The transgressive acts of love laced throughout Toni Morrison's novels are no exception to this perspective-taking challenge; however, Morrison's ability to grace even the most forsaken characters as mostly forgivable redefines the statutes of love in its most passionate, aggressive, desperate, and disturbing manifestations.

The intersection of love and violence stands as the thematic focal point of Morrison's novels. The Black American Literature Forum conducted an interview (1977) with Morrison about her career as a writer and the process her work undergoes. Morrison reveals her perception of the central theme within humanity's core: the dichotomous connection between seemingly paradoxical features of life. Morrison details,

“We have a lot of rage, a lot of violence; it comes too easily to us. The amazing thing to me is that there is so much love also. And two things operate.

“One is that with the best intentions in the world, we can do enormous harm, enormous harm. Lovers and mothers and fathers and sisters, they can hurt each other *a lot*.

“Also, it always amazes me that sometimes, when we have a choice, we take the best one! And we do the nicer thing.

“All about love ... people do all sorts of things, under its name, under its guise. The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do.” (Morrison, “The Seams Can't Show” 5)

Here, Morrison addresses the coexistence shared between love and violence. Morrison suggests that we all have a great capacity to enact both as creatures born of love and hate, of tenderness and violence. Our dialectical efficacy at both love and violence prevents any standardization of human nature. The idea of transgressive love builds upon the epistemology that we cannot be all good or all bad. Humankind can be well meaning at times and vicious at others. Those whom we color all good or bad are fundamentally misunderstood if we cannot allow both sides of the coin to be fully realized. As such, the characters in Morrison's novels are compelling because Morrison allows them to be holistic in their nature. They are good and bad and loving and hateful. They do right and wrong things, sometimes all in the same breath. People are complicated, and Morrison allows her characters to be true to human form in the way they love: imperfectly, with complexity, and without always knowing how to do so.

As readers, we come to the page for many reasons. At times, it is to escape, to entertain, to engage with another world, other people, other periods of time; or perhaps we desire learning, growth, and understanding. Whatever our intent, the book as an object holds a special power beyond its materiality. Georges Poulet, professor of French Literature and a major figure within New Criticism, discusses such power of the book in his work, "The Phenomenology of Reading." Phenomenology can be understood as the philosophy of *experience*. Therefore, his piece addresses the particulars of the experience had when reading.

Poulet distinguishes books from other sorts of inanimate objects. He expresses his awe for the book, stating, "Made of paper and ink, they lie where they are put, until the moment someone shows an interest in them. They wait. Are they aware that an act of man might suddenly transform their existence?" (Poulet 54). This final question provides consciousness to the book itself. Upon being interacted with by a reader, a book is no longer simply an object: it holds a

potential, mysterious consciousness that challenges the barriers of the interiority and exteriority of self. Poulet notices that once he picks up a book and begins to read, there is a “falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside” (Poulet 54). In this space of shared, “common consciousness” (Poulet 59) Poulet describes a sense of consciousness that opens to the reader. He states, “[The book] begin[s] to exist” (Poulet 54):

“...I realize that what I hold in my hands is no longer just an object, or even simply a living thing. I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels.” (Poulet 54)

It would be easy to assume that the other consciousness experienced by readers is that of the author. Poulet recognizes this “biographical explanation of literary texts” (Poulet 58) but suggests that this alone is too simple of an explanation. Rather, the consciousness is that of the text itself, as to assume that the text holds the author’s inner most thoughts is too large of an assumption to rest upon reliably.

Therefore, in our experience as readers, not only do the lines between violence and love blur as acts of transgression occur, but so too does the line between the fiction we read and our own experienced realities: between *I*, the reader; and *I*, the secondary consciousness born of the book. As readers, we come to closely identify with the circumstances, characters, and relationships within the book. We see ourselves, despite the possible distance in experience, as the ones hurting and being hurt, as lovers and beloveds, as responsible for and affected by the acts of “love.”

That is what reading does to and for us. It draws us in, makes us a part of the page. It opens our minds to realities that are not our own and do not exist, at times, beyond the scope of even the author's imagination. The phenomenon we experience when reading *feels* real. And in the business of phenomenological work, what we *feel* holds just as much credence as what we can see right before our very eyes.

As a community of readers engaged with such a difficult subject as transgressive love, our reaction and response to the transgressive acts of love within Morrison's work is not to be passed by unexamined. We are the secondary vessels onto which the words of the novel imprint themselves; we carry each message with us beyond the scope of our time flipping through the book itself. Our minds give the book—an object—an existence beyond stale materiality. As such, the responses we have to the acts of transgressive love within *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise* must be considered extensions of the text's interiority; and, therefore, the phenomenological experience that occurs through reading deserves direct examination as well when engaging with such texts.

It is a universal principle that humans love; and at times, we do it wrong. The degree to which characters within Morrison's novels distill the separation of love and violence does not get easier to accept, but in time, we—the reading community—do come to terms with the transgression to some degree. We enter the text, emersed in Morrison's words, and we must sit with the transgressions to effectively sort through their complexity. There is an informal agreement made whenever we open one of Morrison's novels: Try to understand. How could this happen? Why did they do that? Morrison asks us to sink into the visceral response we have when encountering such egregious violations and violence and delve deeper into our reactive evaluation.

That said, the reading community does not surmise the breadth of response within Morrison's work. The fictional communities offer a keen sense of how people would respond to transgressive love if the violence "really" happened. Therefore, their response serves as a measure that readers can compare their own reactions to. Whether the fictional community's response is laudable or faulted, we can learn from those who are more directly related to the said transgression. As involved and engrossed as the readers may *feel* when experiencing the phenomenological consciousness of and connectedness to the text, the fictional community is the group of people who *actually* experience the transgression. Their response should, theoretically, reflect a realistic response of someone exposed to such offensive transgressions of love. In observing "real" reactions by the fictional community, we can begin to better understand our humanity through peripheral learning.

In the following chapters, I will expound upon each major transgressive act of love found in the three selected novels by Toni Morrison. As egregious as each transgression of love first appears, I argue that by the end of our reading experience, readers (and sometimes, but not always, the fictional communities) learn to understand the characters who violate such boundaries more clearly, leading to a form of forgiveness that, without deep character and contextual analysis, could not possibly be reached.

I. The Bluest Eye

“Love is never better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly...” (Morrison 206).

Ugliness is Learned

The community of Lorain, Ohio is all but beautiful. The people, the streets, the businesses all are unsympathetic to the young, Black, and vulnerable. The world that 11-year-old Pecola Breedlove occupies, then, is one that only knows ugly. Ugliness seeps through every untended sidewalk crack and bushy-headed dandelion sprout. As Morrison writes, “These and other inanimate things [Pecola] saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession” (Morrison 47). These environmental teachers groom Pecola—as the environment does to us all—and molds her into the person she is: “owning them made her part of the world, and that world a part of her” (Morrison 48). Morrison describes the environment through Pecola’s eyes as she walks down Garden Avenue to buy some penny candy at the grocery store. Walking on a street with the name Garden Ave, one would not expect to be confronted by weeds and cracks and all things imperfect, but for Pecola Breedlove, her Garden Ave holds all the above. She is surrounded by the chasms and weeds that suggest a certain level of forgottenness, as if the world of Lorain, Ohio is not one that deserves the maintenance that *pretty* environments receive. This garden is no Eden; the streets that Pecola walks are as anti-garden as they come, bereft of beauty, reflecting the ugliness of the community on the very walks they tread.

We are products of our environment. The argument of nature and nurture always starts this way. In a world that is ugly, it is best presumed that those living in that world will embody

similar characteristics. The dirt determines the produce. Therefore, Pecola Breedlove and the rest of the Breedlove family intensely embody the ugliness of Lorain, Ohio. So much so, that their ugliness is undeniable, even to themselves:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. 'Yes,' they had said. 'You are right.' And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (Morrison 39)

The Breedlove family, without a shadow of a doubt, are ugly people. The Breedlove family does not put up a fight to deny their categorization as ugly people; they view themselves in the same way the surrounding community classifies their value. But their ugliness, as Morrison complicates, "did not belong to them" (Morrison 38). Without exception, each family member's history is ridden with permanently damning trauma that has shaped them into the occupants of an ugly hand, dealt by the social forces that have so aggressively forgotten them as deserving people. These social forces, therefore, *own* the Breedlove's trauma; but that is not taken in consideration by those casting judgement on the Breedlove's, nor by the Breedlove family themselves. As philosopher George Santayana states, "Nothing is intrinsically ugly" (Cory 310). Nothing is inherently ugly; ugliness, therefore, is learned. However, the learning of ugliness—just as any other schema—is hard to unlearn once introduced.

In much of African American literature, the statement "God don't like ugly" repeats as a reminder that God too has his preferences, and his preferences are not in favor of "ugly" folks. The phrase, "God don't like ugly," comes from "African American families, churches and communities" (Brown and Lynn 137) and reminds those listening that ugly *behavior* is not tolerated. While the "God don't like ugly" message communicates a need to be morally "good,"

the common idea that physical ugliness is an indication of moral defect extends the sentiment beyond the judgement of behavior itself; physical ugliness is seen as a sign of evil. Think of the way antagonists and villains are portrayed in children's films. Generally, the "evil" character is drawn or represented as *obviously* evil compared to the whitewashed and pure protagonists/heroes of the story. This obviousness comes from the commonly recognizable trope that ugly *is* evil. This way, even a child who may not be able to distinguish good and bad in real life can visually see *difference* between the good, beautiful characters, and the evil, ugly ones.

The negative trope and common social perception that physical ugliness is an indication of "badness" casts a sort of curse upon the Breedlove family. To be ugly is to be evil, so it is no wonder that Pecola views herself as incapable of being loved once she understands that her family has been *learned* and categorized as ugly people.

Pecola learns and stores such patterns—ugly is bad and unlovable—from various characters throughout the story. First and foremost, she picks up on her family's categorization as ugly from her direct environment: the Breedlove family itself. Pecola first learns what "love"—or more accurately, unlovingness—looks like from her parents, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove. Their love is an unhealthy, ugly kind. They love to *hate* each other. Pauline loves Cholly because of his sinfulness. She takes his wrongdoing as an opportunity to sink into her faith: "She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus" (Morrison 42). And just as well, Cholly loves Pauline because she is "one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt" (Morrison 42). Their relationship is Pecola's first insight into what marriage looks like, and to a young child, marriage naturally corresponds to the truest form of love, right? That is the schema western cultures have been taught to associate as so: marriage as love. She

sees her parents' attachment, one colored with righteousness and pain, as a model to emulate in her future relationships. And while she knows it is ugly love, she sees herself as ugly, and therefore only deserving of a replication of her parents' toxicity. Pauline and Cholly teach Pecola that healthy love does not exist for ugly people.

Pecola feels that to be ugly is to belong in the unfortunate circumstances of her family: "As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (Morrison 45). She equates ugliness with despicability: "...the ugliness [is what] made her ignored or despised..." (Morrison 45). In an ugly family, the love follows suit.

Beyond the observations of ugly love from her parents, Pecola, just as the other Black girls in the novel, learns from her peers. Black girls learn to hate their Blackness through social comparison with those that receive higher social value in peer groups. Morrison depicts how such social comparison fairs for Black girls like Pecola Breedlove and Frieda and Claudia MacTeer by introducing a new girl into their school, Maureen Peal. Maureen is a "high-yellow dream child" (Morrison 62). Her affluence and especially her complexion helps her to escape the torment that non-passing Black girls face in social spheres:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even bought and liked white milk. (Morrison 62-63)

Claudia MacTeer, the narrator of the novel, and her sister, Frieda, are "bemused, irritated, and fascinated" (Morrison 63) by Maureen. Their interest in Maureen hardens into jealousy, which soon enough turns right back around and globes itself onto their hearts as self-hatred. They hate

themselves because they do not look like Maureen, and they want to look like Maureen because they don't want to be tripped in the halls or struggle to find people to eat with at lunch; they envy Maureen's privilege as someone who passes, and therefore learn to hate their own Blackness that seems to be the root of their struggles.

For a short time, Maureen plays the role of the *white savior* for Pecola. Their relationship starts out positive. Maureen, walking with Frieda and Claudia out of school for the only time ever, sees a group of boys circling and harassing Pecola. Maureen steps in and threatens one of the boys, saying: "Leave her 'lone, or I'm gone tell everybody what you did!" (Morrison 67). This statement of power, coupled with her social prestige granted by her appearance and privilege, is enough to ward off the boys. On the walk, Maureen buys Pecola an ice cream cone, leaving Claudia and Frieda out to dry. Soon, Maureen's kindness towards Pecola wears off. Maureen is curious if Pecola has seen a naked man. And when Pecola answers too defensively that she hasn't seen *her own father*, Maureen realizes the separation between herself and Pecola. Pecola—just as Frieda and Claudia—has been tainted because she is not innocent in the way Maureen is. Maureen is guarded from such offenses; her house is likely large enough so that no naked father must change in front of his children. Because the MacTeer girls face similar circumstances as Pecola, living in tight quarters that do not yield privacy, they come to Pecola's defense. Claudia says, "'You stop talking about her daddy'" (Morrison 72). And then, naturally, these children divide themselves based off a newfound categorization of privilege. Maureen replies, "'What do I care about her old black daddy'" (Morrison 73). Once race comes into the conversation, the line has been firmly set. Maureen crosses to the other side of the street, spatially representing the divide, and calls back "'I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black

e mos. *I am cute!*” (Morrison 73). It is at this moment that Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia learn of their collective ugliness and this ugliness’s connection to their Blackness.

Maureen, along with other symbols of Whiteness found throughout the text such as Shirley Temple drinking cups and white baby dolls, sets the precedence of *Othering* the Black girls, even in the Black girls’ own mental images of their world. The Black girls learn to hate themselves because they are not the valued bodies in society. Girls like Maureen don’t face harassment in school like they do; girls like Maureen can buy ice cream and ward off bullies. She *must* be the ideal person, and those that don’t have such privilege are casted as the Other. Whether they love or hate the reminders of Whiteness, these symbols remind Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia of what they are not and what they cannot be. Whiteness is valued in society, which posits that those who are not represented as the valued figures are deviant from the standard and therefore lesser. These young girls are in formative years of their development, so these objects permanently imprint a staple of ugliness into their learned perceptions of self. Pecola learns to see herself as anything but beautiful. As the title of the novel implies, Pecola is occupied with a pursuit or at least the desire to become a part of this valued Whiteness; to do so, she yearns to change her eyes into the bluest.

Such internalized racism is not embedded naturally into the minds of the Othered characters. They are socialized into hating themselves. Back on Garden Ave, Pecola projects her self-disdain onto a symbol of her Blackness: a dandelion. Pecola comes across dandelions on her walk to the local grocery store tended by Mr. Yacobowski. Prior to her interaction with Mr. Yacobowski, she reflects on the socially erred oversight of dandelions’ beauty: “Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty” (Morrison 47). She can’t seem to distinguish their existence from that of “real” flowers.

Implicitly, Pecola seems to identify with these dandelions: weeds with flower qualities. Just as the weeds, her beauty goes unrecognized which leads to a demoted categorization as something less than their worth deserves; both are time and time again overlooked and uncelebrated, seen as disposable and worthless. As mentioned, Pecola's first instinct does not align with the general public's view of the weeds. At first glance, she thinks they are pretty. It isn't until after she has a dehumanizing encounter with Mr. Yacobowski that she trades in her love for hatred directed towards the dandelions: ““They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds”” (Morrison 47). While she saw them as beautiful, she could not hate them. But as soon as she was made to feel worthless, the subtle beauty of the weeds became lost in her pain, and instead could only be seen as through the lens crafted and shared by those that see her only for her ugliness. It is in this moment that Pecola's self-concept shifts from a moldable, gentle view of her life, into a hardened and contemptuous gaze of socialized hatred. If she is a dandelion, she couldn't possibly be loved as well as the flowers. She is no Maureen Peal; she is no flower.

Pecola and the other Black children in the novel learn that they are ugly in the eyes of society because of their Blackness. Internalized racism not only leads to self-hatred, but to the idea that no one else could possibly love them either. As the readers directly observe such damaging, irreversible social learning in Pecola's formative, 11-year-old life, we naturally begin to extend parallel histories to the adults as well. The racism is a generative cycle that recreates itself over and over in the minds of the newest batch of Black children. This contextual assumption Morrison leads readers to contend with opens the door for some sympathy to be directed towards other “ugly” characters, and those that see themselves as lowly as how society has labeled them.

Sex and Love

For those who are considered and consider themselves to be ugly, there is no difference between sex and love. Pecola learns to connect these two aspects of human connection—sex and love—again, by learning from her peers and observing adults as models.

Pecola first equates sex and love, appropriately, after she begins menstruating for the first time. Menstruation marks not only a tangible distancing from a girlhood's innocence, but further, this bodily function represents an open door to the possibility of having a baby. Lying in bed with Frieda and Claudia MacTeer, Pecola entreats upon her new "condition." She's perplexed and genuinely empowered by her newfound stage of womanhood. She initiates conversation with her bedmates: "Is it true that I can have a baby now?" Frieda confirms her question: "Sure you can" (Morrison 32). But Pecola is not satisfied with that alone. She wonders more:

"But...how?" (Morrison 32). Frieda, being the oldest and therefore most well-versed in such subjects, answers simply: "...somebody has to love you" (Morrison 32). Innocently, Pecola presses on in her wonder, asking, "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" But Frieda was asleep. And I [Claudia] didn't know" (Morrison 32). The described scene introduces the central question of the novel—how do we love and feel loved?—by revealing the lack of love these young girls have thus far experienced. They don't know the answer to Pecola's question; the mystery remains: What is love? How can I find it?

Further, sex and love are equated under the influence of the Magnolia Line prostitutes. These women are not only looked up to, but they are the only characters that Morrison tells readers that Pecola loves. Pecola "loved them, visited them, and ran their errands. They, in turn, did not despise her" (Morrison 50-51). To be clear, they do not necessarily *love* Pecola back. They simply "do not despise her," which hardly sounds like a proclamation of anything beyond

tolerance. This distinction is important because if they did truly *love* Pecola, the mystery of attainable love would not seem so impossible for her to understand; she would have found her people. But, alas, they are more or less indifferent to Pecola. She comes around, helps them out, and they simply don't prevent her from doing so. The Magnolia Line are viewed as whorish "gargoyles" (Morrison 55), as ruined women, by much of the community, but Pecola nonetheless sees their generosity and compassion. However, because the Magnolia Line women are prostitutes, the message Pecola receives here, once again, strengthens the connection and indistinguishability between love and sex. She loves them, and their occupation is sex.

One member of the Magnolia Line, Marie, offers Pecola a verbal lesson on love: "Whenever something was missing, Marie attributed its disappearance to 'something in the house that loved it'" (Morrison 51). This reasoning, as fable-esk and innocent-seeming as it may appear, positions something lost is something loved. The object is classified as loved because it has been taken; it was once there, and now has disappeared. This lesson is rooted in possessiveness and uncontrollable loss, much the same as how sex is traditionally described for women: to have sex is to *lose* your virginity, which signifies the disappearance of purity, of innocence. So, as insignificant as it may seem to say that a household item lost is one loved, this messaging reinforces the notion that to be loved is to allow yourself to be *taken*, *lost*, and subject to *disappearance*.

In my evaluation, there has not been any obvious sign of love that is not accompanied by sex within *The Bluest Eye*. In my search for representatives and teachers of healthy love for Pecola, I expanded my search to explore anywhere in the novel where love is not directly related to sex, either in action, occupation, or reference: I found none involving Pecola. There were two examples of love that do not harbor a sexual undertone. The first being between Geraldine

(Junior's mother) and her cat. While this relationship is not sexual in nature, it can hardly be argued that the love Geraldine has for her cat is a depiction of healthy love considering she does not have enough left in her heart for her own troubled son. Additionally, during the montage of Cholly's history, Morrison introduces the character Blue Jack—a friend of Cholly's during his youth—and suggests that Cholly feels love for him: "Cholly loved Blue. Long after he was a man, he remembered the good times they had had" (Morrison 134). While Morrison gives Cholly and Blue's relationship the label as loving, it is clear that their friendship is strictly platonic, and almost of parental nature. Blue seems to be a role model for Cholly, but their friendship does not offer any possible education for Pecola to learn from directly since Cholly never shares his memories of Blue and Pecola never observed the two men directly. It seems that even healthy displays of friendship are out of reach for Pecola. Given that neither of these relationships—pet ownership and homosocial friendship—are romantic, the relationship between romantic love and sex remains intimately entangled within the displays of human affection.

It is no wonder that there are hardly any examples of love without sex in the tragic and debilitating environment that Pecola and the rest of the characters occupy. In Pecola's world, there is no such thing as love without embodiment, without sex. Love, in this way, is mere survival for these characters. To be loved is to—in a heteronormative sense—be a part of the reproductive cycle: to keep the generations coming. But this form of love is not the kind that is socially acceptable in our world. This love is not tender, not accompanied by compassion and understanding. The love Pecola sees is simply sex by a different name; it is primal and necessary to continue existence. In a sense, understanding the nature of love as being one of survival answers Pecola's question: How can she get someone to love her? Simple; they just must be desperate enough not to mind *ugly*.

It must be mentioned that the Breedlove family name holds clear symbolic meaning. The two parts of the name—*breed* and *love*—point to the connection between sex and love as being inseparable for the characters within Morrison’s novel. Names, in general, are incredibly important for Morrison because of the lack of control Black people had over what they were called for much of history. Africans captured and sold in the slave trade lost the right to their name upon becoming seen as property. Names, in this light, hold heavy importance, and cannot be read over in Morrison’s work. The name *Breedlove* is not an accident. The intentionality behind Morrison’s naming of this family reminds readers that they are engrossed in a world that cannot separate love from sex which thereby redefines “love” as mere survival and sensation rather than meaningful affection.

Furthermore, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove solidify the connection between love and sex with their own relationship. Living in a one-bedroom apartment, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove’s sexual activity is all but private. After talking to the Magnolia Line women, Pecola returns to the mystery she has yet to uncover: “What did love feel like? She wondered. How did grown-ups act when they love each other?” (Morrison 57). Immediately, her mind turns to her first influences: “Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed” (Morrison 57). Pecola thinks of the sex sounds that both of her parents make, and postulates, “Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence” (Morrison 57). Quite the opposite. What the Breedlove’s have is empty sex. This is not love. But Pecola knows only this as her schema for love. Love, sex: to Pecola, these are seen as one and the same.

Pecola learns the equivalence between love and sex from a variety of people who, as yesterday’s children, learned the same lesson. To best understand what lessons are available for Pecola about love and sex, we must first learn what has been available to her teachers. Cholly,

given his role in the text later as the instigator of transgressive love, deserves separate and extensive consideration:

Here is what Morrison tells her readers about the beginning of Cholly's life: "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed in on a junk heap by the railroad" (Morrison 132). He was soon saved by his Aunt Jimmy who raised him and frequently boasted about doing so. She eventually dies, and he is once again, but differently abandoned by his caretaker. People at the funeral say that she loved Cholly, but with such limited interaction between her introduction into the novel and the time of her death (all of seven pages), it is hard to know.

After the funeral, Cholly and the other funeral attendees return to his house for the banquet. There, he meets Darlene with whom he soon has his first sexual experience. He and Darlene venture to the gully with a group of other paired off young girls and boys not long before dark. They find an open green field and a dry riverbed; soon, they arrive at their destination: the "vineyard where the muscadine grew" (Morrison 145). Cholly and Darlene separate from the other kids while playing a game of chase. They lay down to catch their breath and plan to head back to the banquet soon as it's getting dark. They gather themselves; Darlene is particularly concerned about how dirty her clothes became in their playing. Cholly kneels in front of her while she sits to help her retie her bow. With such closeness, their moment of intimacy begins to unfold: "She corkscrewed her hands into his clothes" (Morrison 147). They continued touching each other, each movement intensifying towards intercourse. Morrison writes:

Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be. She moaned a little, but the excitement collecting inside him made him close his eyes and regard her moans as no more than pine sighs over his head. Just as he felt an explosion threaten, Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he

looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around.

There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it. Cholly jumped up, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns. 'Hee hee hee heeeee.' The snicker was a long asthmatic cough.

The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and Darlene. (Morrison 147)

In all its horror, the scene continues to play out with these white men forcing Cholly to continue having sex with Darlene: "With a violence of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear" (Morrison 148). The white men bark at Cholly to "get on wid it" and to "make it good" but Cholly "could do no more than make-believe" (Morrison 148). In the passage above, Cholly's first sexual experience is stolen from him. What began as a young boy's exploration of his sexuality, a gentle and curious act of attraction, became a rape against him. The white men, while not physically involved in the sexual action, completely violated Cholly and Darlene both. Rape, in every sense, is about power; and in this scene, the white men pointing their bright flashlights and forcing them to continue, have full power over Cholly.

Instead of hating the white men, since he has no power over them anyway, Cholly quickly determines that he hates Darlene: "He almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much" (Morrison 148). The sensitivity he had for Darlene at first—shyly letting his hand caress her body, feeling concerned when she gasped and he thought he had hurt her—disappears completely. The moment is tainted by the gaze and manipulative threat of the white men: "The sweet taste of muscadine [turned] into rotten fetid bile" (Morrison 148). Cholly misunderstands his anger. He does not hate Darlene; he only hates that he was found in a vulnerable state that opened him up to the white men's violence. To hate anyone involved

besides Darlene is futile: the men are armed and white, physically standing over him in domination. Against them, he is nothing.

Cholly's first sexual encounter shapes the way he sees the world. He becomes painfully aware—whether it is conscious—of his social inferiority and helplessness. As Morrison describes, his violence is one born of helplessness. Just as his ugliness, his violence can hardly be considered his own.

Given Cholly's horrifying "lesson" on sex as an adolescent, what could he possibly be capable of teaching Pecola about sex and love? His moment that was supposed to be filled with tenderness and love turned into his own demoralization. All he ever has known is pain and violence. A garden that only ever reproduces ugly weeds can never understand the difference between love and sex. And the Breedloves, as discussed, are embedded in such a garden. And what possibility of healthy love is there in this space? None. Instead, there is only a reproduction of pain and violence that has been taught and reinforced from generation to generation.

The Rape

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* is the story of how a father was pushed to the point where all he could provide to his daughter is an unfathomably painful experience. Cholly rapes Pecola in the kitchen of their own home in a trance-like state of helplessness. This can hardly be seen as anything other than vile, however, the connection between love and sex—which, given the foundational perspective of sex being equivalent to love, indirectly points to love and violence—*complicates* the rape. While remaining sensitive to the undeniable horror of Cholly's action, I argue that his violence can be read—strictly in a literary sense—as an act of *transgressive love*. In accordance with the above discussion of love's equivalence to sex, Pecola's rape can and *must*

be read as an attempt to love, however evil it may read on the surface. To start, I must examine the scene in question, read as a father's effort to offer *something*, anything, the only thing he can, to his daughter.

Cholly's experience in fatherhood has been one without any direction or guidance from his own experience. Introducing the scene, Morrison writes, "Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (Morrison 160). So, on that Saturday afternoon that Cholly drunkenly enters the kitchen and sees Pecola washing dishes, looking as beaten and demoralized as she and he both feel internally, Cholly's guilt—being that he couldn't protect his daughter from the wear of their world—must be rectified by immediate action. He forces the only action he understands that is related to love: sex. It is all he can offer her as a father because pain is all he's ever known as a person.

Cholly could not understand his own interpretation of Pecola's display of weariness. To begin to understand Cholly's emotional response to seeing Pecola, one must consider the entirety of his emotional procession:

The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—unburdened—why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that

would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit. (Morrison 161-162)

In seeing the weathered and beaten state of his daughter, Cholly cannot help but feel defeated as a father. A parent's role is to protect their child, to preserve the sweetness of their innocence against the forces working to harm and callous; but for the Breedloves, protection from hardship was never an option, regardless of age. Cholly feels this anguish, and instead of recognizing he is angry at the world for injuring Pecola's childhood, he displaces his anger onto Pecola for being beaten down and still loving him. Cholly does not feel like a father who deserves his daughter's affection. So, when he sees her "loving eyes," he feels gut-wrenching "guilt" as an effect of his own perceived but unpunished failure.

Cholly seems to wish Pecola would hate him. Hate is what he has been accustomed to his whole life. People despise him, and he has adopted the character of a despicable man. To be confronted with Pecola's unconditional love is too much to accept without reluctance—more accurately, vengeance. Thus, the stream of Cholly's metacognitive consciousness proceeds with a variety of unanswerable questions. These questions are unanswerable because they are impossible to satisfy given his resources. He wonders, "What could he do for her—ever?" This question speaks to Cholly's own depleted and helpless circumstance. He has nothing for her because he hardly has had anything himself; certainly, he has had nothing provided for him by any parental figure of his past. He has no concept as to what he could do for her that would allow him to deserve her love, and possibly even love her in return.

In line with his reaction to Darlene when the white man dissembled their shared sexual experience, Cholly projects hatred upon Pecola as his response to his failed fatherly instinct to protect. These two conditions—hatred and protectiveness—mirror the essence of this stated

intersection between violence and love. He cannot sort through his cognitive dissonance, and instead, lets it fester into an uncontrollable urge to act and *provide*. In the case of Pecola's rape, what Cholly provides is in no way something that could be appropriated as love in the socially acceptable sense. He is not giving her anything fatherly or pure. But he is responding to a deeply rooted desire to do *something* more than *nothing*, which in a sense, is almost more than he himself has available to feasibly offer. The rape can be read as entirely violent, as it would be rightly considered so if not in a literary context; however, given that this is a work of fiction after all, readers must allow for "the hatred" to be indistinguishably "mixed with tenderness" (Morrison 163).

Community Responses

Fictional Community

For the Black fictional community, there is no literary component in their emotional appraisal of the rape. The adults in the community, knowing full and well how grotesque such an action is, cast terrible judgement on both Cholly and Pecola Breedlove. Morrison exposes readers to the community's response through hushed rumors and hearsay, naturally mirroring the first clause of the novel: "Quiet as it's kept..." (Morrison 4). But as word spreads, the community's view seems to synchronize against Cholly and detest him to the most intense degree.

Claudia, still narrating the story from her limited, childhood perspective, recounts the "fragments of talk" that create "a secret, terrible, awful story" (Morrison 188). She hears the adults' conversations all reiterating the same general message: "'What you reckon make him do a thing like that?' 'Beats me. Just nasty'" (Morrison 189). In such a statement of closed-minded

blame, the fictional community casts judgement without leaving space for any of Cholly's history or context, which, given that this is "real life" to the fictional community, is a realistic form of judgement. For the fictional community, their perspective must read as though what happened is entirely *real*, and therefore not at all as flexible as it is in literary terms. Such a horrific act within a community need not be slowed down to understand the rapist's backstory. Why would *that* matter? The offender is "just nasty" and that is that: no further evaluation needed. That much is understandable, albeit parochial in nature.

The problem with the judgement found in the overheard adult conversations within the community unveils as the blame shifts from Cholly and onto Pecola: "'Well, they ought to take her out of school.' 'Ought to. She carry some of the blame'" (Morrison 189). Not only is the community consumed with Othering Cholly as the identifiable *monster* of the neighborhood, but Pecola becomes grouped into the rape's 'nastiness' as well.

The community, naturally, heartlessly, grouped the unborn baby into the same category of disgust that Cholly and Pecola share as reminders of the horrible memory. In stating that the baby is already swaddled in such hatred from the community, it becomes clear that the unloved histories of the current characters will only ever continue to materialize for future generations. There is no leaving behind such a profound hatred: the Breedlove's existence alone is damnation—a pointedly ironic reality for them given the two parts of their family name: *Breed-love*. Earlier, I mentioned how their name calls to the connection between love and sex. Cholly's transgression reveals the terrible reality of their last name. Breedlove becomes an action, a command; they breed love. But, as we know as readers of the text, the type of love being bred is not the kind we want to reproduce. This type of *transgressive love* is born of a lifetime of pain and helplessness.

The community perpetuates a cycle of un-rectifiable hatred, so Cholly and Pecola's tragic story will only ever repeat with a new set of players. And herein lies the community's main fault in their response. It is understandable not to take the time to victimize and reinstate personhood for the rapist, but to cast Pecola and the unborn baby in a shared light of fault is to cogently define the irrefutable blindness of the fictional community and its consequential imprisonment in such insatiable ugliness.

The resounding consensus from the adults in the community is that of hatred and blame. *This must be someone's fault.* To view the rape as a product of the society at large is too dismissive for them; it gives Cholly innocence that the community would not feel right bestowing, or even recognizing as a possibility. It is easier to blame a person: it's Cholly who did it, Pecola who it was done unto. *These people are ugly, it's their fault.* This judgement allows the fictional community to gossip about *how*. But their rationale is not enough to get at *why*. If they were to lean into *why*, they would see that Cholly and Pecola have grown out of the same soil as many of the other community members. To understand this would be to accept their own community's ugliness. For them, it is easier to chalk the rape up to an individual's malice rather than their own history, their environment, their shared trauma.

The children in the story, specifically the MacTeer girls, have a more holistic approach to their attempts to grasp what happened. At first, Claudia and Frieda's response centers around their shared identification with Pecola. Because of the MacTeer girls' similarity in age to Pecola, their appraisal that *that just as well could have been me* allows for sympathy otherwise repressed by the adults. When Claudia and Frieda first piece together the story, they react as follows:

Our astonishment was short-lived, for it gave way to a curious kind of defensive shame; we were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. Our sorrow drove out all thoughts of the new bicycle. And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked,

outraged, or even excited by the story. But we 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. (Morrison 190)

The MacTeer girls wish for some sympathy for Pecola, at least at first. They see themselves in Pecola’s shoes better than the adults who have intentionally but subconsciously determined that *the Breedloves are different than the rest of us, worse*. But for the MacTeer girls, they are not disillusioned with such comforts of separation. They see Pecola as one of them because they too have been made to feel like outsiders, and the rejection is still fresh and in the front of their young, malleable minds.

Frieda and Claudia’s identification with Pecola allows for a clearer vision than the adults have, despite their youthful naivety about what exactly Cholly did to Pecola. The MacTeer girls, neither of whom could answer Pecola’s initial question about how to get someone to love her, see that Cholly loved Pecola through the violence. Claudia concludes the novel saying, “...Cholly loved her. I’m sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death” (Morrison 206). This admittance—the fact that maybe Cholly does love Pecola—is the first and only suggestion of the *transgressiveness* that Morrison allows to register in the minds of her characters. Such preposterous generosity must be communicated by a child—Claudia—because the adult psyche has become accustomed to fault-placing as the only course of action for such a disturbing violation of social boundaries. *He did it*. People like to point fingers; people like to know *who* and find it easier to accept when there is an answer. Morrison revealed this familiar, lazy habit through the adult response in the fictional community. But the MacTeer girls allow for proper complexity in leaving intact Cholly’s capacity to feel *love* for his daughter, his victim, a reflection of his own remembered, unloved childhood.

What's more, Frieda and Claudia wish to save the life of the communally hated baby that Cholly impregnated Pecola with. In their innocence, they do not see that baby as a mark of violence; they see it as representation, as something to "counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (Morrison 190). To wish that baby dead would be to wish their own demise. The baby is not simply a product of incestuous rape in their eyes; to them, the baby is just another innocent Black child that will grow up unloved as they have: What's the difference in the end?

Frieda and Claudia guide their action with non-rational knowledge to save the baby. They plant their bicycle money in the unforgiving, unyielding ground in hopes that it will grow, and their sacrifice will be accepted in exchange for the baby's life. This is a final effort of their hope and optimism for a future with love. But of course, their wished-for miracle does not materialize; the flowers do not grow. Remember, the ground they have to work with only grows weeds. Readers know that this will be the case right from the first page of the story. Morrison tells the audience from the beginning that such hope is fruitless. And when Claudia and Frieda realize they have no agency in making right with the world, when they understand that it was not them that buried the miracle seeds too deeply, but that "it was the fault of the earth, the land, of [the] town... [that this] soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (Morrison 206), they, too, outcast Pecola Breedlove as a scapegoat. They recognize that their efforts to make grow what never will is not their fault, but that "certain seeds it [the soil] will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear" (Morrison 206). This realization fixes their minds upon the devastating notion that "it's much, much, much too late" (Morrison 206) for healthy love in their own lives.

Morrison posits that the settled upon response—the scapegoating—becomes the general code of conduct of which the *whole* fictional community rests upon in the end. Pecola, at first,

was a mirror showing the community a reflection of its own violence and ‘nastiness.’ When they first looked at her, they saw themselves and blamed her for their own ugliness. They hated her for this vivid exposure to their desolate lives. But upon reconciling that *she is different* than the rest of “us,” Pecola instead becomes a vessel in which the fictional community—adult and child, alike—could store all their ugliness. Jane S. Bakerman shares this interpretation: “For the community, Pecola’s madness, couple with her family history, excites scorn rather than sympathy. She becomes a scapegoat not merely for frustrated children, but for all of society” (Bakerman 548). Claudia’s reflection on Pecola’s circumstances and the community’s response to her as an admission of scapegoating and the fragile and faulted comfort that it provides:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.

And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate; we were polite, not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. (Morrison 205).

It would be a stretch to say that the community, once they determined their “difference” from Pecola, embraced her existence. She was still fervently outcasted, but she became a touchstone for many who wished to freshen their appearance by comparing their ugliness to an embodiment of *what could be worse*. There must be a bottom half of every dichotomy, and that’s the danger of this binary distinction. Separating oneself from the Other divides us into categorical in vs out groups, which leads to discrimination and hierarchical organization. In his work, “Distinction,”

Pierre Bourdieu recognizes that “through the differentiated and differentiating conditions associated with the different conditions of existence, through the exclusions and inclusions, unions (marriages, affairs, alliances etc.) and divisions (incompatibilities, separations, struggles etc.) which govern the social structure and the structuring force it exerts...the social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds” (Bourdieu 355). In line with this thought, Pecola’s existence became subject to the community’s judgement, which thereby inscribed and had inscribed for quite some time at this point in the novel, a social order that left her abandoned at the bottom of the ladder. Bourdieu writes, “Social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world” (Bourdieu 355). The community rejects Pecola’s “membership” (Bourdieu 339) in their town so that they can see themselves as set apart from her circumstance.

By showing readers how *not* to respond—in the way the adults within *The Bluest Eye*’s fictional community victim blamed and uncritically accept Cholly’s disgrace—Morrison built up a model for the reading community to veer away from. Morrison does scaffold some effective discernment through the eyes of the MacTeer girls and (who else but the pedophilic former pastor) Soaphead Church. These characters lend a compassionate lens to Pecola and Cholly by accusing society instead of the perpetrator or victim themselves. Notwithstanding, Morrison leaves much of the contemplative work untapped and in the hands of the reading community to better examine for themselves.

Interpretive Community

Being Toni Morrison’s first published novel, *The Bluest Eye* did not have her now longstanding and established authorial reputation as support. The novel was released without Toni Morrison’s name carrying the same *ethos* it did by the time she published *Beloved* or

Paradise. She was a new author—or rather, a writer, as she referred to herself as (Morrison, “Why I Wrote *The Bluest Eye*” 0:0:55–0:2:00) —and her work covers unspeakable topics, features controversial characters, and references horrific memories of our American history. Because she was relatively unknown, the first print of *The Bluest Eye* consisted of only 2,000 hardcover copies (Morrison, “Toni Morrison and the Bluest Eye – 50 Years Later” para 2). The novel, however unverified at first, did officially instate a loyal readership and the deserved accolades Morrison continued to build upon further publications.

Additionally, *The Bluest Eye* generated “positive reviews from several mainstream publications, including two reviews published in *The New York Times*” (Rosler para 1). Critics noted the beauty of Morrison’s prose but challenged the way in which she structured her novel, saying, “the novel’s structure blunts the emotional impact of Pecola’s mental breakdown” (Frankel 302, qtd. in Rosler para 1). Morrison came to agree with Frankel’s review, realizing: “One problem was centering the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character [which] could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing...many of the readers remain touched but not moved” (Morrison’s “Foreword” to *The Bluest Eye*, qtd. in Rosler para 2).

But Morrison did not write *The Bluest Eye* for public approval, rather, she wanted to write the book she wanted to read herself (Morrison, “Why I Wrote *The Bluest Eye*” 0:0:45–0:2:20). *The Bluest Eye* took five years for her to write, and she wrote because her back was “up against the wall” (Morrison “Why I Wrote *The Bluest Eye*” 0:0:45–0:2:00). She was not writing for a white audience; she was writing about her hometown for other young, midwestern Black girls who had never been seated as the center focus of a novel. She did not at all sugarcoat the

horrors that the environment could breed, nor did she shy away from making Pecola's trauma the climax of her story.

Morrison addresses the controversy and the challenge that comes with the effort to understand a character like Cholly Breedlove, saying:

[H]e might love her in the worst of all possible ways because he can't do this and he can't do that. He can't do it normally, healthily and so on. So it might end up this way [in the rape]. I want, here, to talk about how painful it is and what the painful consequences are of distortion, of love that isn't fructified, is held in, not expressed. (Morrison, "The Seams Can't Show" 6)

Acknowledging the difficulty that her reading-base has with coming to terms with the inclusion of incest as well as a subtle defense of the rapist, Morrison redirects the focus back to the idea of love: love un-fructified, held in, a denied but remaining sense that turns into violence. This idea of an explosive release does not only exist in Morrison's work. Langston Hughes' famous poem, "Harlem," speaks to the same effect:

What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore-- / And then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or crust and sugar over — / like a syrupy sweet? / Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / *Or does it explode?* [emphasis added] (Hughes)

The dream that may lead to explosion does in *The Bluest Eye*. Cholly's desire to love moves through a period of helplessness and despair, and finally, turns into a violent explosion. The explosion, being one of such despicable and violent nature, generates much attention from those wishing to censor the difficult subjects sometimes represented in novels. Today, *The Bluest Eye* remains on the top ten list of most challenged books in libraries, schools, and universities. It is challenged because it "depicts child sexual abuse and was considered sexually explicit" ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists" para 9). The "explosions" that Morrison brings to light are

difficult to sit with as students of her work; but if *The Bluest Eye* is not taught in curriculum or available for students, that censorship creates a great loss for critical thinkers.

In Fall of 2020, I enrolled in a class focused on analyzing Morrison's work. In our class discussion on *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly's victimhood was not immediately accepted by myself or my classmates. As consumers of the novel, we initially felt the same disgust for Cholly's action as did the fictional community. But, as critical readers, and as our discussions deepened, to me it became clear that there was value in viewing Cholly as at least partially redeemable. Much of the class continued to read Cholly as the orchestrator of the violence—and they are not wrong. But I stand to see him as the product of a cyclical violence, as a representation of how unloved children go on to be unloving adults, never having the chance to know anything beyond the hatred that bites them; the same hatred that convinced the Breedloves that they are inherently ugly people; the hatred that *inscribed* itself in Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia as measured social distinction. This sort of hatred generates a cycle of *transgressive love*. People are built to seek human connection. But when that connection can't be healthy, it does not fade or disappear; it continues to fester, to rot, crust over, sag. Love will not rest. Instead, if it must, it rejects social boundaries altogether and becomes boundless.

Having the opportunity to analyze a novel like *The Bluest Eye* offers thought provoking and relevant material that deepens the way in which we engage with academic curriculum. *The Bluest Eye* offers the opportunity for students to consider character psychology, self-analysis, historical relativism, and intergenerational roots of trauma. As much as disturbance wishes to dilute analysis, readers of Morrison's work must wade through the discomfort and arrive at expansive thought.

The Church of Soaphead

In the most unexpected of cases, the most positive and distinct reaction from the fictional community came from Soaphead Church. He himself is not a part of the community per se. He is an outcast, debased of moral grounding, and seen as a quack by the rest of the Black community. But he is the only adult character that, after seeing Pecola's impregnated 11-year-old body, does not hate her. Instead, he curses God for letting this happen.

Soaphead Church, born Elihue Micah Whitcomb, tried his hand at a variety of trades, one of which being Priesthood, but eventually resolves to being a self-proclaimed "Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams" (Morrison 165). Along with his perverse fascination in little girls, he has developed "a hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay" (Morrison 169). So, when Pecola comes to him requesting her eyes to be made blue, all his interests are checked off: "A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (Morrison 174). She is a combination of everything he despises about the world, packaged in the body that appeals to his pedophilic nature: she is a young girl whose very existence is the product of society's disorder and decay. Soaphead is outraged by what he sees in her. He doesn't blame Pecola, he doesn't know of Cholly. He blames God instead, as a sign that it is above any one human's error. It is the design of human nature and the social pressures imprinted into the lives of the community that brought them to this point. Once he sends Pecola away, having her poison a dog as a sacrifice for the fulfilled request to change her eyes into the bluest, he addresses a letter: "TO HE WHO GREATLY ENNOBLED HUMAN NATURE BY CREATING IT" (Morrison 176). Soaphead Church begs to know *how* this could happen, writing, "Tell me, Lord, how could you leave a lass so long so lone that she could find her way to me? How could you?" (Morrison 180). It is Soaphead Church, an outcast himself, and a

pedophile no less, who finally pins down the strangeness of Pecola's fate. He calls out the Black community of Lorain, Ohio for allowing such convulsion that leads to the impregnation of a little girl. Soaphead doesn't know it, but it is an incestuous impregnation at that. This dark side of our shapeable perception allows love and sex to become indistinguishable in nature. When there is no space for healthy love in the environment, it doesn't disappear, it shifts into a different, damaging form. In this case, love—being otherwise discarded once and for all—latches on to sex and invites in violence and trauma. This new phenomenon is not love or sex in the form that can be admired or glorified. This is humankind grueling in the remains of what could have been if circumstances were otherwise. Soaphead relents, "We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom" (Morrison 177).

Only Soaphead can see past the comfort found in accusing Cholly for being 'just nasty.' For Soaphead isn't interested in knowing *who* stole Pecola's innocence, rather, he is focused on what the little girl with a pregnant belly means is happening in the community. Soaphead hints to the reading community that the violence displayed by Cholly, enacted upon Pecola, is an indication of a much greater scale disturbance. Pecola becomes a symbol of Godlessness in their community; in this moment, Soaphead sees that some people have been truly, utterly abandoned. He sees, in this way, that possibly Pecola does not need to be ostracized for the outcome of unregulated sex on her young body. Maybe she shouldn't be faulted for such hardship.

The adult community in *The Bluest Eye*, however, refuses to let this be bigger than what they can see immediately in front of them. They see the act as the malice of a dirty Black man, and because of this blindness, they cannot see the true tragedy. But the MacTeer girls remain open to Cholly's violence as an effort to love despite the damage caused; and Soaphead Church sees the overlap between such seemingly contradictory expressions, as brutal and stark as it is.

Indisputably, we too, the community of readers, must put in the work to dissolve such a harsh binary set between love and violence in this case. And instead, recognize that in Morrison's literature, it is possible for Cholly to love Pecola and hurt her. His love and his violence are not mutually exclusive, for Cholly *did* love Pecola, but he did not have anything in the world to give her except for pain.

I would be remiss not to mention the possible meaning behind such a name as Soaphead Church. Considering the vile and detestable nature of Soaphead Church's character, it is hard not to see the irony in his name. Beyond the juxtaposition between his name and his character, the words "Soaphead" and "Church" call back to the attempted and failed construction of a disembodied love. Throughout the whole story, love and sex have been inseparable. Therefore, there is no such thing as love without the presence of a sexual body as well. Hand in hand, the two concepts merge as one in Pecola's reality. However, Soaphead's sympathy towards Pecola—without any physical advancement for himself—begins to temporarily deconstruct the pairing. Up until his point, readers are confronted by the juxtaposition of his name and actions: his name implies cleanliness and purity, but he is a pedophile. When he meets Pecola, though, his horror at her situation—at her young pregnant body—snaps him out of his habits and grounds him. He no longer tries to "play God," as he has taken on a job as the town's future-teller; his pedophilia seems to pause, and instead, for a moment he sees how broken his community is. He sees that Black children like Pecola are dirtied by their community, and he hates God for allowing this to be. He seems to pity Pecola, and tries to offer her an escape, instead Soaphead "exploits her tendency to divorce physical reality from her identity" (Alexander 5). Allen Alexander argues that Soaphead's intervention does more harm than good for Pecola. The escape Soaphead offer's Pecola is a deception: he promises her that he changes her eyes to blue, as she has long wished

for. He seems to do this as an act of mercy, as a way out of her body and the reality that she faces, but the blue eyes symbolically remove Pecola from her Blackness, from herself and her reality, and not only steals away her body, but now confuses her mind. He deceptively offers her the safety and purity only available for the white children. She believes him, but the only change exists in her mind and her self-perception, leaving her spinning in a non-existence that mimics trauma responses like disembodiment and derealization.

Soaphead's clarity comes too late to make a difference. His mind snaps out of his sinful and boundary breaking objectives, and he sees Pecola as a victim. But he sees her as a victim of Blackness, of godlessness in the community, and his solution is to change her body—to give her the eyes of white children. This decision can be read as a certain hopelessness within the Black community. It is as if Soaphead surrenders his and Pecola's sanity because the surrounding community is damned to Blackness. He doesn't hate Cholly—in fact, he doesn't even know of Cholly—but he hates the nature of the world that Pecola exists within, and he questions the possibility of change because he finally sees the dire effects of leaving love and sex as interchangeable.

The How and Why of Pecola's Eyes

The Bluest Eye is a story bereft of love, at least the form of love that could ever be considered a healthy display. In Lorain, Ohio, circumstance and social disparity perpetually deny young Black children the ability to conceptualize basic principles of what it means to be accepted, embraced, and ultimately understood by the surrounding community and in familial relationships. Young Black girls, especially, learn early and continuously that the “earth itself might [be] unyielding” (Morrison 5) for their growth. Morrison addresses the lost potential for

young Black children to learn love from role models, leading them to consequently fail as role models for the next generation. For the “weeds” (Morrison 50) of society—the unloved and unlovable characters who live always on “the hem of life” (Morrison 17) —healthy love is a mystery, never an experience. Such a vicious pattern lends to failed, violent attempts to express affection and compassion that can only be forgiven if seen as alternative, transgressive acts of love.

The parent-child relationships centered in *The Bluest Eye* serve as a battleground for love and violence’s intersection. Devastating harm, packaged as the last breath of love’s efforts, capitalizes on the intergenerational trauma that distills affection into something transgressive, something heinous, something incomprehensible. Morrison begins her novel recognizing the difficulty in understanding *why* a father raped his daughter and offers instead the opportunity to become privy to *how* such a crime was committed: “There is really nothing more to say—except *why*. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*” (Morrison 5). Examining both *why* and *how* throughout Morrison’s work is the necessary contemplative step readers must take to grasp the gravity of *The Bluest Eye*.

It is easy to hate and blame Cholly. To see him as a rotten reflection of the most sinister human behavior, not at all deserving of contextual consideration. Maybe it is even easy to wish to cast Pecola and the unborn baby aside as the discardable remanence of a disturbance that we would rather not remember or reconcile. Or maybe what’s easy is to curse God. To curse the air until breathless as a conviction against the human species as being horrible and tainted and seemingly forgotten. Any sort of blame cast upon a person or figure starts to make the horror go away. To find someone at fault is to see the action as a misfire of human judgement and behavior. And perhaps these natural human responses to cast blame and fault are all that can be

asked for if this story were *real*. But if these simple, underdeveloped reactions are that of literary students of the novel's message, that is not good enough. To charge Cholly with agency and fault is to lazily graze over the thematic complications that make Morrison's work so engaging. For readers, it is necessary to consider Cholly a victim himself; there is no alternative, we must. In considering the room afforded for readers in knowing the rape is a fiction, we must dig deeper into *why* instead of leaving such matters at the surface of *how*.

Readers learn *what* happened: Cholly raped Pecola. We read Morrison's novel to learn *how* this happened. And by focusing on Cholly's context, as well as the unyielding environment of Lorain, Ohio taken into consideration, there's at least an idea of *why*. It is not because Cholly is evil, though he is a damaged man. It is not because Pecola is ugly and deserving of nasty forms of love. Rather, the *transgressive love* in *The Bluest Eye* is all that was possible given the circumstances of the Breedloves' lives. There is nothing left but pain and destruction; this was their fate from the beginning. Morrison told us the end before we even began because before the Breedloves could do anything to deserve such ugliness, they already were deemed as so. There is no escaping such preconceptions, such determinism, such a horrific attempt of love gone wrong. Incomprehensible as Cholly's transgression reads, there is reason for his disturbance; and that, just as his and his family's determined ugliness, is not of his own volition.

II. *Beloved*

“Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (Morrison 194).

Interpretive Community Response

In the foreword of the 2004 printed edition of *Beloved*, Morrison writes that she wishes the reader to be “kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (Morrison xviii). And with this intention, Morrison offers her readers *Beloved*: the story of an escaped slave mother who loves her children so much, she’d rather them face death than be recaptured and forced into the life she managed to remove them from. No reader could ever be ready to conceive such a choice made by a mother and inflicted upon her infant. Yet, scholars agree, “how else could such a story be told?” (Webb 99).

Morrison engrosses readers in a world that is hard to fathom, where beauty, friendship, and community exist alongside death, violence, and abandonment. Our breaths are kept short, sputtering at the inconceivable violence inflicted by Sethe, not only because of what she did, but because Morrison somehow shifts such action to be—in so far as it is possible—understandable. The idea that a mother could wish death for her children before she could subject them to a life of slavery speaks to the unspeakable atrocities that exist in our American history.

By design, Sethe’s story stays with us beyond our time spent with the novel. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison states:

“...the whole point is to have those characters, and any that I do, if they’re successful, move off the page and inhabit the imagination of whoever has opened herself or himself to them. I don’t want to write books that you can close (laughing) and walk on off and read another one right away—like a television show, you know, where you just flick the

channel. It is very important to be as discreet as possible, that the writing be as understated and as quiet as possible, and as clean as possible and as lean as possible in order to make a complex and rich response come from the reader. They always say that my writing is rich. It's not—what's rich, if there is any richness, is what the reader gets and brings him or herself. That's part of the way in which the tale is told. The folk tales are told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It's not over just because it stops. It lingers and it's passed on. It's passed on and somebody else can alter it later. You can even end it if you want. It has a moment beyond which it doesn't go, but the ending is never like in a Western folktale where they all drop dead or live happily ever after." (Morrison, interviewed by Marsha Darling 6)

Morrison relinquishes the responsibility of her message over to her readers, as it is ultimately them who "pass on" (Morrison 323) the story. The story lives on in the minds of those who have encountered it; and whether *Beloved* was a story we planned to come by, as Morrison tells us, we cannot pass by *Beloved* unaffected.

Barbara J. Webb reflects on her experience in teaching *Beloved* to a classroom full of students with diverse backgrounds. Webb recounts, "Some readers see themselves as outsiders; others lay claim to the text as part of their own personal history; many feel defensive about what they perceive as suggestions of racial complicity" (Webb 200). For Webb personally, being a native-born African American who grew up in the Jim Crow South, *Beloved* took shape as a remembrance of "the people and places we knew and had been told about" (Webb 200). Webb addresses that sharing the story with the variety of students can be and often is uncomfortable because of the different backgrounds found within the classroom. Each person comes to the page from a separate standpoint, which can make the process of sharing and contemplating the story a tedious and careful one. The discomfort, however, is no reason to shy away from the task at hand.

Morrison seems to anticipate this probable reluctance and resistance to continue reproducing such an uncensored story. In the final few pages, the phrase, "This is not a story to pass on"

(Morrison 324), directly addresses the reader's potential qualms. The phrase can be taken in a variety of different ways. First, and most directly relevant, it can be read that *Beloved* is not a story that can be looked past, passed on. To *pass* on sharing *Beloved* is to hide from a history that must be spoken of to be reconciled and recognized as wrongful. One cannot *pass* on *Beloved*, just as the Black characters within the story could not *pass* as white and avoid these racially driven tragedies. Alternatively, and undoubtably ridden with Morrison's witty sense of irony, the phrase "pass on" could also be read: this story is *not* one that should be shared by way of experience, *passed* on as a legacy burden. To "pass on" trauma as a generational legacy may seem to contradict the first sentiment. The first interpretation suggests that the story must be shared, the second requires that the story is not shared. "Shared," in these statements, holds a different meaning. Morrison first asks readers to share the story—do not pass it by unread; then Morrison stresses that the history should not be a shared burden for future generations. To prevent the reproduction of the circumstances that make up the story of *Beloved*, one cannot ignore the fact that this story holds truth in a historical sense. Reproduction or inheritance of these circumstances—to have the story *passed on* to a future generation—must be abated by the telling of the past—a *passing on* of the horrendous memory.

For a time, some members of the reading community did wish to *pass* (as in disregard) on Morrison's message. School boards across the nation wished to have Morrison's books, especially *Beloved*, banned from scholastic realms. In 2007, parents in Kentucky spoke out against the curriculum and requested to have *Beloved* removed from the AP Literature reading list (Buksbazen para 3). Their qualms were received by the board, and the following year, *Beloved* was replaced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Is permitting a story featuring adultery any more age appropriate and scholastically acceptable than a story about

race? If their objections were, in fact, based on the early exposure of harsh subjects for children, the replacement novel failed in offering the schoolboard's call for innocence. Additionally, in 2012, parents once again challenged *Beloved*'s place on the reading curriculum, this time in the Missouri Plymouth Canton School District (Buksbazen para 4). In Missouri, the request for censorship were rejected. In 2016, a member of the Virginia State Senate called *Beloved* "moral sewage" and sought to have it removed from the AP English curriculum. Subsequently, a bill was passed to allow parents to opt-out their children from certain reading selections (Buksbazen para 5).

It has been common practice to keep the ugliness of history hidden from the surface of our public proceedings and academic fields. Morrison's work disturbs that quietness and offers a message that can speak in memory of, as the novel's dedication notes, the "Sixty Million and more" who have long been read over. The dedication, importantly, refers to the many slaves displaced from their African homelands and brought to the states along the Atlantic Slave Trade. Morrison notes her concerns regarding the lack of reverence and recognition our nation offers to those affected by historical displacement:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves: nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper. There's no 300 foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book [*Beloved*] had to. (Morrison qtd. in Webb 202; originally found in Denard 44-45)

Morrison took the responsibility of commemorating and honoring her ancestors into her own hands. It could be theorized that those who wish to censor *Beloved* out of school curriculum are simply experiencing the exact reaction that Morrison seems to have intentionally instilled within

her craft: the horror of remembering. Morrison's work confronts readers with something that is largely invisible in our world today. We do not pass by statues or frequently encounter other symbolic remembrances of slavery. To make it taboo, these parents and officials may think, is to make it disappear. But that is far from the case. To leave the history of slavery untold is to erase the lives of the "sixty million and more" (Morrison xi) who deserve a place in our collective memory. To remove *Beloved* from any contemporary conversation about our current moment, or our historical memory, is to erase the truth of American history. Stories like *Beloved* must be recognized and taught in order to be reconciled. The grotesque truth of what *Beloved* holds is an integral, albeit difficult, part of what our country was founded upon; so, to heal, we cannot censor, we cannot erase, we cannot progress without what the novel offers: visibility.

Beloved exposes the horrendous grievances that crop up in conversations about our country's past. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement has become a hyper-visible platform for today's world to reconceptualize and understand race. As a nation, we've become more educated on *what* racism today looks like, and we revisit the sorrows of yesterday's world as well. Books like *Beloved* open up that conversation because the past is not past. The conversations about race are full of conflict in our current political climate, but nevertheless, stories like *Beloved* deserve to be passed on from mind to mind, invading our consciousness and our perceptions of history.

Motherlove: Margaret Garner's Story

The story that haunts is of a slave-girl who "talked about safety with a handsaw" (Morrison 193). One in which "a pretty little slavegirl [...] recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children" (Morrison 186). The story that abducts Morrison's readers is one

of hardship, pain, and exceptionally *transgressive love*. Exceptional because it is transgressive, which calls to its unconditionality and boundlessness. And though what Morrison gives us is fiction, her inspiration—the story of Margaret Garner, found by Morrison in an 1856 New York *Times* article—is far from imaginary.

Though Margaret Garner’s story is widely recognized as the inspiration for *Beloved*, the story originally found its way into Morrison’s hands while she was working on *The Black Book*—a historical compilation of facsimiles, obituaries, advertisements, photographs, and other documents featuring African Americans. Morrison created *The Black Book* as an artifact to commemorate Black history in the United States and to combat the historical censorship. While sorting through her compilation, Garner’s story struck a chord with Morrison because of the heartbreaking reality it reveals: a mother decided that death was the only escape from re-enslavement for her children (Carroll para 1-18).

Her story is one that haunts. Margaret Garner fled her enslavement from a plantation in Boone County, Kentucky. She escaped with her husband, his parents, and her four children. They all crossed the Ohio River and found refuge in the house of her husband’s cousin. Garner’s safe haven was interrupted when slavecatchers surrounded the house in an attempt to recapture the escaped slaves. In that moment, Margaret Garner decided death was a positive alternative to being returned to slavery. She killed her two-year-old daughter and planned to take the rest of her children’s and her own life as well. Standing as one of the longest fugitive slave cases in history (Carroll para 13), Garner was, after two weeks, “indicted on charges of damage of property” (Carroll para 15). Her charge was not murder because her baby was seen as property before being seen as human. She and her family were returned to their former slave master.

Garner's story has inspired a variety of artistic and literary interpretations. Despite the tragedy's story-worthiness, it cannot be forgotten that this story was a lived experience, one that does not only exist on paper. This is not just a sensationalized story, this is the retelling of a horrific truth, of something that happened really, truly, horrifically, in desperation to protect. Morrison honors Garner's tragedy, telling readers of the love that motivated the violence, insisting: "Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (Morrison 132).

What to the Slave is Attainable?

What to the slave is an attainable life? Hardly a human existence. Human existence, though it observes a multitude of interpretations, requires there to be basic needs to be fulfilled and means beyond mere survival. Slaves were not recognized as human, and therefore, were not granted an existence as anything more than property. Life, to the slave, does not attain personhood or the ability to make and keep plans for the future.

A Place Devoid of Personhood

The characters' experiences as slaves lessen their existence to something subhuman. Life at Sweet Home—the plantation Sethe spent her time as a slave—feigned proficiency for the inhabitants' basic needs, but beneath the appearance of high treatment, it is still slavery. Mr. Garner, the owner of Sweet Home—which "wasn't sweet and sure wasn't home" (Morrison 16)—prides himself on having only "real men" work for him. He aims to treat his slaves as men, as people, but ultimately, these men, these people are still enslaved and eventually subjected to treatment worse than the farm animals. Some allowances are made to create the façade of personhood. For example, Garner permits Sethe and her lover, Halle, to "perform marriage,"

though the documentation and ceremony is not legally official. In this example, Garner provides his slaves with the illusion of agency. He creates a space where the slaves have a sense of choice, albeit limited, and can count on that allowance remaining consistent. But even these thinly veiled allowances are devoid of true power for the slaves. They can only exist within the framework of acceptable actions and behaviors that Garner sets out. When Garner dies, his brother-in-law called “Schoolteacher” takes over his reign; this is when all façade of satisfactory needs and shared human decency dissipates. Paul D shares his memory about when he was caught during an attempted escape and reflects on how the rooster looked at him: “Mister [the rooster], he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch couldn’t even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was...” (Morrison 86). When Schoolteacher takes over, his new dogma disallows even the slightest allowance of personhood. The slaves have no ability to retain agency, to have autonomy; the illusion of Sweet Home fails when the power transfers over to Schoolteacher.

The idea of slaves being categorized as equal or lesser than the farm animals they care for traces through Morrison’s work. Schoolteacher, with his primary interest set on eugenics studied his slaves as if they were animals. Hence his name, Schoolteacher had students analyze the measurements they found and compare the slaves’ characteristics: animal characteristics listed in the left column, human characteristics on the right (Morrison 228). When Sethe overhears the instructions for this eugenics exercise shared between Schoolteacher and his pupils, seeing the students write with the very ink she made for them, Sethe realizes she cannot bear to subject her children to such barbarism.

Life, to the slave, is not something that offers ontological security. Jennifer Mitzen defines ontological security as “the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time—as

being rather than constantly changing—in order to realize a sense of agency” (Mitzen 342, qtd. in Markham para 1). Slavery is devoid of such a phenomenon. Slaves were not only without a consistent sense of self-identity, but they had absolutely no control over their lives or the identity they occupied. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, grieves in her reflection: “men and women were moved around like checkers” (Morrison 27). And what’s worse, “...Nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (Morrison 28).

Once Baby Suggs is bought out of slavery, she realizes the lack of self-identity she had endured without knowing: “Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me?” (Morrison 165). Soon after she discovered there was a self she could grow into knowing, Baby Suggs learned there was a body that was *hers* just as well: ‘Those hands belong to me. There *my* hands.’ Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along?” (Morrison 166). Baby Suggs had no sense of identity and certainly no concept of realistic agency until she was out of slavery and breached the narrow perspective that it allowed for. Though at first Sweet Home seemed to allow for a certain level of personhood and agency, once freed, the memories of Sweet Home offer a clearer image of slave life for what it truly was.

The Danger of Planning

For slaves, plans are only ever dangerous. Without making decisions or plans for oneself, the very principle of agency and planning becomes muddled. Slaves learn to embody an identity as a pawn because they have never had the opportunity to make moves, decisions, or plans for

themselves. Years without agency or the opportunity to decide for oneself stirs angst but dissolves the prospect of choice.

At Sweet Home, each day's unyielding uncertainty prevents Sethe and the other slaves from feeling secure in their ability to make plans. While a slave at Sweet Home, Sethe's days were not her own. She spent her time doing as Mrs. Garner instructed, on a timeline not made of her own design. Eventually, Sethe does craft a plan, but not one that is without consequences: "The one set of plans she had made—getting away from Sweet Home—went awry so completely she never dared life by making more" (Morrison 46). Once escaped, given the consequence of her choice, Sethe lost the concept of planning, and the desire to make any more. And what is a life without plans? One that cannot move forward; one rooted in stagnancy. But planning requires a sense of trust that what is decided can be counted on. And without ontological security, let alone any consistency in having basic needs met, the hesitancy Sethe learns is warranted.

There was a time directly after the escape, a sweet twenty-eight days of bliss, that Sethe accepted the right to plan for herself. In this period of absolute choice, Sethe was not yet burdened with the consequence that made her lay down her plans forever. In these first twenty-eight days, she learned "how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day...she had claimed herself" (Morrison 111). But all too soon, Sethe buries her freedom to plan alongside the body of her baby girl, Beloved.

Schoolteacher followed Sethe to her haven, 124, and had his own plan: to take Sethe and her children back under his control, back into slavery. Sethe didn't have time to plan for another clean escape, "she just flew" (Morrison 192). She had no time to think. Burning with instinct, Sethe acted:

Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there

where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.
(Morrison 192)

It is no wonder the haunting that *Beloved* casts upon 124 is one of plans. Denver states that she thinks the baby ghost has “plans,” which is all too appropriate given that plans were out of the scope of possibility for those on the living side of the veil. What couldn’t be done while alive is finally possible in the beyond. Baby Beloved, living at Sweet Home for all but twenty-eight days of her life, never experienced the ability to make plans. But as a ghost, in her return, she can scheme her way back into Sethe’s life.

Beloved isn’t the only character who wants to rely on plans, Denver, too, asks: “Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and *count on something?*” (Morrison 46). But now, after the consequences of Sethe’s only plan, Sethe knows better than to count on something: “[H]er brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (Morrison 83).

The characters in *Beloved* do not live a life with any sense of agency while on Sweet Home’s domain. Characters hardly have the chance to learn their identity, let alone set down plans. While at first, Garner provided enough leniency and trust to feign respect, as soon as Schoolteacher came into the picture, the curtain fell away. Sethe desperately wanted to free her children from the limited life she knew would be theirs if they stayed slaves. To the slave, what is attainable is not identity, agency, a future of their choosing and direction. To the slave, life with any personhood or plans is not attainable. This lack of agency sets up the perfect framework for transgressive love. Without any sense of power, Sethe’s desperation to protect her children bubbles up until the desperation turns to violence.

Mother Milk and Tree Scars

For Sethe's children, the cost of freedom is life. In the picture Morrison paints of slavery, it may seem that there is no room for higher order needs like love. But it is nearly indisputable, after reading *Beloved*, that Sethe deeply loves her children. For Sethe, slavery heightened her need to be a protective force in her children's lives. On Sweet Home, Sethe was limited in what she could provide for her children, so she clings to the one thing she could always provide—her milk: "Milk was all I ever had" (Morrison 187). Milk stands as the central symbol of a mother's responsibility to her children. Not only is it the necessary basic need for a child (nutrients), but further, it grows into a symbol of Sethe's love: a love that is not safe from harm's way.

Sethe's milk also was taken from her at Sweet Home. Even that was not off limits for the brutal and power-hungry men at Sweet Home. Sethe shares her memory with Paul D on the night of his arrival at 124, eight-teen years after their escape. Sethe tells Paul D of her scars: "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house'" (Morrison 18). Paul D asks about the tree, and as it turns out, this scar is one that holds even heavier baggage than the whipping alone. Sethe explains:

'I had milk...I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her ahead with Howard and Buglar...

'Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress, Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl... [T]hose boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had a lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still' (Morrison 19).

When the nephews steal Sethe's milk, it can be presumed that they raped her as well. Even if they hadn't physically forced themselves on her, the stolen milk alone could be considered a

form of rape. The nephews violate Sethe as they take from her the one thing she has to offer her children, the one thing that operates as her sense of self as a mother. And when Sethe exposes the nephews, they punish her again with a whipping so brutal, she has a full tree, branches, blossoms, and all, etched into the now senseless skin on her back.

Morrison's choice to describe the scar as a tree connects to symbolism traced throughout the rest of the story. Before Sethe exposes her tree scar to Paul D, the image of trees first appeared in a reflection Sethe had about lynching. Sethe finds herself remembering images of trees from her time at Sweet Home, and she hates that she remembers the trees, rather than the boys hanging from them: "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys" (Morrison 7). In effect, trees, memory, and trauma become intertwined as one. Additionally, trees seem to point to the idea of family—a family tree—which is something that slaves would have had very limited access to. It was impossible to tell "who, in fact, belonged to who" (Morrison 258). Branches of every family tree were severed and lost forever in a twisted history of abrupt and irreversible displacements. So, to have a tree as a memory of the time two white men stole her motherhood from her only seems fitting.

Given such a poignant and loaded image, I must also mention that trees do show up in Morrison's work as positive symbols. At Sweet Home, Paul D connects with a tree on the property that he calls Brother. When he has time to himself, which isn't often, he and the other slaves would go to Brother and spend time under its shade as a community. Eventually, Brother points Paul D to freedom, giving him the idea to follow the trees in bloom north. In this case, trees are cast as both shelter and a map. The idea of community comes up again in relation to trees while Baby Suggs preaches in the Clearing. The Clearing is a space surrounded by trees in

which the community can come to and safely let out their pent-up emotions. Denver, too, finds refuge with trees in what she refers to as her Emerald Room. This is the space Denver goes to when she is lonely and needs to find comfort before Beloved fills her void. Trees, in these instances, become symbols of safety, community, and comfort. The duality of the tree imagery complicates the story. Morrison distills the binary of good/bad images and insists that most things are both.

Milk, too, becomes wrapped up in multifaceted layering. Milk symbolizes Sethe's identity as a mother, but Sethe's experience with the nephews points to her powerlessness as well. Milk occupies a large space in Sethe's memory of her family's escape from slavery. During her escape, Sethe remains set on reuniting with her children and offering them the milk only she could provide:

‘Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew but me and nobody had her milk but me.’ (Morrison 19)

Sethe's identity as a mother and a slave operates as an intersectional position that makes pain unavoidable. She has children and is entirely out of control as to what happens to herself or to them. The entanglement can be surmised by the statement, “‘The milk would be there and I would be there with it’” (Morrison 19). She fully embodies her role as a mother and only ever thinks in terms of how she can provide for her children, for the pieces of herself that she sent ahead on the wagon. Her escape plan, therefore, is more than an individual pursuit. Rather, it is a confluence of Sethe's intersectional identity as both a mother and a slave. In this way, Morrison “reworks the traditional slave narrative from a female perspective...Sethe's voyage toward

freedom is complicated by the love for her children which precludes individual escape” (Mathieson 5).

Even when Sethe no longer carries milk for her babies, the idea of milk remains tied to her ability to provide as a mother. When Sethe reflects on Beloved’s death, she describes Beloved’s passings as “soft as cream” (Morrison 11). Cream, again, points to the milk motif that traces its way through Morrison’s depiction of motherlove. Beloved’s death, performed by Sethe, is intimately tied to Sethe’s desire to provide and protect: to give milk, to make death soft, soft as cream.

Sethe’s Thick, Transgressive Love

Morrison uses the pages of her book to explore the question: What force is strong enough to drive a mother to kill her own child? Maybe the first thought is slavery, for yes, it is slavery that makes Sethe fear for the life her children would face if recaptured. But ultimately, I argue that the force that drives such action is love. When Sethe escapes, she immediately opens to the idea of boundless, thick love: “Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off the wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to” (Morrison 190-191). This type of love, the kind that is layered on without restraint, is what Paul D cautions Sethe against. He says, ““Your love is too thick”” (Morrison 193).

Paul D’s idea of love requires self-preservation to be counted into the emotion. He “protected [himself] and loved small” (Morrison 191). Paul D has always loved in this way. Instead of risking the pain that inevitably comes with big, thick love as a slave, he instead:

Picked the tiniest star out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept. Stole shy glances at her

between the trees at chain-up. Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn't do. A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. (Morrison 191)

The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one. (Morrison 54)

Despite his reluctance to do so himself, he understands the appeal of big, thick love: “He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom” (Morrison 191). Because he does not feel free, he cannot love, and to help repress such emotional attachment, Paul D packs his once beating heart away in a rusted tobacco tin. Love, pain, hope, sorrow: he tucks it all away, “one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in the world could pry it open” (Morrison 133). Paul D feels the safest when he is in control of his emotions, but Sethe rejects Paul D's adherence to caution, insisting, “Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all” (Morrison 194).

When Paul D discovers that Sethe killed her child, she feels no need to give him an explanation. Paul D judges Sethe for her boundlessness and condemns her for choosing death over life. Sethe rejects his view, countering: “It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job [...] to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (Morrison 194). Paul D cannot see Sethe's perspective, and he meets her with shame instead of compassion: “‘You got two feet, Sethe, not four’” (Morrison 194). Paul D suggests that what Sethe did was less than human; that her love transgressed beyond all conceivable reason and transformed her into what Schoolteacher once suggested himself: that she is an animal. Paul D's lack of understanding, divides them as if “a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet” (Morrison 194). At this point in the story,

Sethe and Paul D's relationship has completely disintegrated. They are no longer in the present moment or planning for the future; they are entirely occupied by what lies in Sethe's past.

Paul D does not understand the offense of his comment about Sethe's feet, nor does he understand the boundlessness of her motherlove. It is only later, when Sethe metacognitively explains herself to Beloved—the only person she feels she owes explanation to—that we hear of her internal thoughts about the transgressive act. Sethe feels that the choice “was right because it came from true love” (Morrison 251). To Paul D, this explanation would never make sense because his perception about love is so tightly bound up and confined within the symbol of his tobacco tin heart. And with that, Paul D leaves Sethe and the other occupants of 124 to bear their love alone.

Paul D: Balance and Boundaries

When Paul D first arrives at 124, he provides balanced companionship for Sethe. They relive some of their remembered history at Sweet Home, and they expose their scars to each other; they begin to make plans. Paul D decides he will stay around: “‘You saying it’s all right to scramble here?’” (Morrison 51). Sethe agrees and accepts his presence. Soon after his arrival, they go to the fair with Denver and begin setting plans for a future together as a family. On their way back to 124, they come across “[a] fully dressed woman [who] walked out of the water” (Morrison 60). This is Beloved. And immediately, Sethe's attention pivots from her new life with Paul D to this new mysterious figure. There was hardly any time to build a healthy love between Paul D and Sethe before Beloved came into the picture. And once Beloved enters Sethe's life, Paul D's presence is effectively phased out.

Readers can track a negative correlation between the relationship growth with Sethe and Paul D as opposed to Sethe and Beloved. When Paul D first arrives, his first act is to remove the baby ghost from Sethe's home. He demands that the ghost leave:

‘Leave this place alone! Get the hell out!’ A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. ‘She got enough without you. She got enough!’ (Morrison 22).

This scene sets Paul D and the baby ghost at opposition from the start. They are foil characters in competition for Sethe's affection. Sethe cannot have Beloved if she wants Paul D; and similarly, she can't have Paul D if she wants Beloved. As Sethe and Beloved grow in their bond, Paul D is slowly removed from 124. He is moved from staying in Sethe's bedroom with her, to the downstairs chair, and eventually, out of 124 completely, and into the shed:

She moved him. Not the way he had beat off the baby's ghost—all bang and shriek with windows smashed and jelly jars rolled in a heap. But she moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of 124. (Morrison 134)

Paul D and Beloved cannot share space in Sethe's life. Though Paul D has enough power to remove Beloved from 124 while she is in the place beyond life, her physical form has mysterious, suggestive power that Paul D cannot compare against. Paul D complicitly leaves, and without Paul D involved in the lives of the women in 124, all boundaries dismantle.

The boundlessness comes into full effect once Paul D separates from the house. Paul D leaves, and “nobody saw them [the women of 124] falling” (Morrison 205). Morrison symbolizes their fall from balance with an ice-skating scene with only three skates. The three women—Sethe, Denver, and Beloved—take turns skating around on the misfit pair and lone skate: “‘We’ll take turns. Two skates on one; one skate on one; and shoe slide for the other’”

(Morrison 205). Sethe, Beloved, and Denver do not each have a pair for themselves; they do not have their individuality intact, but they are perfectly content to share. They are not bothered by the overlap; but this scene represents the beginning of their demise. They do not hold the same boundaries of self that Sethe had when Paul D was in the picture. Their identities intersect, and “124 was left to its own devices” (Morrison 235).

Without the masculine presence of Paul D as the enforcer of boundaries, Sethe and Beloved become boundless in their affection for each other. Beloved expelled the masculine presence that upheld the separation between Sethe and herself, and now there is no stopping her domination over Sethe’s life. Interestingly, Paul D is not the first man to leave 124. Sethe’s children, Howard and Buglar, both quickly skipped out on 124 after Sethe murdered Beloved and tried to take their lives too. The two boys are only ever mentioned in the story as an absence. They do not appear as characters, but rather hold a space of what used to be. They left, and the household became one of only women: Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and—in the background—Beloved. Though the impact of the brothers’ exit is not extensively explored in the text, it can be assumed that their leaving created an even larger hole in Sethe’s heart that Beloved gladly fills with her arrival. When Paul D leaves and takes his masculine boundedness with him, the evidence of his absence shows up in the unrestrained regime of Beloved’s power.

The power that Beloved and Paul D hold are of different sorts. Beloved’s holds destructive power slowly dissolve Sethe’s personhood; Paul D uses his power to set and enforce boundaries, both for himself and for those he is around. In fact, Paul D and his tobacco tin-can heart represents the opposite of transgressive love: excessive boundedness. His boundaries are balanced by Sethe’s powerful view of love. When Paul D leaves, Beloved’s power does not have the same opposition that his presence provided, and neither does Sethe’s boundlessness. Beloved

and Sethe, left alone without any sense of boundaries, leads to a lost separation of selves and identity confluence.

Another Transgression: Identity Confluence

Sethe's violence, though prominent, is not the only representation of transgressive love present in *Beloved*. The way that Beloved latches onto Sethe, and Sethe permits and enables this insecure attachment, furthers the way in which love spirals out of control and transgresses socially reconcilable boundaries.

Boundaries in *Beloved* are "a curious thing" (Miller 24). Without them, it seems as though all manner of separation between self and Other become obsolete. So too, does the thin line between love and violence. Miller explains,

It is a line, infinitesimally narrow, but never so narrow that it does not have a this side and a that side. When you are on this side, you are within a safe and pure enclosure, enveloped by the boundary line. Everything on the other side is the other side, over there, beyond the pale, in another territory, foreign, strange, uncanny, radically other. When you cross that infinitesimally narrow line, suddenly the valences reverse. You are now within another domain. The land you have just left is now other, strange, distant, even if it is your own homeland. (Miller 24)

Not only does Beloved cross the boundary of the living and the dead, but she continues to transgress in the way she loves and expresses her love for Sethe. Sethe is the only person on Beloved's radar. She loves her so wholly that she begins to confuse herself with Sethe: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (Morrison 248). Just as death crosses back into life, love crosses into a confluence of identity. Morrison writes four metacognitive style chapters in which readers gain access to the inner workings of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved's respective internal monologues. The fourth chapter, then, is where the confluence truly unfolds. The three previously distinct voices merge and meld into a conglomerate of words that are nearly

impossible to assign ownership to. Each chapter begins with a proclamation of ownership: “Beloved, she is my daughter. She mine” (Morrison 236); “Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk” (Morrison 242); “I am Beloved and she is mine” (Morrison 248); and again “I am Beloved and she is mine” (Morrison 253). In the fourth and final metacognitive chapter, when all the voices blend, it reads with a clear sense of possessiveness, but that possessiveness has crossed over into a new level of inseparability: “Beloved / You are my sister / You are my daughter / You are my face; you are me / I have found you again; you have come back to me / You are my Beloved / You are mine” (Morrison 255).

At its core, the love shared by Sethe for Beloved is not all that distant from the typical parental-child relationship. It is one of mutuality and genuinity, but their love embodies a glaring difference from healthy love: their love is “deformed by extreme circumstances—slavery and death—and involving supernatural components of existence” (Mathieson 3). The extremity of both Sethe and Beloved’s past creates a monstrous love that leads to an all-consuming and carnivorous expression of passion. The mother and daughter lose track of their distinct identities. Phrases like “Will we smile at me?” (Morrison 244) and “she is my face smiling at me” (Morrison 252) suggest that Beloved and Sethe have lost the boundary that maintains their individual existences. Beloved, especially, transgresses the boundary past healthy love into obsession. Their boundless love loses all restrictions and becomes an all-consuming purpose of their existence (singular: one existence as they become less and less distinct). Sethe cannot see past Beloved. She places all her energy into fostering her relationship with Beloved, who gladly laps up Sethe’s devotion:

Sawyer [her boss] told her not to come back. And instead of looking for another job, Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything lullabies,

new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk, If the hen had only two eggs, she got both, It was as though her mother had lost her mind, like Grandma Baby calling for pink and not doing the things she used to, But different because, unlike Baby Suggs, she cut Denver out completely. Even the song that she used to sing to Denver she sang for Beloved alone: 'High Johnny, wide Johnny, don't you leave my side, Johnny.' (Morrison 282)

There is no balance. They become "locked in a love that wore everybody out" (Morrison 286).

What at first seems to be an understandably anxious attachment style turns into a parasitic relationship. Morrison writes, "She [Sethe] sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (Morrison 295).

Before Sethe realized that Beloved is her reincarnated daughter, she set firm boundaries. For example, during one of Sethe's visitations to the Clearing, Beloved and Denver join her. Beloved kisses Sethe's chin gently:

They stayed that way for a while because neither Denver nor Sethe knew how not to: how to stop and not love the look or feel of the lips that kept on kissing. Then Sethe, grabbing Beloved's hair and blinking rapidly, separated herself. She later believed that it was because the girl's breath was exactly like new milk that she said to her, stern and frowning, 'You too old for that.' (Morrison 114)

In this scene, Sethe detaches herself from Beloved's grasp. When Beloved tries to "feed" from her—alluded to by the milk smell on her breath after the kiss—Sethe halts the interaction. But once Sethe connects the identity of her mysterious guest to the embodied reincarnate of her dead daughter, all boundaries dismantle, and Sethe gives her whole life over to satisfy any whim Beloved could ask for.

Sethe gives everything she is and can offer to Beloved out of guilt for taking her life. While Sethe doesn't feel the need to explain her decision to kill Beloved to anyone else, she embarks on a ceaseless pursuit to justify herself to Beloved and Beloved alone:

Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears. (Morrison 284)

Sethe promises that all along, her plan "was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever" (Morrison 284). She begs Beloved to validate her motherlove efforts: "You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here I had milk enough for all?" (Morrison 233). And promises:

'When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Buglar and Howard and Denver didn't need me, because my mind was homeless then. I couldn't lay down with you then. No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back then. Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine.' (Morrison 241)

Sethe pleads with Beloved to understand her position, but Beloved is never satisfied with whatever Sethe offers; whether it is words, affection, time spent together, memories made, Beloved remains unquenched in her desire for her mother.

At first, Denver reasons with Beloved's anxious attachment style. She understands that Beloved "was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural, considering" (Morrison 247). For most of the women's time alone in 124, no one sets limitations as to what is acceptable for Beloved to require. She can have anything she wants, and more if she pleases. The trauma of Sethe and Beloved's history disturbs their relationship; there is no way around it, despite the efforts to beat back the past. Their love is one of boundlessness. It has always been one of boundlessness. It was boundless when Sethe killed Beloved; it was boundless still when Beloved came back.

Fractals of Rememory

By exploring the impact of rememories and intergenerational trauma, Morrison develops *embodied* trauma as a central theme experienced by her characters. As Sethe and Beloved's fixation upon one another grows, Sethe physically begins to disappear. Beloved's body, on the other hand, grows and expands until her belly rounds out like a pregnant lady's. It is as if remembering the past holds the power to "*re-member*" Beloved's ghostly form into a physical being. As the days pass, the mother and daughter only continue to deteriorate because of their entanglement with rememories of slavery, death, and trauma.

Morrison pays great attention to the idea of "rememories" in *Beloved*. Morrison coins the term, suggesting that memories of trauma come and go in fragments for survivors. Sethe, especially, faces the effects of rememories as she struggles to free herself from the remaining toils that slavery still holds over her. Freud would call it repression; psychologists today may treat Sethe for PTSD. Regardless of the psychological diagnosis, Sethe continues to carry the burden of unaddressed trauma from her past, trauma that she is reluctant to revisit. Morrison tells readers: "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (Morrison 51). The word "rememory" calls back to that idea of repression. Not only is the same "re" prefix used, but additionally, Sethe beats back the past as best as she can to prevent it from resurfacing. When it does reveal itself again, the memories of Sweet Home and what followed her escape threatens to spiral Sethe into an uncontrollable swell of remembrance.

Morrison seamlessly intertwines the physical body and idea of rememory within her work. Memories of Sweet Home show up as scars on Sethe's back. Beloved has a scar on her neck of the fatal gash from Sethe's transgressive act of love. Denver, too, who only knows slavery and death through second-hand accounts, cannot escape the weight of this

intergenerational trauma; she turns to food as a coping mechanism and physically carries more weight consequently. Paul D symbolically locks up his heart in a tobacco tin-can to protect himself from remembering and from developing too thick of a love for anything. As slaves, these characters did not own their bodies. They were property in the eyes of the law. Yet, their bodies absorbed their experiences and now store their pasts.

Place, or the memory of place, can be another physical embodiment of trauma. The primary place that haunts Sethe is Sweet Home—an ironic and patently false name for such a place. Those who experience Sweet Home can never fully escape its rememory. Sethe is always reluctant to share memories of Sweet Home with her daughter, Denver, who never stepped foot on the property. Since Denver never had to face slavery at Sweet Home, Sethe wants to keep the very idea of that place far out of her reach. Sethe explains, “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay...Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (Morrison 43). Sethe explains that these “thought picture[s]” (Morrison 42) can bump into a person at any point, no matter how distant it is by way of time. Denver, then, suggests that rememory must mean that ““nothing ever dies”” (Morrison 44), to which Sethe confirms, ““Nothing ever does”” (Morrison 44).

This promise—that nothing ever dies—speaks to the theme of haunting that traces throughout the pages of *Beloved*. Morrison creates a fictional work about a literal haunting, but the experience of haunting is hardly imaginary. *Beloved*’s haunting of 124 represents the way slavery continues to haunt our nation as well as the progeny of those who were enslaved. Graves Minor writes, “The power of place and what happened there is real and omnipresent, just as memory cannot be repressed, no matter how hard Sethe tries. In the novel, the ghost is the

physical manifestation, the constant reminder of that past” (Minor 1250). The past is never gone, it’s never buried so deeply it disappears. Sethe is haunted by her past, by her dead daughter, by the rememories still alive and burned into her memory from her time at Sweet Home; the haunting shows readers that the pains of history cannot be escaped by way of time. Time does not heal all. Trauma imprints itself on the body, in the memory of place, and in the lives of characters long after the experience itself is over.

Because the past is so alive, Sethe hardly ever lets herself reflect on her past, or as she states it, “go inside” (Morrison 55). Her rememories are so immersive, it is as if she is actually re-entering the time and the place that she first experienced the trauma. When Paul D first comes to visit Sethe at 124, he promises to keep her out from the abyss and asks her to trust him: “Sethe, if I’m here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, ‘cause I’ll catch you, girl. I’ll catch you ‘fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out” (Morrison 55). Paul D recognizes the trauma that weighs Sethe down and tries to lighten her load. He chases the baby ghost out of the house screaming, ““She got enough without you! She got enough!”” (Morrison 22). Paul D knows what it feels like to carry a load for so long, it begins to feel like death would be a pleasant alternative to another step forward. He understands the rememories that Sethe is often confronted by from Sweet Home. He also understands that her memories there aren’t all bad. Minor states:

For Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the six male slaves, the Garner 6, it is ‘home’ despite the fact that they are slaves there. Their feelings for the place are confused and ambivalent; they are attached to the place and to the people there, yet they are not free. They are bonded and bound to Sweet Home. (Minor 1246)

Just as the symbol of the tree is complicated in its nature, the character’s traumatic memories of their time at Sweet Home cannot be categorized as evoking any one emotion. While helping

Sethe feel safe in the process of introspection and reflection, Paul D also reveals his own scars, figuratively speaking. He shares the scars of his memory about the trauma he experienced and no one else knows about. Sethe quickly puts her hand on his knee to comfort him, and this gesture slows him down. He pauses, knowing that any more would be too much to share:

Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. (Morrison 86)

Such a weighty past drags on into the present; it cannot all be left behind. That is what trauma does. It lives in the body and festers like a sore, if untreated. Much of what festers in Sethe and Paul D's heart is shame: shame that he was treated like an animal, shame that she couldn't escape without such a hefty price paid in full. In Yolo Akili Robinson's essay, "Unlearning Shame and Remembering Love," Robinson shares the message "Shame unhealed is an intergenerational curse" (Robinson 158). And just as well, Robinson theorizes, "Shame sits in the body and restricts the flow of love" (Robinson 160). For Sethe, her shame restricts healthy love and convolutes the sentiment into something violent, unrestrained, and born of a place of anxiousness.

Children who were separated early from a parent or caregiver or were reared in environments where they could not count on consistent care given to them, can develop an anxious attachment style (Cafasso para 13-17). Given Beloved's history and her all too fatal separation from Sethe, it makes perfect sense that her reincarnated self is highly dependent and anxious about any future separation. Sethe, too, develops an anxious attachment with her daughter, which only fuels the destruction of the fire that has become their love.

Beloved's trauma is not just her death alone. She also bears sequences of the trauma Sethe faced individually. Trauma has a sort of "legacy" effect. That is to say: "Trauma can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes, which can then be passed down to future generations. This mark doesn't cause a genetic mutation, but it does alter the mechanism by which the gene is expressed. This alteration is not genetic, but *epigenetic*" (Erdelyi para 2). The trauma passed from a mother to a child is heightened if the environment (the *epi* part of *epigenetics*) is unstable or insecure—which, of course, for Beloved, that was the case. With Sethe's legacy of trauma, as well as Beloved's murderous death, it is no wonder the two women bond together in such a caustic, panicked, anxiety ridden transgressive love.

The sad irony of Beloved's trauma comes from how hard Sethe tried to prevent her children from developing their own scars. Sethe views her children as "her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean" (Morrison 296). But as it turns out, her children could not be protected the trauma legacy of Sethe's experiences. The attempts to stop the fractals of rememory and the continued legacy of shared trauma gives readers a "glimpse [of] the tremblings and uncertainties with which the first generation after the Civil War must have embarked on life as freed people, bearing their legacy of scars" (Mathieson 19).

Fictional Community Response

The fictional community within *Beloved* shares a dynamic relationship with Sethe that shows the potential healing available in even the most traumatic and estranged cases. Sethe first meets the community upon her arrival at 124 and realizes the support and love they offer her within her journey towards healing. Because Sethe married Halle and became a part of Baby

Suggs' family, there was no need to earn a place in the community; the place and the people within it eagerly accept her presence.

Every Sunday, Baby Suggs would go to a place in the trees she called The Clearing and preach her own kind of gospel to the community: "[H]er own brand of preaching, having made up her mind about what to do with the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River" (Morrison 173). Her sermons lead the community to a place of self-love and reclamation of personhood. The community savors the wisdom that Baby Suggs offers. Her focus on healing targets each individual's reappropriation of their body to themselves:

'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it, And O my people they do not love your hands, Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either, *You* got to love it, *you!* And no, they ain't in love with your mouth, Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavings instead. No, they don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all 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. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your lifegiving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.'

(Morrison 104)

Baby Suggs provides the community with the ability to reclaim their lives as their own. Her words give these former slaves back ownership of their bodies, and she encourages them to love themselves despite how they have been treated by the outside world. She offers them healthy self-love, and they accept. Just as the community's quick acceptance of Sethe stems from her association with Baby Suggs, so too does her rejection.

Upon Sethe's arrival, Baby Suggs puts on a celebratory feast that had enough food to stuff every person who wanted to partake. This display offends the community: "Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave..." (Morrison 161). The community interprets Baby Suggs' celebration as "uncalled for pride" (Morrison 162). In the community, no one has much, so providing such generosity—generosity that cannot ever be repaid—comes across as an offense: "Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (Morrison 163). Baby Suggs surpasses the socially agreed upon boundaries of giving. Her generosity and joy are therefore perceived as a gluttonous display of pridefulness. The community's appraisal of Baby Suggs' generosity evidences the pains that still permeate their lives. They must only accept kindness that can be repaid so that they do not have to owe anyone anything. Their condemnation reveals their fear that what they have is still fragile. They cannot expect too much of any one good thing without fearing an impending consequence.

It is at this point in Sethe's history that the community begins to dissociate from her and the other occupants at 124. The community rejects them all: "For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends. No coloredpeople" (Morrison 14). The feast created a divide between 124 and the rest of the community. The community assumed that the inhabitants of 124 could take care of themselves, and so they left them isolated.

It was because of the community's shunning that Sethe had no warning when Schoolteacher had located her and her children at 124. Stamp Paid, a community figure, reflects on *why* Sethe received no help on this fateful day:

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, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house on Bluestone Road where a pretty woman had been living for almost a month. (Morrison 185)

The community saw Sethe and Baby Suggs as prideful due to their display at the feast. Because of this judgement, they decided she could fend for herself with no exceptions. So even when the four horsemen (Schoolteacher, the sheriff, and the two nephews) arrived at 124, Sethe was left out to dry. Morrison invokes the trope of the four horsemen to symbolize a kind of apocalypse. The men's arrival catalyzes the complete destruction of Sethe's newfound world. The community had already started to withdraw from her life, but Sethe's act of transgressive love, executed to evade the horsemen's recapture, confirms the community's exit.

After Sethe killed Beloved, the community had a glaring reason to shut her and her remaining family out. The community held Sethe "morally responsible" (Schmudde 124) for the murder of her infant daughter. They do not understand the transgressive nature of Sethe's love. More than the action itself, the community rejects and shuns Sethe for—once again—what they interpret as pride. The community feels as though "Sethe had lost her wits, finally, as [they] knew she would—trying to do it all alone with her nose in the air" (Morrison 299). The community seems to think Sethe has a high opinion of herself, that her pride wouldn't allow for reception to community intervention. As a consequence of their interpretation, they shut her out entirely. Without the community, the lives of 124 spiral into chaos. No one is there to see them falling, and it is only because of Denver that the community eventually helps pick up the pieces.

It isn't until Denver "step[s] off the edge of the world, leave[s] the two [Beloved and Sethe] behind and [goes to] ask somebody for help" (Morrison 286) that the community comes back into Sethe's life. Denver recognizes the destructiveness of Sethe and Beloved's relationship, and she understands that her mother and she herself are in great danger, even

though Sethe doesn't seem concerned. Denver knows that: "Whatever was happening, it only worked with three—not two—and since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring (Sethe happy when Beloved was; Beloved lapping devotion like cream), Denver knew it was on her" (Morrison 286). Denver reaches out to her first and only contact to the community that she made years before, when 124 was still a place open to the community: her teacher, Mrs. Lady Jones. Denver asks for some help. Mrs. Lady Jones remembers Denver from her time in class and offers to send food. Soon, many members of the community set out food in baskets for Denver to pick up. But eventually, food alone is not enough intervention. Denver explains what has been happening: that a baby ghost has crossed the threshold and is eating up Sethe day by day. While the community members still harbor some mixed opinions about Sethe and her pride, they see clear as day that "[Beloved's presence] was an invasion" (Morrison 302). Denver rallies the community to help Sethe. Wasting no time, thirty women gather and "[walk] slowly, slowly toward 124" (Morrison 303):

They grouped, murmuring and whispering, but did not step foot in the yard. Denver waved. A few waved back but came no closer. Denver sat back down wondering what was going on. 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. (Morrison 304)

The thirty women unlatch Sethe from Beloved's clamorous haunting. They call upon a higher power—upon God—to rid 124 of its dangerous baggage. It works; Beloved disappears, though no one can quite say where to. The community makes up tales to help decide where she could have gone, but soon enough they "quickly and deliberately forgot her" (Morrison 323). It is the community that performs an exorcist for 124 because whether they want to admit it, the 124

household is a part of the community. The health of 124 reflects on the community: “For if one lost, all lost” (Morrison 130).

With the haunting gone, the community—Sethe included—can move towards healing and healthy love. Marsha Darling’s interview with Toni Morrison (1988) elucidates Morrison’s intention behind the journey away and back to community connection:

“They don’t want to talk, they don’t want to remember, they don’t want to say it, because they’re afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they’re two, and three, and four, you know. The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective” (Morrison, interviewed by Marsha Darling 5).

The community shares a history of pain, and therefore they need to look right at *Beloved* for their own sense of healing. They wish *Beloved* could just be Sethe’s problem, but *Beloved* is part of their past too. She is a reminder for the Black fictional community that there has been pain that will not go away without a fight; but they work towards healing together and find it together, the only way a strong community ever could have.

The fictional community of *Beloved* holds an interesting role because, unlike in *The Bluest Eye*, they correct their judgement and redirect their support accordingly. At first, the community abandoned Sethe for her pride. They saw her as arrogant, and they feared her love: “In her unwillingness to apologize or bend...she would kill her child again is what they know. That is what separates her from the rest of the community” (Morrison, interviewed by Darling 6). But once the community lets themselves blame the circumstances more than they detest Sethe’s pride and lack of remorse, they finally see Sethe for who she is: a strong but hurting woman, one who’s strength doesn’t negate the need for community.

Re-Established Boundaries, Stacked Stories, and Healthy Selflove

By the end of *Beloved*, Sethe finds healthy community connection, an interpersonal relationship, and selflove. Sethe finds a sense of self amidst the painful absence she feels from Beloved's disappearance. After the community exorcism, Paul D returns to 124 to check on Sethe after a long time away. He sees her lying in the bed Baby Suggs died in and knows her sadness cannot be rocked. But nevertheless, he asks her what her *plan* is. When she says she has none, he promises her: "'Look...Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I'm a take care of you, you hear? Starting now'" (Morrison 320). Sethe cannot help but mourn Beloved's absence, but Paul D wants to make sure she still has her mind in order. When Sethe insists, "'She was my best thing'" (Morrison 321), Paul D reestablishes a necessary boundary; he assures her that she is more than her motherlove, that she has a life beyond this sadness. This intimate interaction between Paul D and Sethe reads:

He wants to put his story next to hers. 'Sethe,' he says, 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.' He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' His holding fingers are holding hers. 'Me? Me?' (Morrison 322)

Paul D helps return Sethe back to herself. He reminds her that she has a self that needs protection and care, just like Baby Suggs preached in her sermons at the Clearing. Sethe's final words in the novel—"Me? Me?"—indicate that she accepts and internalizes his message. She understands that she has a self. She phrases the pronouns as a question, as if she is coming back into contact with a friend that she has long been out of touch with. It takes her a moment to recognize the concept: Me? Is that me? It's been so long. I'm back now.

Morrison assigns Paul D the role of assisting and supporting Sethe in her healing process. Assigning this role to Paul D is an appealing choice because he, too, is working towards similar

if not the same goals as Sethe. They work together. He is not higher or better off than she is. Paul D provides her (and consequently, readers) with hope that there is still life beyond this heartache. It is so important that Paul D approaches his love for Sethe without possessiveness. The line “He wants to put his story *next* to hers” [emphasis added] (Morrison 322) speaks loudly of his intentions. He wants to stack their stories. He is not trying to monopolize her time and energy as Beloved had tried to; he is not looking to become her whole life. He wants to live his life in tandem with Sethe, not because he feels as though he can own her, but because *she is a friend of his mind*. This view of love—to be a friend of your mind—came from another slave at Sweet Home and were spoken about the woman he loved. His words serve as a model of what healthy interpersonal love looks like, as well as the healing that accompanies such affection:

‘She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.’ (Morrison 321)

Paul D wants his story to stay next to Sethe’s. He wants to gather her, just as she has gathered him, and help her put back together the pieces that have been scattered so violently by a painful history. He does not love transgressively; his love is not boundless. The boundlessness of Sethe’s love throughout the story has led to her destruction. Paul D finds her at her lowest and wants to teach her how to love with limits. Though his love, arguably, is too bound, Sethe needs a model of boundedness to prevent a loss of self. Paul D’s love is nothing but a promise: a promise to find healing and restore love to its healthy and fullest form.

Their scars will remain. From the tree still slated on Sethe’s back, to the memory of the bit in Paul D’s mouth, they will still have rememories of these horrors. Morrison shows readers that there can be both: pain and love. There can be pain in the past, and love in the future; love that does not kill, does not haunt; love that stays balanced, bound, and can begin anew.

III. *Paradise*

“God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (Morrison 18).

Ideologically Transgressive Love: An Inevitable Violence

“They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time” (Morrison 1).

Morrison constructs a painful and abrasive first scene as the first statement of her seventh novel, *Paradise*. She tells readers immediately: *this* is what happened. *This* is the transgression. The rest of the novel deals with *how* and *why*.

Born from Morrison’s time editing *The Black Book* came her inspiration for *Paradise*. As she sorted through the fifty Black newspapers in the Southwest during the Emancipation period, she discovered promises of a newfound paradise within the Oklahoma Territory: “The opportunity to establish black towns was as feverish as the rush for whites to occupy the land. The ‘colored’ newspapers encouraged the rush and promised a kind of paradise to the newcomers: land, their own government, safety—there were even sustained movements to establish their own state” (Morrison xii). Amidst these promises, the newspaper’s message presents a “clear admonition”: “Come prepared or Not at All” (Morrison xii). Morrison reflects on the message those words carry: “Implicit in those warnings were two commands: 1) If you have nothing, stay away. 2) This new land is Utopia for a few. Translation: no poor former slaves are welcome in the paradise being built here” (Morrison xii).

Clearly the gates of this newfound paradise of the 1860s was not an open invitation for all those in need. The new land was intended to be *paradise*, after all; and no paradise is complete without an air of exclusion. Furthermore, Morrison notes that in these newspaper clippings, the leaders of the new Black towns were “invariably light-skinned men” (Morrison xiii). She

ponders, “Was skin privilege also a feature of the separation? One that replicated the white racism they abhorred?” (Morrison xiii). In effect, Morrison decides to explore such conditions in reverse in her construction of *Paradise*:

Exclusivity by the very black-skinned; construction of their very own ‘gated community,’ one that refused entrance to the mixed race. Considering the need for progeny in order to last, how would patriarchy play and how might matriarchy threaten? In order to describe and explore these questions I needed 1) to examine the definition of paradise, 2) to delve into the power of colorism, 3) to dramatize the conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy, and 4) disrupt racial discourse altogether by signaling then erasing it. (Morrison xiii)

Morrison’s first sentence in *Paradise* touches on her fourth intension: to signal and then erase race. The first victim is overtly marked as having race: she is white, and she is killed first. But throughout the novel, readers pay no mind to the races of the women in the Convent, a wayward home in the town of Ruby’s peripheral gaze. These women may as well be colorless, though of course they are not. But their identities are not warped by or wrapped up in the nuances of color.

Who is this white woman? Who are the other women of the Convent? And who are the men who take aim for Ruby? Morrison leaves her readers without answers to these questions at first, and instead uses her first line to “signal 1) the presence of race as hierarchy and 2) its collapse as reliable information” (Foreword xvi).

But in time, Morrison admits the rest of the details. Coordinated and executed by the men of Ruby—a town built on the principles of pure-blooded membership and tradition—the women of the Convent are attacked and become victims of an ideologically motivated killing spree. The men of Ruby have convinced themselves that they have performed this violence against the women as an act of community-preservation, as an exclusionary measure, as a requirement to conserve what they know as and believe to be paradise. And to them, it may be seen as so; but to the reading community—us—as well as the fictional community—the uninvolved but now

implicated townsfolk of Ruby—at best, the men’s violence can only be seen as an act of *ideologically transgressive love* in its most righteous and self-serving form.

So far, in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, the transgressive acts of love cannot be separated from pain. Cholly’s violence against Pecola stems from his own history bereft of love. He has only ever known pain as the emotion that can be shared from person to person, so he continues the intergenerational cycle of trauma in turn. His violence against Pecola erupts as an effort to provide her with *something*—and pain is all he has. Sethe’s violence, similarly, is enacted as an effort to protect her children. She does not seek harm; she yearns to protect them from the pains of slavery, though harm is ultimately the outcome. The violent transgression of these two characters differs from that of the men of Ruby. The violence within *Paradise* does not result from the desire to protect an individual, but rather, an idea, an ideal. This is what makes the transgression in *Paradise* ideological in nature.

Fear is a central feature of each transgression discussed; however, Cholly and Sethe’s fears, both arguably rooted in love, present in ways that are far more comprehensible than what happens in *Paradise*. In the first two novels, while the violence cannot be dismissed, it can be sympathized with. Here, in the text of *Paradise*, readers do not sympathize with the nine men who go out one night and massacre the strange but harmless women. This transgression is difficult to accept as an act of love. The reason this violence feels impersonal and unforgivable is because the “love” the men feel is not for their victims, unlike in the cases of the previous novels; the men’s love is for what they believe they are protecting, which, in their minds, is paradise. To readers and those in the fictional community that aren’t so indoctrinated in the town’s cultural and religious ideology, it is clear to see that their violence is unwarranted. But to evaluate transgressive love in all forms, I must argue that this too—while less justified—is an

example of the pattern: to love something so deeply that emotion takes over all reason, and the passion that fuels love transgresses into its darker, more desperate form...violence.

Separate Paradises: Juxtaposed Representations of Eden

Haven and Ruby

Morrison constructs the future Rubyites' early history in such a way that mirrors *The Book of Exodus* from the Bible. As a community of newly freed slaves, nine families abandon their former homes in Louisiana and Mississippi in search of a place they can claim for themselves. In 1890, they pass through Fairly, Oklahoma, and seeing that the settlement is that of Black folks, they assume they have found refuge. It is here that the parallel between *Paradise* and *Exodus* unravels, and instead, Morrison explores constructions of colorism. To the newly freed slaves' surprise, the customs of Fairly did not align with its name. The Fairly townsfolk deny the migrating slaves' inquiries of homestead but offer that they can stay for one night and intend to supply them with a meal and a collection. Appalled at the exclusion and *unfair* treatment, the nine men who head the relocation cannot accept the skimpy offer, and instead suggest that their caravan carries on. This memory of colorism, general prejudice, and consequential rejection imprints upon the minds and hearts of the wandering slaves and is remembered as "The Disallowing."

The original nine families form an integral bond with one another after the Disallowing:

Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. (Morrison 189)

The Disallowing, “a story that explain[s] why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (Morrison 13) serves as the foundation of all the violence there is to come. It stirs a fear that their community’s ways should be seen as sacred, that their community can’t be found just anywhere by anybody: it must remain intentionally isolated from the outside world.

In 1891 the wandering and dejected slaves finally find land—land that their leader, Zechariah “Big Papa” Morgan, feels has been gifted to him through a sign from God—that they claim as their own: “This is our place” (Morrison 95). The myth surrounding the town’s origin states that a walking man with thundering footsteps appears to Big Papa and his son, Rector, one night as they pray for salvation for their people. They follow the thundering man’s direction and see him take something from his satchel. They run over to where he was and see that a guinea fowl has been placed in one of their traps, though the ‘pull string’ has not been affected. Big Papa takes this as a sign that they will be provided on this land and decides to claim it for their community. They call their new home Haven, but in their new settlement, they do not forget the sting inflicted by the people of Fairly. Their pride hardens, and they spend the years to come creating a community that is equally as exclusive as the one they were sent away from.

The first thing Zechariah insist upon in Haven is the creation of the infamous “Oven.” The brick and iron Oven is created as a community kitchen that opens up a shared space for the intentionally isolated community. Townspeople of Haven gathered around the Oven and shared stories and meals during the prime, all the way to the downfall of the town. The Oven stands as a symbol of communion shared between the former slaves. And even when the town is in shambles—as it becomes nearly fifty years after its establishment—the Oven remains intact and firing away as the centerpiece of the community and what it stands for.

Stewart and Deacon Morgan, the twin sons of Rector Morgan (Zechariah “Big Papa” Morgan’s son) return from their service fighting in World War II and realize Haven’s deterioration. As the progeny of the founders of Haven, the twins become the de facto leaders of the community and decide they must all begin again on new grounds. In 1949, the families of Haven all pack up their belongings—the bricks and iron of the Oven included—and set out in search of new grounds to continue their traditions. The people of Haven decide to relocate their home, but they do not abandon their ideology along the way; that much they carry with them. They move farther West and find their new town. This new settlement, originally called “New Haven,” operates under the same rules of isolation as they followed in the first Haven. The townsfolk of New Haven quickly learn that they are still separate from the “outside world” in the tragic loss of Rector Morgan’s daughter, Ruby Morgan. Upon their arrival at New Haven, Ruby Morgan requires medical attention from a doctor, but her brothers, Deacon and Stewart Morgan, could not find one willing to help. Her brothers drove her to a nearby city, Demby, but learned that the hospital does not permit colored people in the wards: “No regular doctor would attend them...When the brothers learned the nurse had been trying to reach a veterinarian, and they gathered their dead sister in their arms, their shoulders shook all the way home” (Morrison 113). Mirroring the sentimentality of the original “Disallowing” that occurred in Fairly, Ruby’s death stands as a reminder of the town’s required self-sufficiency. They cannot rely on anything outside of their isolated community, so they decide to continue building their town on the principles of exclusion that originally founded their community. To remember the rejection they faced and the life that was lost, the town of “New Haven” is renamed in Ruby’s honor.

Ruby Morgan’s death becomes an anomaly. From her passing on, no one else has ever died in Ruby. After Ruby Morgan’s death, she is buried, and the nine families created a covenant

with God: “It was then that the bargain was struck. A prayer in the form of a deal, no less, with God, no less, which He seemed to honor until 1969, when Easter and Scout were shipped home. After that they understood the terms and conditions of the deal much better” (Morrison 113). The townsfolk take great pride in what they ascribe as blessedness. The Rubyites believe that they have a spiritual deal with God to make up for the rejection they faced at “The Disallowing” and the injustice Ruby faced on her deathbed. The deal stands that nobody *in* Ruby will face death because they are kept separate from the changing and uncontrollable forces of the outside world. In the re-creation of an Eden-like paradise, the town of Ruby stands as an all-black community that will do anything to maintain their alliance with God. They keep to themselves, ensuring that their bloodlines stay “pure,” do their best to prevent “drift” out of the community. And so it goes: no one else’s life will be taken in their community, so long as their community does not break the blood-rules or reject the patriarchal traditions and structure of the town.

Rather than learn from the pain they experienced, the people of Haven, and later Ruby, uphold the exclusivity that they were met with at Fairly and the subsequent isolation that followed. It is under these principles of exclusion that they ensure their communal longevity. They build an all-Black town. The Black people in Ruby, unlike those of Fairly, are colored a shade of Blackness so deep, they call it 8-R: “An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (Morrison 193). To preserve the 8-R bloodline becomes the objective of each generation to come: a promise to further distance themselves from the light-skinned Black folk of Fairly, Oklahoma—from the Black folks who decided they wanted to separate their community from their darker brethren. Subsequently, the

blood rule is the deal that supposedly “blesses” the Ruby townfolks and grants them immortality.

Built on the principle that exclusion is power, a bitterly ironic lesson learned from their own experience, the generations continue to grow in Ruby. However, the memory of the past never tires. Rarely, but on occasion, the townfolk threaten the blood-rule. Those that are not 8-R are treated like outsiders since they are seen as threats to the integrity of their “brand” of community members. Those that are outside of the 8-Rock community, even if they *seem* to be a part of Ruby, are considered enemies. Morrison notes that the words “outsider” and “enemy,” in Ruby, mean the same thing (Morrison 212). For those that are a part of the “in-group,” Ruby is as close to being a version of paradise as anything on Earth could be: “Having been refused by the world in 1890 on their journey to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing, were vigilant to any need or shortage” (Morrison 109). But this grace and generosity does not extend to those who have broken the 8-Rock order. Morrison pulls from the one-drop rule that white communities enforced to divide whites and Blacks before and after slavery. For example, Patricia Best Cato is the daughter of Roger Best, an 8-Rock member, and her mother, a light-skinned woman. She is rejected from the community of Ruby, just as her mother was, and sees that she can never make up for the color of her skin. Patricia marries Billy Cato, an 8-Rock man, but that does not change the town’s perception of her skin color.

Unironically, it is Patricia, through her work with genealogy records, that unveils the permeating patriarchy that drives and has always driven Ruby. She creates family trees and notices the repeated nine names that have stayed in power all these years. It is the founders’ male descendants that hold all the power, and they keep the bloodlines under lock and key so that their power can never be disrupted. Only a member of the out-group could see through the illusion of

paradise much of the Ruby townfolks subscribe to. Only Patricia Best Cato, who daily faces the prejudice that mirrors the Disallowing, has clear enough vision to dismantle the facade of security and protection for what it really is: control.

The need for control in Ruby, unsurprisingly, stems from fear that they may lose what they have. After forming their own settlement, the founders sought protective measures that would ensure the success of their budding community. To do so, they must control the elements that could dismantle their power. If they invite just anyone into the community, there is no saying that those who founded Ruby will stay in power; there is no guarantee that another group of light-skinned Black folks or white folks would not come to Ruby and redesign the hierarchy. The strict 8-Rock bloodline rule validates the 8-Rock reign and removes the possible threat that could steal away their home. Channette Romero focuses on how Morrison centers exclusion as a form of security. Romero claims, “*Paradise* asks us to look closely at what happens to a religion and a community founded on principles of exclusion” (Romero 419). The way in which the 8-Rock men structure their community mirrors and imitates the racist models of exclusion, power, and control that have historically been inflicted on Black populations. Morrison, therefore, inverts the social pyramid by placing the darkest skinned people as the ones in control of granting access to certain communities.

Just as in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison exposes the internalized racism that her characters subconsciously live with every day within *Paradise*. While in the former, the internalization leads to self-loathing for both Cholly and Pecola, in *Paradise*, the internalized racism that the 8-Rock community develops after being rejected by lighter-skinned Black people leads to a desire to control all aspects of their daily life. If they are in control, then no one can expose their Blackness as a vulnerability. While the start of the 8-Rock community’s search for new land

initially followed the structure of the Biblical Exodus, the blood rules enforced in Haven and then in Ruby are distinctly separate; the Rubyites' concern with blood purity, instead, was learned from racism and slavery. Therefore, the disaster at the climax of the novel stems from the 8-Rock men's imitation of white prejudice and desire to control. They see a people separate from their own standards that do not fit their schema, and they destroy what is different.

Furthermore, the governing patriarchy of Ruby serves as another control measure to keep the founding 8-Rock men and their sons at the top of the hierarchy. Patricia Best Cato writes a letter to her deceased mother saying, "'The women really tried, Mama'" (Morrison 197). In this statement, Patricia refers to the founding of the town. The women had their own ideas about what would make for a successful move from Haven to their new home, but in every step of their community's founding, the 8-Rock men overpowered the women's judgements. While the women's perspectives are not included in the official narrative of *Paradise*, the multiple perspectives that separates each chapter from one another laces in a touch of the female influence that helped build the community as well. One story that particularly stands out happened on the night of the Disallowing. While the men's pride prevented them from accepting any of the offered provisions from the town of Fairly, the women went back in private to accept the food so that they could feed their starving children (Morrison 195). The different approaches men and women foster throughout the story balances out the community, but at all times, it is clear that what the men demand stands and what the women would like to do differently must be done in secret. The women of Ruby, while largely invisible in their defiance of the patriarchy, subtly work throughout the novel to subvert the patriarchal dominance, which makes the men uneasy.

Much of the division between men and women, again, can be traced back to fear. Because the blood rule holds so much power over the vitality of the community, the power

women hold as child bearers instills a touch of unpredictability into the 8-Rock men's hearts. Unless the men can control all the women entirely, which they do their best to accomplish, then there is always the chance that there could be offspring that separates future generations from the core of their community's bloodline. Therefore, Morrison writes: "[E]verything that worries them [men] must come from women" (Morrison 217). To keep the 8-Rock bloodline "unadulterated and unadulteried" (Morrison 217) the men must trust that the women uphold their end of the "deal." Ironically (but invisible to the 8-Rock men), it is just as much the men that must control their impulses and maintain the community's objective if they want to only breed their 8-R blood. However, the men do not accept their own culpability and instead cast their fear upon the women. For if they do not keep the blood line "pure," their supposed mystic deal will vanish: "That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality" (Morrison 217).

No matter how controlling the blood rule presents, the true goals of the community of Ruby can be traced back to the symbol of the Oven. The community's priority, from the start, was to create a space in which *their* people could gather and unify. In theory, the Oven precisely offers this opportunity for mutually support and cohesion. However, given the patriarchal structure of Ruby, the Oven shifts from a symbol of exclusion to a symbol of women's limitations in such a system. Traditionally, ovens (and any other appliance in the kitchen) tend to be gendered within the feminine domain of power. Women have long been seen as occupying the kitchen as *her* space that *she* controls. In Ruby, the men exclude the women from decisions that have to do with the Oven. A man decided to have it built; his male prodigy decided to bring it with them on their journey to their new home. Because the women of the town had no say over anything to do with the Oven, one could argue that it represents the "patriarchal oppression [of Ruby] because it monumentalized women's exclusion from the construction and naming

involved in the building of society” (Allen 16). While traditionally the women would have agency over what happens in “the kitchen,” in Ruby, even that has been stripped from the women’s explicit control. That is why, as mentioned, the women of Ruby must do their deeds silently without drawing attention to their differences.

The gendered tension lingers around the Oven but is covered up by the town’s concern over what to make of Zechariah “Big Papa” Morgan’s message. Over the top of the Oven, there lies a plaque that hints at the community’s contradictory ideals. The disagreement about what the plaque reads divides the older generation and the younger generation of Ruby. The words themselves are worn and difficult to decipher, but the older generation holds strong that the original intent of Zechariah Morgan was to have the sign read: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (Morrison 195). This original statement reminded the community of God’s protection over their people because of what they faced as their original rejection:

[The message] was not a command to the believers but a threat to those who had disallowed them. It must have taken him months to think up those words—just so—to have multiple meanings: to appear stern, urging obedience to God, but slyly not identifying the understood proper noun or specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen or to whom. (Morrison 195)

But the younger generation of Ruby wants to change the plaque to read “Be the Furrow of His Brow” (Morrison 195). The use of the word “Be” is not to suggest that the people of Ruby should act *as* God himself, but rather as “His instrument, His justice” (Morrison 87).

The war between the older and younger generations reinforces the thematic idea that change is met with wholehearted resistance from a community based on the principles of constancy and unchanging tradition. The older generation fears the effects that change may bring to their community, so to entertain the idea of rewriting the message of their founding father is entirely unthinkable. It is at this point of the story in which the Oven has shifted from a utility

that brings the community together into a shrine that divides: “Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile” (Morrison 93). But the message in and of itself carries weight for the older generation; it has become a reminder of their ideological adherence to sameness and the safety that is held in their traditional ways. The message states what the founders believed, and the elders are not ready to incorporate new ideas/people/events into their community for fear that they may lose what their ancestors originally set out to create. Change in and of itself is not the enemy. The enemy is uncontrollability.

Whether the elders’ desire to remain the same stems from sentimentality to their ancestors, or general fear of what is not certain, it results in the same effect: stagnation. Morrison addresses the slowed influx of growth, meditating on the strong attachment to the past rather than the present: “But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates” (Morrison 161). This, in effect, is why the Rubyites have theoretically been granted “immortality” in the form of their deal. It is not that no one will ever die, but that their community will grow in predictable ways that do not stray from the original bloodline. It is as though the community members are creating carbon copies of themselves. So, when the new generation challenges their principles, it becomes evident that their mission is slowly on the decline.

Though tradition prevails, Ruby stagnates, and declines rather than prospers. As time meandered on, the sense of spiritual protection and divine right to govern with untampered success dismantles:

A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD

shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed.
(Morrison 11)

As these circumstances continued to arise, the men of Ruby needed reason. They couldn't accept that the cause of such outrages could be traced back to something rotting within their own circle, let alone to the guiding principle that secures their "deal" with God for immortality. Instead, the "outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence...the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women" (Morrison 11). Seeing the fault in something outside of their own doing provided them with the righteousness of vigilante justice. Some mislead or loose connection clicked in the minds of the men of Ruby, and instead of turning inward, they extend the blame to the mysterious happenings of the Convent: "Nothing like other folks' sins for distraction" (Morrison 159).

The Convent

Just seventeen miles outside of Ruby stands a mansion shaped like the cartridge of a gun. Built as an "embezzler's folly" (Morrison 1), the mansion originally housed an embezzler who was arrested shortly after its construction was completed. The embezzler used the mansion as an informal brothel and decorated it as such. In time, and with the removal of most sexual paraphernalia, the mansion becomes the home of Catholic nuns who turn it into a boarding school for Arapaho Indian girls. The administrator, Mother Magna or "Mother Superior," teaches the young girls to forget their culture and adopt the Catholic faith and Oklahoman culture. Consolata "Connie" was once a student, taken from her home in Brazil by Mother Magna, and grows to be wholeheartedly loyal to Mother. After Mother passes, despite Connie's attempts to keep her alive through spiritual practices *outside* of the Catholic faith, the mansion is informally

passed to Connie. She upholds the mansion with the help of other wayfarers—all women—who often stay for longer than they originally anticipate.

The Convent offers an alternative “paradise” that juxtaposes what is available and present in Ruby. Rather than exclusion, at the Convent there is full inclusive acceptance; where there are rules and tradition in Ruby, there is fluidity and revival in the Convent. While Ruby is rooted in Protestant beliefs, the spiritual mysticism at the Convent offers a fully immersive view of the self in relation to a higher power. And most importantly, Ruby’s patriarchy is deeply contradicted by the longstanding matriarch that persists through generations at the Convent. The differences run deep and are reason to assume threat in the eyes of the men of Ruby.

Although the many differences may naturally ignite thoughts of competition and rivalry for the men of Ruby, the Convent and the women within its walls are not looking to disturb the town intentionally. Morrison takes care to describe the Convent’s architecture in such a way that suggests it is a closed system; closed in the sense that it is primarily self-contained. For example, as the men break and enter the Convent on their mission to steal the lives of its occupants, they observe that “there are no windows” (Morrison 5). The men reflect on how strangely separate this sets off the Convent from the outside world, and they are not the only ones who notice this architectural effect. When Gigi, one of the first tenants, arrives, she notices: “All around her were closed doors and shut windows where parted curtains were swiftly replaced” (Morrison 68). Gigi notes the privacy and seclusion that the Convent supplies, a perfect shield against the bitter wind that beats the backs of those whose lives lead them to such a place. In being a closed system, the mansion offers a protectiveness that counters the hardships that drive women to the doorstep of the Convent in the first place.

There are many who do come to the Convent, and many who stay too. The Convent collects “throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door” (Morrison 4). Or at least that’s how the men of Ruby see their “target.” For the women who come, and especially those who stay, but even for those that simply know that the Convent is an option, the space exists so that “you [women] can collect yourself there, think through things, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They’ll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it” (Morrison 176). The Convent is a sort of underground railroad for women who have been spread too thin for too long without any recognition or assistance with the loads they bear. But at the Convent, the load disappears. Behind the windowless walls, there is a tranquility that begins once the women remove themselves from their outside lives.

The Convent, therefore, successfully accomplishes what Ruby wishes to: separation from the outside world. But what makes the Convent successful contradicts Ruby’s mission statement. While the Convent is separated structurally from the rest of the world, the door is open for anyone who wants to pass through. In Ruby, there is no way to prevent people from physically passing through, but they create a culture of exclusion and self-containment to imitate the same effect. In other words, Ruby failed at being a closed system despite their intentionally formed culture of isolation; the Convent successfully manages to have a closed system without relying on faulty principles of division to maintain their goals. Being self-contained and cut off from the world, however, does create a sense of vulnerability that the men of Ruby eventually capitalize on. The women in the Convent become sitting ducks for their murderous plans, and there is no chance that the outside world could save them because of the mansion’s longstanding isolation

from the rest of civilization. The strength of the Convent—its separateness—in time, becomes its downfall.

By the end of the book, there are five steady occupants within the Convent: Connie, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas. Each woman has a chapter that reveals a glimpse into the events that drove, or rather, redirected her to the safety and support that the Convent provides.

Mavis Albright is the first to arrive, and when she does, Mother Superior is still alive (barely). She meets Connie after running away from her family. She is the wife of an abusive man, and fears that her family will try to kill her. The catalyzing event that causes her to leave happens when she leaves her two babies, Merle and Pearl in a hot car, just momentarily, while she runs into the grocery store. When she comes out, they are both dead in their car seats, and she knows that home is an even less safe place for her now.

Grace “Gigi” Gibson comes to the Convent after first getting off the bus in Ruby and shaking the townspeople’s feathers with her promiscuous attire. She has been in search of a rock statue that her ex-boyfriend told her about that looks like a couple making love. She has long been searching for love or images of romantic love in all the wrong places, and finally makes her way to the Convent and submerges in the welcoming womanhood that now exists for her.

Seneca, at five years old, is abandoned by who she thinks is her sister, but is actually her mother, and left alone in their apartment for days. She enters the foster system and is assaulted. Later, she tries to collect enough money to get her boyfriend out of jail; decides not to upon her boyfriend’s mother’s request; and eventually hitchhikes around, runs into Sweetie (one of the women from Ruby) on her walk on with her to the Convent. Entranced by the walking woman’s intense sorrow and deliria, Seneca follows her all the way to the Convent, and decides to stay.

Her name may have found inspiration from the Roman philosopher known for withstanding extreme suffering, and accurately so, for she has.

Pallas Truelove finds her way to the Convent after her older boyfriend—a janitor at her high school—cheats on her with her own mother, Divine. She runs away, only to be chased by a group of boys who likely planned to sexually assault her but escapes by hiding in a lake. She ends up in the hospital, where Billy Delia (Patricia’s daughter) suggests she takes refuge at the Convent. Though she does not seem settled in the arrangement at first and often tries to leave, she returns and has the baby she denied carrying, and is present for the attack, as are the rest of the women.

Each of these women come to the Convent, estranged from their former lives, and in need of a blank slate. At the Convent, they receive this grace and the company necessary to do so with the full support of the fellow women:

The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here—an unbridled, authentic self, but which she thought of as a ‘cool’ self—in one of this house’s many rooms. (Morrison 177)

Through most of the novel, the Convent is not as organized or cohesive as it becomes by the end. At first, it truly is a place that the wind passes through and occasionally drops off a woman in need. But often that woman denies needing the support of the Convent, and temporarily leaves. It isn’t until Consolata’s chapter, where we learn more of her history, that we see the unification and directive communication through the recreated scene of the Biblical Last Supper.

Compared to the foundation of Ruby and the religious allusion to the Exodus that permeates the future Rubyites’ journey, Consolata’s spiritual establishment of the Convent reflects a gentler articulation of good faith. The founding of the Oven and the “Beware” message

on the plaque calls to the rigid tone that the Old Testament God embraces. Consolata's version of the "last supper" expels the vengeful, masculine wrath of the Old Testament and replaces that tone with one of forgiveness, femininity, and growth. In this way, Consolata parallels the offerings that Jesus contributes to his people, promising salvation to those that choose to follow her ways. In Consolata's "last supper" scene of rebirth and symbolic communion, the newly realized matriarch, Consolata, establishes her reign and sets the course for healing for the women she shelters:

The table is set; the food placed. Consolata takes off her apron. With the aristocratic gaze of the blind she sweeps the women's faces and says, 'I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for. (Morrison 262)

Consolata performs a renewed introduction of her new self and her role in the Convent. She has "passed through the void, changing her silenced and rejected identity into one of power, and she has reclaimed her original persona. She has transformed from a ghosted woman into a spectral guide" (Anderson 331). Most importantly, Consolata frees the women from their bodies. Much like Baby Suggs did in *The Clearing*, Consolata tells these women that they do not need to break apart their bodies from their spirits. They need to love their flesh and their spirit if they want to be whole. Consolata explains that she did not understand this for a long time. She was taught by Mother Superior that "'my body is nothing my spirit everything'" (Morrison 263). But when she met Deacon Morgan and they fall in love, albeit the brevity of their romance, she realizes that her body is just as hungry for attention as her spirit. And this education—her new knowledge of the importance of the body—calcifies as she takes care of Mother Superior up until she dies. Consolata describes the physical connection and the power associated with the lesson:

When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost?" (Morrison 263)

Concluding her introduction of her new self and the revived doctrine of the Convent, Consolata restates her main lesson: "Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (Morrison 263). Consolata breaks down the conception that one cannot be holy and still be human. We are body and spirit, inseparably tied into one existence. One aspect does not weaken the other. Both are united as a singular whole self. Consolata speaks these words and begins the necessary steps to bring these women back to their whole, undivided selves.

Importantly, Morrison chooses to describe the connectivity of body and spirit with the use of two major Biblical figures: Eve and Mary. Eve, being charged with the original sin, infamously taints the nature of women: "Eve signifies the body run ruinously amok, her appetites leading directly to humankind's expulsion from Eden," (Mix 167). Mary, on the other hand, is the mother of Jesus. She is an idol for women and is considered the most revered figure, aside from God himself: "Mary stands for a kind of disembodied femininity as both virgin and mother, as paradoxical model of self-sacrifice and purity," (Mix 167). To understand womanhood is to accept oneself as both Eve and Mary (Mix 166). There is no separation. Just as body and spirit, there is no separation from the right and wrong, the good and evil aspects of self. Neither is any better than the other. There is no distinction. And Consolata wants to reinforce such inseparable connections.

When the women first arrive at the Convent, they are only just beginning their spiritual and emotional journeys. Up until their arrival at the Convent, they learned the customs of the outside world and have been influenced to see themselves as wrong and wicked, as failures, as misfits. These ideas of themselves have been plastered in their minds, and it is Consolata's intension to remove this branding and begin anew. To reteach and restart. To try again and do better. And to forgive. To love. To learn. To grow: "...unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted. Or hunted either, she might have added. But there she would have been wrong" (Morrison 266).

A Mere Seventeen Mile Walk: The Threat of An Open Invitation

As self-contained and isolated as the Convent may try to be, their reputations seep through the cracks in the mansion walls and trickle seventeen miles down the road into the thoughts of the Ruby men. The men don't see the Convent as a space for healing and revival. They see the Convent and the women who make it up as a threat because of the matriarchy that it is. The power of the Convent and the way this woman-oriented space empowers the occupants threatens the control of Ruby's 8-Rock men and the rules they administer in their town, and therefore it cannot be tolerated.

The men in Ruby ascribe all the negative circumstances of their town to the Convent women. They scapegoat these women, who have little to no connection to anything happening in the town, because they refuse to see the fault in their own system, in what they believe is and has for generations been *paradise*:

"Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them at least had some religion. These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either, They don't need men and they don't need God. Can't say they haven't been warned. Asked

first and then warned. If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. But they don't. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families. We can't have it, you all. Can't have it at all."

This passage has been taken from the scene when the nine Ruby men (notice the repeated number—nine—that mirrors the original founding families) stoke their groupthink and plan their attack on the Convent. Lone, a woman quietly observing the men's "private" meeting at the Oven, thinks to herself: "So...the fangs and tails are somewhere else. Out yonder all slithery in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven" (Morrison 276). The men package their fear of the women's independence in a more digestible form: as being the protectors of their town. But it is clear to any onlooker, especially any female onlooker, that the men are merely threatened by the women of the Convent's matriarchy, self-sufficiency, and successful isolation. The men fear that the women of Ruby—their women—may learn the ways of the Convent women and decide against the rigidity and lack of power available in their town. The men fear that instead of abiding by the patriarchal rules and traditional values, the women of Ruby may instead set foot down the long road to a place where they will be embraced for all they are capable of being. It is possible, or so the men of Ruby think, that the Convent may bring the onset of the decline of the traditional female. The men seem to theorize that if the Convent remains, then the traditional, agreeable women of Ruby are "doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female" (Morrison 279).

In all fairness, the men have limited access to seeing what goes on within the walls of the Convent. So, their "worst case scenario" projections—that the women are abortionist lesbians practicing witchcraft and worshipping pagan gods, child torturers, and those of the like—are not

proven untrue just as much as they are not proven true. These speculations spiral out of control because the men do not directly confront the women of Ruby; if there had been clearer communication, the men would have seen past the fears created by their inflated theories.

What the men do see of the Convent women in public does give reason to assume these women may be poor influences for those following a more conservative doctrine. For example, when the Convent women are invited to Arnette and K.D.'s wedding, their entrance is not one to be forgotten: "They piled out of the car looking like go-go girls: pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear, no stockings. Jezebel's storehouse raided to decorate arms, earlobes, necks, ankles, and even a nostril" (Morrison 156-157). If the men of Ruby are hoping to avoid all things outside of tradition, it is clear that these women are anything but the mold. The men begin to accuse the women of misconduct for how they appear and what that appearance connotes: "[F]un-obsessed adults were clear signs of already advanced decay. Soon the whole country would be awash in toys, tone-deaf from raucous music and hollow laughter. But not here. Not in Ruby" (Morrison 157). But despite the Convent women's unorthodox way of life, they are in no way trying to tear down the system that Ruby was founded upon. The Convent women clearly do their best to stay separate from the town of Ruby's happenings. But nevertheless, the Ruby men carry on their case.

Not far from their controlled and predictable homes in Ruby, the men press forward into the Convent to expose "women like none he knew or ever heard of" (Morrison 8). But as they enter, they are shocked:

These rooms are normal...What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children? Out here in wide-open space tucked in a mansion—no one to bother or insult them—they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew. (Morrison 8)

The minds of the nine men become caught up in their imaginative revolution for Ruby. Their passion for Ruby blinds them against the violence of their action. The men fear that the women of the Convent will *contaminate* the town of Ruby—the women in particular—with their new way of life. The men must have wondered: Is this—meaning how the Convent women act—how *our* women would be too if they were left alone? And *that*, right there, is the fear. *That* is why they pressed on in the quiet stillness of the night to the sleeping Convent. When they arrive at the Convent and enter the doors, the men see nothing grotesque or obviously *different* than what a normal house would have. The absence of difference and thereby not being able to tangibly name the difference between these women and the women of Ruby gives the men even more reason to press on towards violence. The men did not find anything in the rooms to signal “difference” in the way that would have provided them with ease, so instead, they invent “evidence” where really there is none. For example, they see a letter written in lipstick as a letter written in blood; they see infant shoes and clothes as a sign of alarm (Anderson 316). The men want to see something that *caused* the women’s behavior, not just the *normal* rooms of these obscene and unorthodox women. The men realize that the women of the Convent are no different than the women of Ruby. The only difference is that the women of Ruby have not experienced the freedom that the Convent offers. But instead of reconsidering their judgement, the men make examples of the Convent to reassert their masculine power. They enacted their violence, so they believe, because of their *love* for Ruby.

The men’s fear—the idea that the women of Ruby may “cross-over” and prefer the ways of the Convent—holds truth. Many times throughout the novel, the women of Ruby escape the confines of Ruby and seek refuge at the commune just seventeen miles down the road. The women of Ruby recognize the inner urge they feel to be something besides a wife and mother.

Many of them resist the urge, but eventually succumb to their impulses, even if it is only temporarily so. Several women from Ruby—Sweetie, Arnette, Billy Cato, even Soane Morgan—venture out to the Convent for support and a momentary break from their everyday lives:

[W]omen 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 start. Soane Morgan, for instance, and once, when shew as young, Connie as well. Many of the walkers Lone had seen; others she learned about. But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women's: Sergeant, KD., Roger, Menus. And the good Deacon himself a couple of decades back. (Morrison 270)

Though denied by the proud, blessed men, Ruby and the Convent are *connected*. Not just as neighboring oases, but as indistinct communities. There is a certain permeability that exists between Ruby and the Convent, even if it is mostly invisible and hushed; it is there because of the women and the path they tow, nonetheless.

The connection is quieted because the men control Ruby's narrative. They don't accept that there is a crossing over between *their* women and the *other* women, but there is. As we read on, it becomes more and more clear how the connectedness leans towards Ruby's dependence on the Convent, rather than the opposite. Not only are the two places connected, but the people of Ruby—especially the women—depend on the Convent as a reprieve from their regular lives. The Convent is strong enough to exist without Ruby. But the women of Ruby, as time and their many obligations press on, rely on the Convent as a resting point, as the place where trouble will not follow them. And if the women start leaning in favor of the Convent's way of life, then this undermines the patriarchy that then men of Ruby love so dearly.

When the Rubyite women enter the Convent, they dissociate from the patriarchal and "Old Testament" ways of Ruby. They see the women in the Convent are peaceful, that the

Convent women are set on liberating themselves from the baggage they didn't even realize they were carrying: "She [Anna, a woman from Ruby,] saw instead the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them" (Morrison 303). The monsters in the women's lives take many forms, but for most of the women in *Paradise*, the baggage takes a male form.

Meditations on (Spiritual and Social) Exclusion

Most Christian faiths offer the same central message: not all will make it to paradise. Heaven doesn't have an open gate. And logically, this makes sense: if everyone is let in regardless of the way they lead their lives, what would make that any difference than life on Earth, or Hell? If there are no rules to follow, then how do we know we're doing it right? Ruby embraces the logic of paradise: not everyone can get in if we want Heaven to be Heaven, Haven to be Haven, Ruby to be Ruby. But there are flaws to this method of thought. It separates every individual from the next, making us only responsible for our own salvation. This individualistic view is represented by the Protestant beliefs that steer the men of Ruby in their massacre. They cannot tolerate the possibility that the Convent women may taint the pure and righteous community they've spent generations building. That sort of self-indulgence, the kind that leaves the men of Ruby feeling higher and mightier than the women in the Convent is wholeheartedly flawed and rooted in self-serving bias.

The women of the Convent, contrarily, take on a separate, and I would argue better belief system: one without a name, without exclusion, and without individualism. While each of the women do try to heal themselves individually, they are all a part of each other's growth process. They no longer separate the self from the Other, and instead become a community that wishes to

share in each other's wholeness. To begin the healing process, Consolata leads the women to the stone cellar and instructs them to lay on the floor. She outlines the silhouettes of their bodies, and they lie quietly for an extended time. Eventually, they are invited to rise—to reawaken—and to decorate the outline traced on the floor in ways that represent who they are and what they carry as baggage. It is at this moment that they are no longer separated. They simultaneously voice their past traumas and begin to glean individual insights about their histories. Morrison states, “it was never important to know who said the dream” (Morrison 264). The women all work as a collective towards the goal of healing the body/spirit divide and the harm done in their pasts. They see each other transparently, and they share in a unifying process that leads to connectivity and communal strength.

Geta LeSeur argues, “[The] barriers dividing the women are broken down and their personalities intermingle, becoming something entirely different from what they were before” (LeSeur 17). This idea goes back to the earlier discussion about the continuance of identity shared between Mary and Eve. The symbol of purity and fall from grace, are one. The women of the Convent, coming from all sorts of backgrounds, become one. Through the self-disclosure found in what Morrison coins as “loud dreaming” shared among the women, the community within the Convent strengthens, while Ruby's denial to accept fault in their own people continues to crumble their foundation. LeSeur argues, “The women of the Convent have achieved what the men of Ruby could not—a true community—because they had resisted a politics of exclusion based on division between self and other” (LeSeur 18).

The choice to build a town upon the principles of exclusion and intentional isolation naturally lead to a resounding separatism in Ruby. Morrison's writing both explores and criticizes separatism, seeming to rest on the notion that to be separated from others, or to try to

separate anything on this Earth from itself, is to prevent wholeness and balance: “You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don’t separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don’t unbalance his world” (Morrison 244). Lone shares this sentiment when teaching Connie how to “step inside” another living person and save their life. At first, Connie rejects this power; she does not want to overstep her place and intrude on God’s work. But Lone assures her: where there is power, there is God. This new way of thinking redirects the patterned effects of division. Rather than separate, Lone preaches that duality and balance are what brings peace. This contradicts the practices of Ruby and the common conceptions of the Christian denominations. This idea suggests that there is no need to separate ourselves from our maker; there is no reason to make paradise separate from our lives (Romero 417).

To stay separate is to operate and organize within a binary structure. Binaries, in every sense, make invisible the necessary and relevant grey areas that exist regardless of whether they are recognized. There are countless binaries set up throughout the pages of *Paradise*. Most obviously, there is Ruby/ the Convent. Here we see the separation of Christian/ pagan beliefs, men/ women, traditional values/ progressive views, and “good”/ “evil.” Within Ruby itself, furthermore, there is a binary between 8-R/non-8/R individuals, men/ women, and the elders/ young generations. In each of these binary pairings, there is a competitive opposition—a tension—that arises. This idea of binarism is what creates a sense of *ideologically transgressive love*. To be or believe in something is to reject being or believing something else. Ideological love forces individuals to see those that are not in alignment with themselves as the Other, as outside of what they are, and therefore outside of what is legitimate. To Other someone is to

dehumanize their existence. And to dehumanize is to make someone an idea rather than a person, as something that must be destroyed to protect your own idea.

Dangers of “Thy Will”: Ideological and Confirmation Blindness

The danger of “Thy will” comes down to interpretation, the haze and blur that distinguishes one perspective from the next. Lone, the midwife who taught Connie how to ‘step in’ and interfere with death overhears the men conspiring against the women of the Convent. She mutters to herself the saying, ““Thy will. Thy will”” (Morrison 274), as recognition that there must be a reason that she be the one to overhear their plans for violence. She feels as though she has been chosen by God and therefore cannot turn a blind eye. In this case, readers are encouraged to celebrate Lone’s bravery to fulfill “Thy will.” The repetition of the phrase is similar to a prayer, whispered and understood as acceptance of what the divine wants from her. Lone warns the women and uninvolved men of the town that there is a great storm brewing with the 8-R men of the community. She sounds off the alarm and attempts to send as much help to the Convent as she can muster at such a late hour of night.

The irony and danger about “Thy will” comes into play when the perspective shifts back to the 8-R men. They, too, fully believe that they are the agents of an almighty mission: to preserve the town’s integrity, and so they must destroy the perceived threat. Each party involved, the ones looking to enact the violence and those looking to dismantle the plan both feel as though their intentions align with “Thy will.” The juxtaposition of action, bound by the same justification, evidently exposes the dangerous power within the sway of tradition, religion, and ideology at large. Morrison asks, rhetorically: “How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?” (Morrison 292).

The danger of ideology is the emergence of echo chambers. The confirmation bias that permeates the men of Ruby's meeting in which they decide to rid the town of the Convent women could only happen because relevant voices were actively excluded from the decision-making process. At their meeting at the Oven, only the men—who are incredulously biased against the power the Convent women muster—speak for the whole town and shape the narrative without any sense of balance from an outside perspective:

Here, when the men spoke of the ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways—they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need till each piece fit an already polished groove. A few did most of the talking, some said little and two said nothing at all, but silent though they were, Lone knew the leadership was twinned. (Morrison 275)

The last line—calling out the “twinned” leadership—summons Deacon and Steward Morgan into center stage. These two men have shaped the scope of the town's official history for as long as they have been alive. Morrison writes, “They haven't forgotten a thing since 1755” (Morrison 278). Not only do they remember every instance that occurred throughout their own lives, but they know and reinstate the history from the start of the 8-R families. They bear this gift of memory as a weapon against the possibility for change, and instead of looking to progress, they seek to destroy anything that threatens the town's former constancy. And what is more concerning is the impossibility of such a gift. Likely, the two men don't *accurately* remember everything that has ever happened since 1755, but they and the rest of the town believe that they do. They shape the story because they have an almost divine right over the script. No one else claims to know the whole history of their people; it is only the Morgan brothers who control the memory of the town. It is the Morgan brothers' interpretation of history and the present moment that inspires and motivates the other 8-R men to act in accordance with their will. The men may

think—given the Morgan brother’s fervent religious practice—“How could the devil be anywhere near a cross?” (Morrison 154). If the Morgan brothers, the leaders of the town, say that this must be done, then it must be right. But Morrison reminds us, “A cross [is] no better than the bearer” (Morrison 154). And the Morgan brothers prove, in the violence they manifest against the Convent, that they, as bearers, are far from sainthood.

Ultimately, it is their love for control that inspires the 8-Rock men to violently interrupt the lives of the Convent women. Morrison describes Ruby as, “A backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who could not and where; who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them” (Morrison 308). It is the progeny of the original 8-rock men that interpret the Convent as a threat, just as they interpret and assume that it is “Thy will” for them to rid the community of the nuisance. Privileging one’s own interpretation over other people and claiming own’s own side of the difference as the dominant view creates an imperial mentality that can only lead to destruction of the weaker party. Romero writes, “The resulting extermination of the Convent is an extreme interpretation [of religion]” (Romero 638).

Community Responses

Fictional Community Response

Just as the interpretations among the Rubyites vary regarding the Convent women, the townfolks’ response to the violence done unto the women is also subject to variety. When executing the plan, the 8-R men of Ruby assume that the whole town has consensus. They think everyone agrees upon “the necessity of this action: Do what you have to. Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue” (Morrison 9-10). Despite the binary oppositions within the

town itself—the separate congregations, the unequal division of power between men and women, the diverging perspectives of the older and younger generations—the men assume that everyone will agree on the violence they’ve committed. But for those that are not so wrapped up in the power craze and defense of the traditional hierarchy of power, they do not see the women as such a threat: “Strange neighbors, most folks said, but harmless. More than harmless, helpful even on occasion. They took people in—lost folk or folks who needed a rest. Early reports were of kindness and very good food” (Morrison 11). And while some may think that this appearance is but a front to hide the schemes that go on behind closed doors, for the most part, everyone sees them as: “Just women” (Morrison 288). A conversation shared between *the wives* of Deacon and Stewart Morgan, after the violence, exposes the way in which the townspeople grapple with justifying the men’s behavior:

‘What do you think?’ Dovey broke the silence. ‘I can’t.’ ‘They wouldn’t hurt them, would they?’ Soane cut off the wipers. There was no need for them now. ‘No,’ she answered. ‘Just scare them. Into leaving, I mean.’ ‘People talk about them all the time, though. Like they were...slime.’ ‘They’re different is all.’ ‘I now, but that’s been enough before.’ ‘These are women, Dovey. Just women.’ ‘Whores, though, and strange too.’ ‘Dovey!’ ‘That’s what Steward says, and if he believes it—’ ‘I don’t care if they’re—’ Soane couldn’t imagine worse. Both became quiet. (Morrison 288)

In time, the rest of the town is given a voice within the narrative, too. Nearly everyone in the town has some type of relationship with one of the nine men who were present at the Convent, but despite the lines of connection, the townspeople cast disdain upon the 8-Rock men who could not see beyond their fear-based biases. Pious, the first man Lone sought out when trying to stop the attack, says: “‘You have already dishonored us. Now you going to destroy us? What manner of evil is in you?’” (Morrison 291). Pious says this directly to the 8-Rock men, and while Steward—the one who killed Consolata—argues, “‘The evil is in this house...’” (Morrison 291), Deacon—who once loved Consolata—admits, “‘My brother is lying. This is our doing. Ours

alone. And we bear the responsibility”” (Morrison 291). The rest of the town, the families of the men and the men themselves, make up stories that give them peace. This leads to multiple recitations of the story:

One [version], that nine men had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air. And two (the Fleetwood-Jury version), that five men had gone to evict the women; that four others—the authors—had gone to restrain or stop them; these four were attacked by the women but had succeeded in driving them out, and they took off in their Cadillac; but unfortunately, some of the five had lost their heads and killed the old woman. Pat left Richard to choose for himself which rendition he preferred. What she withheld from him was her own: that nine 8-rock murdered five harmless women (a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (c) because they *could*—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the deal required.

As for Lone, she became unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good. Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation. (Morrison 297)

Each Rubyite convinces themselves to remember the version of the story that protects themselves, or the ones they love most, completely. They do not want to allow the evil that happened to register as fault of their own. The recorded history of the slaughter will likely be as skewed as the single narrative version of the Disallowing that left out the women’s roles. The history becomes as muddled as the reputation the men assumed of the Convent women. There is no learning for the people of Ruby. They are bound to their defenses and to their exclusion; to their self-righteousness, they fasten evermore.

Reading Community Response

Readers, unlike the townsfolk of Ruby, do not have the same instinct to protect and defend the men or their ideologically motivated, blind violence. In fact, the readers have just

spent 300 some pages learning the intricate histories of the women who ended up at the Convent. So, if anything, reader biases render closer to the women of the Convent.

In the text, Reverend Misner, the more progressive of the two religious figures of Ruby, represents the instinctual response that an outside figure would have when observing the violence. He is new to the town at the start of the novel, so he is not blinded by the loyalties that many of the townsfolk are bound to. Misner's reaction, therefore, mirrors the natural course of a reader's interpretation, though he knows less than even readers do about the victims. Misner visits the Convent with his love interest, Anna. He reveals that he does not think highly of the violence. He is disgusted by the culpable men and their "primitive instinct for protection" (Morrison 305). His thoughts summarize what I imagine Morrison expected her readers to take from the men's violence:

Whether they be the first or the last, representing the oldest black families or the newest, the best of the tradition or the most pathetic, they had ended up betraying it all. They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him [Misner], was an unnecessary failure. How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it. Soon Ruby will be like any other country town: the young thinking of elsewhere; the old full of regret. The sermon will be eloquent but fewer and fewer will pay attention or connect them to everyday life. How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders? (Morrison 306)

The true quandary of the readers comes down to the disappearance of the women. The final chapter recounts each woman visiting her past life and making peace with those she left behind when entering the Convent. Is this their paradise? Did they make it out alive? Were they alive in

the first place or was the Convent itself a spiritual resting place? These questions are left up to the interpretation of the reader, though it seems fair to assume that a truer paradise has been found than the one that the women left behind.

Concluding Thoughts

The 8-Rock men of Ruby respond to the perceived threat of the Convent with a warrant for the women's death. This is certainly a strong and violent response to the presence of difference. The men's fear of difference stems from Ruby's strong adherence and privileging of tradition. As a town that only can survive on what was originally established, anything outside of the defined boundaries is a ticket for desolation. Not only that, but the men of Ruby *love* the power they hold in Ruby because of the patriarchal structure. The pressure of the past, coupled with the love they have for power, made it so that the men were willing to destroy anything that could possibly interfere with the success of their beloved paradise.

Ideologically transgressive love, therefore, happens because of fear. Fear that something important to you isn't important to someone else, and in their disregard for your value(s), they may inadvertently take it away. Religious crusades and political wars happen every generation because of such a fervent love for a single interpretation of a multifaceted issue. Violence, then, is a defense mechanism that arises out of such an intensely engulfing sense of love. The necessary strength, then, must come from recognizing a beloved value, belief, or way of life without shutting out perspectives, or worse, seeing those alternative values, beliefs, or ways of life as threats that must be disposed of. The town of Ruby could have benefitted from the healing offered within the Convent, but their reflex to put up strong defenses against anything outside of their "normal" caused insurmountable division and led to loss for all.

Conclusion

To love and be loved fiercely can hardly be considered criminal. But in Morrison's novels, the passion that bewitches and occupies said lovers turns the socially acceptable perception of love backwards and convolutes its invisible limits. To rape a daughter, to murder a child, to massacre a house of women: these actions are not the same as love. But love, very well, could be the justification each violating character employs: love could explain *why*.

Morrison stretches the bounds of love into something transgressive and challenges her readers to see it for what it is beneath the surface: love. She pushes readers to search for forgiveness for the forsaken. She names the transgression—the violence—but then packs in reason and context that makes the violence resemble elements of love in its worst form. This is not to say that Morrison completely justifies the violence, so much as she makes the characters human by letting readers see their faults. Morrison exposes the violators and their raw misinterpretations of love. The backbone of transgressive love is passionate boundlessness, but these two ingredients surmount boundaries that cannot be considered acceptable. And yet, Morrison never falters in her insistence that what she writes about is, indeed, always love. Morrison reflects:

“Beauty, love ... actually, I think, all the time that I write, I’m writing about love or its absence... I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it ... or are tenacious about love.” (Morrison, “The Seams Can’t Show” 5)

Despite the disguise of transgression, Morrison, as shown above, sees beyond the surface of the violent action: she admits that what she writes about is love. Love by a different brand than the typical connotation; the type of love that she writes is full of flaw and failure. She taps into a

field of love that becomes so faint and disfigured, so convoluted, that it is easily misunderstood as pure violence. But at its core, it is love.

Fully excusing any of the violence within the three novels would be too extreme a grace. The concept of transgressive love is not one that is meant to foster blindness. However, to distinguish between intent and impact is a critical component of the human psyche. Love without boundaries challenges the readership to allow space for redefinition of the concept; love no longer looks like love usually looks. The violent and extreme circumstances that arise from “nastiness,” from desperation, from righteous ideology are not love in its socially acceptable form, though the root of this love does stem from the same source of passion—of heart—all the same.

As a reader, I struggled first to understand and forgive these characters, as did many of my classmates. But in writing this thesis, I’ve realized the opposite side of the pendulum is equally as blind: to forgive in full. *What* was done still deserves recognition, no matter how valid and evocative the justification. Gracing any of the violations with complete compassion disregards the impact and outcome of the violence. To rape is to rape. To kill is to kill. To hurt is to hurt. No matter the reason. Morrison tells us *what* happened; while reading, we discover *how*; and beyond the pages, Morrison challenges us with *why*. But the picture is only complete with all three components—*what*, *how*, and *why*. Left with only *what*, there is no sympathy; with only *how*, there is confusion and disturbance; and with only *why*, the forgiveness is fraud. All three are intimately connected in this thesis’ analysis.

The readers of Morrison’s work operate within the tentative boundary of being both inside and outside of her story. Her words tempt readers with such real emotion that some fail to retain a sense of separateness from the heartache, the violence, the transgression. Poulet

addresses the blurring of the “I” that exists outside the book and the “I” that is modified while reading and “thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within [the reader]” (Poulet 309). The separation fades, and the self is displaced by the work. But Poulet offers an alternative to the complete union between reader and story, saying:

The astonishing consciousness is in fact the consciousness of the critic: the consciousness of a being who is allowed to apprehend as its own what is happening in the consciousness of another being. Aware of a certain gap, disclosing a feeling of identity, but of identity within difference, critical consciousness does not necessarily imply the total disappearance of the critic’s mind in the mind to be criticized. (Poulet 310)

Readers of Morrison’s work ought to heed this critical consciousness. Doing so allows readers to remain a subject outside of the story they engage with. It is only with the mind of a critic that readers can stay detached enough to analyze Morrison’s work. Providing enough objective thought, the critic’s mind is able to both feel the emotional pull of the story, while understanding that it—the story and the accompanying emotions—are still separate from themselves: they can retain an “I,” external to the phenomenology of reading.

The fictional community cannot separate themselves from the story in the way the reading community can. The fictional community only exists because the story has been written; there is no exteriority for the fictional community beyond the text. In this way, the fictional community’s response must be realistic and therefore respond with a certain level of horror and consequential forgivelessness.

Each fictional community reacts to the transgressive acts of love in ways that the readers can and should learn from, for better or worse. From *The Bluest Eye*, we learn of the secondary violence that rises from the short sidedness of the community. To learn from *Beloved*’s community is to see the potential for healing and forgiveness with the right conditions. And

Paradise demonstrates how fickle paradise is, how subject to interpretation ideology remains, and how devastating the effects of parochialism are.

To love so much it hurts: Morrison shows us how it *can* happen, how it *has* happened. And from her words, we take forth a nuanced understanding of what is possible within the human capacity for love, and in effect, for violence. We take forth a lesson on limits, on violence, on love, and how violated limits leads to violence, even if the intension, ultimately, is love.

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