

Taking a Bit of Foreskin with Him to Jesus:
An Intersection of Black and Queer Signs in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to bridge what can only be called a grave lacuna in the scholarship of Toni Morrison's novels: the intersection of black and queer signs in her work. This thesis examines that intersection by analyzing the treatment of male homosexuality and the construction of black masculinity in five of Toni Morrison's novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1993), *Paradise* (1997), and *A Mercy* (2008). Using close readings of these texts, supplemented by the tenets of Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, I argue that Morrison's treatment of male homosexuality is riddled with dangerously conflated attitudes which interfere with her ability to differentiate herself from the pitfalls of the misogynistic, homophobic authors who preceded her during the Black Arts Movement. At the same time, the shifting nature of homosexual depictions in Morrison's novels from her earliest to her latest work suggests an active struggle on Morrison's part to overcome many of these troubling attitudes in much the same way that the modern black consciousness continues to wrestle with the unspoken specter of white-on-black homosexual violence perpetrated under slavery.

I. Introduction

Before undertaking any meaningful analysis of an author's body of work, it is always of value to consider what light the inquiry in question might cast upon two discrete worlds: the interior world of the texts themselves and the exterior world which all literature reflects without exception. In the case of this thesis, which concerns itself foremost with the intersecting signs of homosexuality and black masculinity in the novels of Toni Morrison, I find it is useful to begin by reflecting on the objectives of queer literary theory. In Eve Sedgwick's seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), a book which has established many of the core tenets of the modern queer theoretical approach, the author posits that "virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/hetero definition" (Sedgwick 1). Human experience, that is to say, is inextricable from the experience of human sexuality, while the language we use to articulate sexuality leaves unretractable marks on every aspect of modern life. Literary texts, which I would classify in Sedgwick's terms as aspects of modern Western culture, thus require a critical analysis of sexual definition in order to be understood in their uncorrupted entirety. "The appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin," Sedgwick further postulates, "is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory" (1). Sedgwick's position may seem radical at first—decentering the analysis of a text smacks inevitably of some unilateral bias—but really, Sedgwick's suggestion has no feasible alternative. An attempt to trace the contours of a homo/heterosexual definition from the "center" of heteronormative culture quickly ceases to be much of a discussion at all, if only because normativity itself operates on the basis of long-held assumptions and marginalizes the significance of non-heterosexual experience. To borrow from the somewhat antiquated

linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, heterosexuality can only be understood in opposition to non-heterosexuality, a position which, despite being deeply imbedded in heterosexuality as an idea, becomes invisible in a discourse which takes heterosexuality for granted. Strengthening this position, Sedgwick also expresses that the discussion of homo/heterosexual definition is not exclusively important for the relatively fixed marginal group of queer or homosexual identities, but that it is rather “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (1). This perspective, which Sedgwick herself calls the universalizing view of homo/heterosexual definition, is the one I would like to apply to the underrepresented intersection of blackness and homosexuality in modern American literature—a crossing of signs which Kathryn Stockton, author of *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, describes as both “called for and . . . remarkably under-theorized” in modern literary studies (22). Sedgwick herself references this same inadequacy in the academic dialogue in another of her works, *Touching Feeling* (2003), where she laments the “almost genocidally underrepresented topic of black gay men in the United States” (28).

Of perhaps even greater concern than the grave underrepresentation of a black queer experience in American literature, however, is the tension which lurks in the shadows of this particular crossing of signs: a too-often-invisible history of black male bodies violated by a white colonial patriarchy and the reactionary homophobia that continues to haunt modern black communities, where cultural phenomena like the so-called “down low” point to sites of contention in the crossing of homosexual and black masculine identities. The ugly intensity of this white-on-black homosexual violence which disfigures the history of the United States as well as the inevitable homophobic reaction which continues to reside in the cultural imagination are perhaps at their best expressed in the hands of Robert Reid-Pharr. In his book *Black Gay*

Men, Reid-Pharr contends that “the life of the nigger is so caught up in the debauchery of the white master that even when ‘nigger’ is translated to ‘black’ it is still possible to sense the faintest hint of the raw milk smell of cum on his breath” (Reid-Pharr 148). Unexamined, this faint hint of a smell is all that remains to remind us of a social institution which to this day overshadows modern intersections of queer and black signs and to some degree black masculinity itself; yet the specter of white-on-black homosexual rape, however invisible, still precludes any possibility that the two signs might be reconciled. Returning to Sedgwick’s hypothesis, I would argue that the intersectionality of blackness and male homosexuality is not merely an incomplete and underexplored aspect of Western cultural understanding; it is, rather, a broken one, riddled with festering emotional wounds and traces of racially coded homophobic attitudes. Together, these are volatile chemical agents which, unless confronted, can only amalgamate in the sustained suffering of black men, homosexuals, and especially those who bear the charge of both troubled signs: black gay men.

It is with this cultural project in hand that I return to literature as a reparative cultural agent. There is perhaps no better candidate with whom to begin the reparative confrontation for which I have just argued than the prolific Toni Morrison, frequently celebrated as a speaker of the unspeakable and as a champion of African American healing through the confrontation of historical ghosts—the type of confrontation at heart and soul of her most famous novel, *Beloved*. An attempt to address homo/heterosexual definition in Morrison’s texts, however, is no small challenge. On their own, Morrison’s novels proffer a limited examination of a black homo/heterosexual definition as I have only just emphasized it: reinscribing the same silence which I argue has made such a mess of the intersection of black and queer signs. Not infrequently, her novels are also peppered with dangerous conflations which further obscure the

path to exorcising slave-rape culture from a modern understanding of blackness and homosexuality, ensnaring the language of sexual violence, bestiality, and child molestation within the image of the male homosexual. Still more problematic, the silence in Morrison's texts is redoubled by a consistent gap in the critical discussion surrounding Morrison's treatment of homosexual characters. Except for a handful of analyses addressing the topic of *female* homosociality in *Sula* and *Paradise*, scholars have eschewed discussing Morrison's treatment of male homosexual and transsexual characters even in novels where these characters play considerable roles. In this thesis, I will attempt to bridge this considerable oversight in Toni Morrison scholarship by analyzing the treatment of male homosexuality and the construction of black masculinity in five of her novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1993), *Paradise* (1997), and *A Mercy* (2008). I will then scrutinize these choice depictions in light of the historical context which may help to explain some of the more homophobic moments in her work—using Reid-Pharr's hint of a smell of a slave-owner's cum as my chief line of explanation—before I attempt to exorcise some implications of this violent history from a modern, black-identified homo/heterosexual definition.

Before delving into Toni Morrison's texts, I would like to take one further detour to explain the historical-literary context in which Morrison's novels are written. This, I hope, will situate Morrison in the larger tradition of modern African American literature, which regrettably has its own, long history of homophobic rhetoric. When Toni Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970, she unwittingly established herself as a central figure of what Deborah McDowell retrospectively terms a "second renaissance of black women writing to public acclaim; a demographic shift that brought the first generation of black intellectuals into the halls of predominantly white, male, and elitist institutions" (McDowell 168). Following in the

footsteps of the widely controversial (and arguably abortive) Black Arts Movement, Morrison and her contemporaries—Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Sherley Anne Williams, to name a few—introduced a new, distinctly female voice into a racial discourse previously “characterized, almost defined, by an extremely misogynistic and homophobic masculinism” (Smethurst 84). By viewing Morrison’s work as a reaction to the myopic pitfalls of the Black Arts and Black Power movements which preceded it—its misogyny and homophobia in particular—it becomes both possible and imperative to understand what Morrison does and does not say about gender and homosexuality as a response to existing modes of treating these topics.

The *Handbook of African American Literature* defines the Black Arts Movement as “a literary movement of mostly young, politically conscious African American artists who came of age in the 1960’s . . . [which] proposed as one of its principal aims the grassroots mobilization and politicization of all black-identified people, using literature . . . to achieve both artistic and political autonomy at any price” (Ervin). The movement lasted, according to the same source, from 1960 until 1976, overlapping briefly with the black womanist renaissance of the 1970’s and 1980’s with which Morrison’s work is generally associated. Contrary to the definition above, however, the mobilization and politicization of all black-identified people was not as inclusive as its mission statement would suggest. Instead, the Black Arts Movement suffered from a kind of limited vision: the dominance of a masculinist artistic voice which failed to accommodate a female or homosexual experience in its scope. In *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960’s and 1970’s*, James Edward Smethurst explains, at some length, the homophobic attitudes of the Black Arts Movement:

A fairly normative heterosexual vision of the liberated African American community was a powerful current in Black Arts ideology. One of the pillars of this vision was the reconstructing and revolutionizing of the black family in which

men were men and women were women, in surprisingly conservative ways. The notion of reconstruction was often predicated on the cultural fall of prehistoric Africa a familiar trope of African American nationalism reaching back into the nineteenth century. In this scheme, the figure of the gay male as a sign of cultural decay and the use of the epithet “faggot” as a free-floating slur also became common in the work of quite a few Black Arts activists.

(Smethurst 87-88)

An inspection of Smethurst’s delineation above informs two key observations: one, the surprisingly conservative model of the black family at play in Black Arts ideology—a model which appears to be internalized, almost entirely, from the white American model already established at the time of black emancipation. At the same time that Black Arts writers are critical of white American practices, these practices still leave their mark on the black nationalist vision. The second and perhaps even more troubling observation to be made here is the strong identification of black masculinity with the idyll of unadulterated Africa—a mythic space separate from the moral corruption of the white colonizing force. The image of this emasculator and violator, in turn, is a homophobic conflation of the corrupt colonizer-slave-owner and the figure of the white “faggot” who comes to represent his depravity. Further instances of homophobia in the Black Arts Movement emerge around the subject of James Baldwin—perhaps the single most prominent gay, black male author America has ever known and who wrote extensively through the fifties and sixties from Paris, where he expatriated at a young age to escape prejudice against blacks and gays (Boyd 205). While Smethurst’s book makes many attempts to defend members of the Black Arts Movement from the accusations of homophobia leveled against them, Smethurst nonetheless concedes on this point that “one could find open or only slightly coded antigay attacks on the more publicly ‘out’ James Baldwin” (Smethurst 86). These assaults on Baldwin translated directly into an alienation of a gay authorship within black culture, an alienation which divided rather than unified the black literature of the period.

Compounded with the faggot epithet which identified colonial power with the male homosexual, the Black Arts Movement had drawn the battle lines between black and gay signs long before Morrison wrote her first novel.

It is worth mentioning that within Black Arts circles, there have been those who “deny bitterly that the movement was particularly homophobic and misogynist [maintaining] that was true of almost every segment of American society” (Smethurst 85). That said, these attempts (chiefly Smethurst’s) to generalize the movement’s narrow, masculinist attitudes, conveniently overlook the obvious racial politics of the faggot epithet previously described. The “faggot” of the Black Arts movement is a caricature of white moral depravity—drawing venom, no doubt, from a history of white-on-black homosexual violence specific to institutionalized slavery. It is not a reflection of the larger American zeitgeist, which would not have made any discrete connection between colonial violence and homosexuality. Furthermore, a creative movement such as the Black Arts, built around exposing the mistreatment of one minority, is anything but infallible in its own prejudices on the singular account that other movements had the same tendencies, especially when one of the minorities in question—women—are the sisters, mothers, and wives of these Black Arts writers. In one final attempt to defend the movement, Smethurst points to the presence of prominent woman writers within the Black Arts Movement—from Sarah Fabio to Elma Lewis to Barbara Ann Teer. What Smethurst’s argument overlooks, in this case, is that these women were not represented in black literature until the Black Arts Movement was already on its figurative deathbed. Smethurst’s book observes “one would have to go back to the early New Negro Renaissance to find a major black cultural movement in which women played such leading roles prominent to the 1970’s” (85). What he attempts to grandfather in as a large female involvement in the Black Arts movement misses the first entire decade of that

movement's activity. The black cultural movement Smethurst outlines here seems, in fact, to better fit the timeline of the black female renaissance to which Morrison and her contemporaries belong: a movement which was at least in part an attempt to compensate for the pitfalls of the Black Arts objective. There is an abundance of evidence, meanwhile, to suggest that the Black Arts Movement was a straight, black man's artistic project. Maulana Karenga, one of the cornerstones of the Black Arts Movement, meanwhile clearly demonstrated an affinity for "Kawaida philosophy, with its notion that black women should be 'complementary to,' rather than equal with, men" (Smethurst 85). Ultimately, whether misogynistic and homophobic attitudes were in part an internalization of white majority attitudes or reflections of the unique philosophies of the Black Power Movement, the popular vocalization of these attitudes within Black Arts works indicates a movement dominated by the discourse of straight black men.

The feminist literature which followed in the 1970's is thus inextricably linked with the emergence of a new black voice: a tolerant and more inclusive artistic movement which according to some critics endorsed "a flexible black masculinity that eschews homophobia and encourages gender equality" (Fultz 164). By understanding Morrison's work as situated within this moment in the black literary canon, it becomes far easier to understand her novels as a significant stride forward in black literary history. Most emblematic of this forward mobility, perhaps, is Morrison's success as a black female writer—a success further immortalized by her 1993 Nobel Prize. But while Morrison's contribution to black feminism is almost impossible to refute, it will be the mission of my thesis to assess what strides Morrison makes to repair the "faggot" rhetoric of so many Black Arts writers: an undertaking which will, in turn, help to repair and enrich the discussion of Morrison's work in accordance with the central conjecture of Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*.

II. “To Name an Evil”: Soaphead Church’s Marred Symmetry in *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), features the first of three overtly homosexual characters in her oeuvre. Soaphead Church, “a cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin” (Morrison 167), is also the most overtly demonized of those three choice depictions. Described variously as “a very clean old man” (167), a “caseworker” (167), and a “misanthrope” (165), the “arabesque” symmetry of Soaphead Church’s character is, according to the text, “marred . . . by [the] rare but keen sexual cravings” of a homosexual too cowardly to act upon his sexual instincts (166). By examining the strange discrepancy between Soaphead’s homosexual framing in the text and his active molestation of young girls, by demarcating the conflated attitudes at work in the description of his character, and by at last exploring the connection between his sexuality and the white strain indicated by his “mixed blood” (167), I will argue that Soaphead Church’s character operates in part as a subtle reinscription of the “faggot epithet” once popularized by Black Arts writers. Ill-contented with this reductive reading of a decidedly complex character, I will then weigh this reading of Soaphead against what Eve Sedgwick would call a reparative reading of the text, in which I suspend my accusations to consider that Soaphead is demonized in the text not for being a homosexual, but for his inability to confront this difficult sexuality in himself. These two alternate readings will lay a foundation for the exploration of four of Morrison’s other novels, in which I will trace the homophobic attitudes first illumined in *The Bluest Eye* as I chart Morrison’s ongoing struggles with black masculinity and homosexual subjects.

In order to fully comprehend the homophobic attitudes at work in *The Bluest Eye*, the first line of business is to observe how little Soaphead’s homosexuality actually bears upon his actions in the text. Morrison’s choice to portray Soaphead Church as a homosexual becomes

expressly redolent of the Black Arts' faggot epithet when one considers how little he seems to actually embody homosexual desire—the apparent misappropriation of this label transforming it from a descriptive insight into a more general entry in a litany of dark “perversions.” This one-size-fits-all perversion model is apparent from the introduction of Soaphead's character in the novel, where the very first mention of his homosexuality spirals almost immediately into a list of sexual proclivities which Soaphead does *not* enact but is nevertheless associated with:

He could have been an active homosexual but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not occur to him, and sodomy was quite out of the question, for he did not experience sustained erections and could not endure the thought of somebody else's. And besides, the one thing that disgusted him more than entering and caressing a woman was caressing and being caressed by a man.

(The Bluest Eye 167)

The idea that Soaphead Church's sexual urges are homosexual in nature manifests here as a kind of empty conjecture which impedes rather than augments a reading of his character. The first assertion in this section follows easily enough: Soaphead *could* be an active homosexual, but does not actualize this potentiality because of his own reticence. From that conjecture on, however, Morrison's description of Soaphead's sexuality enacts a series of contortions. Because Morrison chooses to indicate that Soaphead is not an *active* homosexual, she is forced to mark him instead as either a *passive* or as a *closeted* homosexual. Both of these possibilities might allow Soaphead to fit the identity category without actualizing the behavior associated with a homosexual man. Homosexuality, in this case, is marked by Morrison as a matter of *being* rather than *doing*. The remainder of this excerpt, however, actually suggests that homosexuality is not an appropriate label for Soaphead even on theoretical grounds. He seems, if anything, to be repulsed by the idea of having sex with another man—leading one to wonder why, other than name-calling animosity on the narrator's behalf, he is characterized as a homosexual in the first

place. His feelings about homosexuality go beyond the timidity Morrison has describes into the realm of outright disgust: he cannot endure even the thought of another man's erection and is more repulsed by the idea of another man's caress than by that of a woman's. This rhetoric is not indicative of a man who cannot actualize his latent homosexual desires; if anything, it is indicative of a homophobic ascetic or a literal misanthrope: a hater of men. In this vein, Soaphead Church eschews two different definitions of the homosexual man: the man characterized by his actions (i.e. having sex with other men) and the man characterized by his innate identity (i.e. someone who is attracted to other men as an extension of his essence).

Other incidents in the text only further alienate Soaphead Church from the homosexual identity Morrison has thus far ascribed to but not adequately carved out for him. The closest Soaphead is able to come to a meaningful connection with another human being in the text manifests on the strongly heterosexual terms of his failed marriage. His wife, Velma, is described as both "his Beatrice" and as "a lovely, laughing big-legged girl" (170). By entreating the name of Dante's Beatrice, Velma is situated as Soaphead's spiritual guide. At the same time, she is strangely sexualized in this portrayal, which relays a description of her large legs and little else. These large legs, which to some extent also insinuate child-bearing hips, form a sort of road to Soaphead's salvation. This trend of linking Soaphead's unearthly religiosity and a heterosexual paradigm also suffuses the eventual failure of their marriage: Velma leaves Soaphead because of his melancholy and because "he [equates] lovemaking with communion and the Holy Grail" (171). This equation, on one hand, can be read as Soaphead's sexual inadequacies turning lovemaking into a nearly impossible task akin to the search for the Holy Grail, but at the same time it is impossible to divorce Soaphead's concept of lovemaking from the salvational intensity which seems to be a recurring theme in his relationship with Velma.

Additionally, the allusion to the Holy Grail is not well-tailored for a recapitulation of Soaphead's sexual pitfalls. In Arthurian legend, the quest for the Holy Grail is not some burdensome obligation saddled upon the impotent so that he might keep his wife; it is a king or a knight's passionate, almost obsessive search for the miraculous. By this point in the text, any reference to Soaphead's homosexuality has trailed off entirely, replaced with an overzealous, religiously heterosexual idyll which Velma cannot or will not provide. Rather than treating the failure of their marriage with the disinterest of a man attracted to other men, the backstory of Soaphead Church's marriage concludes with still more evidence that his love for Velma was a passionate one: the insinuation that he "never [gets] over [Velma's] desertion" (171).

Even within the parameters of Soaphead's alternative, pedophilic sexuality, he does not seem to envelop any sentiment which would demarcate him as a homosexual. Rather, he chooses to prey on little girls because "little boys [are] insulting, scary, and stubborn" (166). The little girls he preys upon are described, meanwhile, as "usually manageable and frequently seductive" (166). Soaphead is insulted by masculinity, even in its earliest developmental stages, while something in the demure female child is seductive to him. Thus, every opportunity Morrison has in the text to qualify Soaphead's unactualized homosexual desire is instead spent qualifying his disgust with the male form and his interest in little girls. Morrison's depiction of Soaphead's sexuality is more than problematic: it is overtly contradictory.

Having established how incongruous Soaphead's homosexual demarcation is, I will next evaluate some of the dangerous connotations surrounding his character. Returning to Morrison's initial assessment of Soaphead Church's sexual orientation, I would like to draw special attention to the interchangeability with which Morrison treats homosexuality and bestiality when she observes: "He could have been an active homosexual but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not

occur to him, and sodomy was quite out of the question” (167). This passage, in addition to qualifying the possibility of Soaphead’s homosexuality with the negatively charged conception of “sodomy,” also equates two disparate sex acts—as if bestiality and sodomy were the two available modes of expressing homosexual desire. In *Can’t I Love What I Criticize?: The Masculine and Morrison*, Susan Neal Mayberry proffers a similar reading of this moment in the text, but also problematically classifies as witty on Morrison’s behalf. In her interpretation, “Morrison comically ticks off the outlets available to a homosexual who lacks the courage to practice: bestiality (does not occur to him); sodomy (can’t sustain or stand erections); bisexuality (abhors physical contact)” (Mayberry 46). At first blush, there does appear to be a kind of comic irony at play between Soaphead’s impotence and this catalog of sexual aberrations. He is unable to sustain an erection and yet his character is introduced in relation to just about every mode of sexual expression imaginable. What is troublesome in this depiction, however, is that his inability to partake in bestiality is placed parallel to his refusal to be an active homosexual, implicitly equating the two acts in Morrison’s little joke. Morrison (and to a lesser extent Mayberry) link the active homosexuality Soaphead Church is too cowardly to confront with a sexual instinct cartelized by bestial desire and perverse anality (presented, as other aspects of Soaphead’s character, in a rhetoric exemplary of Old Testament damnation).

In the same vein, it is by no means difficult to interpret Soaphead’s attraction to little girls as the conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia as interconnected perversions—a conflation which is both popular and enduring in a larger body of homophobic rhetoric. In his letter to God, Soaphead insinuates another kind of interchangeability:

The love of them—the touch, taste, and feel of them—was not just an easy luxurious human vice; they were, for me, A Thing To Do Instead. Instead of Papa, instead of the Cloth, instead of Velma, and I *chose* not to do without them.

(179)

By situating his sexual encounters with little girls as a kind of alternative to other sexual and unsexual practices, Morrison again utilizes a system of logic in which any given sexual practice can be substituted for another: homosexuality, bestiality, and pedophilia become, rather than autonomous aberrations, interchangeable expressions of a one-size-fits-all model of “perversion”: things to do instead.

Finally, the association between Soaphead’s sexual deviancy and his familial obsession with purification of a white racial strain lends itself to the Africanist rhetoric that homosexuality is a kind of white man’s disease. Like the faggot epithet of the Black Arts Movement, Soaphead’s sexual proclivities are carefully coded as white within the novel. Soaphead’s ancestors, the Whitcomb family, are characterized by a desire “to separate . . . in body, mind, and spirit, from all that [suggests] Africa” (168). The reference to Africa at this point in the text (rather than merely to blackness) speaks obliquely to the Africanist belief that homosexuality did not exist in primordial Africa, but was rather brought to Africa by the white colonizer—the “faggots” of the Black Arts Movement’s epithet. Within *The Bluest Eye* itself, the desire to preserve a white strain leads, eventually, to intermarriage within the Whitcomb family. The result is “a weakening of faculties and a disposition toward eccentricity in some of the children. Some flaw outside the usual alcoholism and lechery” (168). Morrison makes a special point of implicating the white strain rather than the inbreeding by which it is maintained as the source of this aberration: “they blamed the flaw on intermarriage with the family, however, not on the original genes of the decaying [British] lord” (168). When this background is combined with the suggestion that Soaphead’s personality is “marred” (167) by his sexual orientation, a strong link between the white strain in Soaphead’s family tree and his deviant sexuality can be extrapolated:

Soaphead's lightness of skin is associated with his general depravity, which in turn is correlated with his sexual orientation (which is at once homosexual and predatory). Soaphead's white strain marks him as one of the strongest white presences in the text at the same time that it implicates itself in his moral failures. Thus, Morrison shifts the problematic characterization of Soaphead Church into the dangerous domain of *racial* conflation initiated under the banner of the Black Arts Movement.

To simply label Soaphead's appearance in *The Bluest Eye* as an unsophisticated pejorative against homosexuals would be, however, a reductive reading of Morrison's novel. Particularly, in a text where Morrison permits sympathetic thought to permeate scenes of incest and rape, it is too convenient to conclude that confluences in a character's depiction deny the possibility of redemption. Soaphead is one of many flawed and violent characters in a novel where invisible racist institutions corrupt even the innocence of children. In this vein, the motif of cleanliness and "funk" in the novel may provide a more nuanced sense of Soaphead Church's nature and offer what Eve Sedgwick would call a reparative reading of his role in *The Bluest Eye*.

Throughout the novel, the interplay of cleanliness and funkiness is a recurring theme which sits at the center of the narrator, Claudia's, racial shame drama: a shame drama which ultimately causes Claudia to violently destroy white baby dolls to keep from hating her own blackness. Baths, in one example, deprive Claudia of time "to enjoy one's nakedness" (22), while the discussion of "funkiness" throughout the text similarly associates (mostly racial) notions of shame and dirt. At its most basic level, blackness in the novel is coded as "dirty," while whiteness is coded as "clean." When this rhetorical scheme of dirtiness is applied to Soaphead's character, the conflation of pedophilia and homosexuality begins to deconstruct itself

and actually places the two at opposing ends of a binary. Soaphead's cleanly fixation with little girls—"those humans whose bodies [are] least offensive" (166)—becomes the opposite of the *dirtiness* he associates with "active" homosexuality. By situating Soaphead Church's perversion toward little girls as the byproduct of a homosexual shame drama—taking Morrison's word that Soaphead is a homosexual and that he is "too diffident to confront" the shame he experiences as a result—it is possible to understand the paradox of homosexual attraction and enacted heterosexual pedophilia at play in Soaphead's character as a kind of self-destructive transference. If we decide to read Morrison's depiction of Soaphead as unintentionally flawed rather than overtly antagonistic to homosexuality, Soaphead's attraction to men, perhaps, is not the thing which "marrs" his personality at all. Rather, his inability to face his true sexuality transforms his internal shame into an externality which victimizes innocent children. Emy Koopman's article, "Incestuous rape, abjection, and the colonization of psychic space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*," aligns itself with aspects of this reading, maintaining that "In the passage describing Soaphead, it is . . . suggested that complying with the colonizer's ideal, suppressing one's blackness and one's 'natural desires' leads to abjection striking back with a vengeance" (307). Admittedly, Koopman's article makes the same mistake as Morrison's original text, placing both Soaphead's homosexuality and his molestation of little girls under the umbrella of a one-size-fits-all "abjection" which *strikes back*, but the intersection of blackness and homosexuality in this case nevertheless manifests as an overlapping plight. The authentic self, whether black, or homosexual, or in Soaphead's case, *both*, is an abject experience twisted into violence. Soaphead Church's sexual urges, which might be mitigated any number of ways, turn into a destructive perversion in the pursuit of artificial, colonizer's ideals of cleanliness and purity, much like how Claudia's internalizations of similar "values" results in the

urge to destroy white baby dolls. Soaphead's family race drama can be reinterpreted through this same lens: the attempted hoarding of [his family's] white strain" and the separation of "body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa" leads to the perversion of illicit inbreeding in much the same way that Soaphead's attempts to "cleanse" his homosexuality lead him to satisfy his sexual urges with little girls. If the emphasis is placed on the rejection of one's identity, in this case his blackness, in favor of an ideal one, I might recant the insinuation that perversion is simply coded white in the text. Unfortunately, the tangle of thorns which comprises Soaphead's description makes it impossible to dismiss either the paranoid or the reparative reading of his character entirely. Rather, the only real conclusion I can draw from my reading of *The Bluest Eye* is that Morrison is actively playing with homosexual stereotypes in her debut novel. At the same time that she reinscribes the tenets of the Black Arts faggot epithet, Morrison leaves just enough room for sympathy to condensate along the rim of Soaphead's marred symmetry.

III. “As it Were Meant or Ought to Be”: Black Male Essentialism in *Tar Baby*

Although Toni Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), does not interface with the idea of homosexuality in any direct or enduring sense, it is nevertheless the most problematic of her novels when it comes to the intersection of black and queer signs. Where many of Morrison’s later works engage in a critical renunciation of the Black Arts movement’s patriarchal narratives, *Tar Baby* is a novel which condones the same, narrowly defined black masculine idyll which gave rise to the faggot epithet in the first place. Son, the novel’s black male protagonist, employs all of the problematic tropes of the Black Arts movement—from overt homophobia, to acts of startling violence, to, according to some critics, the outright rape of the novel’s female lead, Jadine Childs. What is most problematic of all, however, is that Morrison seems to endorse Son’s world view in the text, elevating him in the novel’s final moments into a kind of mythic space. By analyzing the homophobia, violence, and implicit rape connected with Son’s character, I will argue that Morrison’s apparent endorsement of Son’s character reinscribes many of the pitfalls of the Black Arts movements and problematizes all attempts to pardon her for the homophobic rhetoric which crops up elsewhere in her oeuvre.

Following the precedent established in my reading of *The Bluest Eye*, I would like to begin my reading of *Tar Baby*, likewise, with the most overtly homophobic moment in the text. Near the end of the novel, Son encounters an unspecified number of either transgender women or drag queens in the streets of New York City, who are described in the following terms:

The street was choked with beautiful males who had found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult and so they’d dumped it. They had snipped off their testicles and pasted them to their chests; they put the weighty wigs Alma Estée dreamed of on their heads and feathery eyelashes on their eyes. They flung sharp hips away to the right and away to the left and smiled sweetly at the crying girls and the men on tippy-toe.

(*Tar Baby* 216)

Although, admittedly, the term *transphobic* might better describe the exact undertones of disgust at play in this particular scene, the implication that these “beautiful males” are somehow unable to face the challenge of being black men is riddled with heterosexist as well as cis-privileged presumptions. These beautiful men, donning wigs and feathery eyelashes and casting sweet smiles at “tippy-toed men” are not acting as the speaker believes men *should*, and so this speaker frames their way of life in the language of auto-castration. What is more troublesome than the actual description of these beautiful men, however, is that the text does not make it explicitly clear who is voicing these opinions. Is this Son’s internal narrative expressed as free-and-indirect discourse? Is this Morrison’s own quasi-objective narration casting these kinds of problematic judgments? In failing to differentiate her voice from the voice of her character, Morrison allows herself, in a sense, to enter into collusion with Son about this narrowly essentialized notion of black masculinity.

While critics have consistently neglected to talk specifically about homophobic attitudes in the text, Morrison’s apparent endorsement of Son’s problematic world view has, in fact, drawn the attention of several critics in the existing Morrison literature. Peter B. Erickson, for example, critiques the novel for what he perceives to be “gender polarization: the exclusion of androgyny in favor of a male/female differentiation” (qtd. in Goulimari 193). Erickson’s criticism maintains, additionally, that Morrison “indicts” Jadine in the novel while she endorses Son for his submission to maternal authority. Meanwhile, in *Toni Morrison* (1998), Jill Matus also objects to what she views as Morrison’s reductive reading of Jadine and her blind endorsement of Son, whose ideas Matus calls “shallow” (Goulimari 193). By the final scene of the novel, in which “the mist [lifts] and the trees [step] back” a bit as if to make the way easier

for a certain kind of man” (*Tar Baby* 306), it seems almost impossible to refute that Morrison is working in Son’s favor—bending the very laws of nature to guide him into mythic immortality.

The idea that Morrison blindly endorses Son only becomes more problematic when other failures of his character are viewed in conjunction with the homophobia I have already illustrated. Contrary to Jadine, who is indicted in the text on the vague premise that she has “forgotten her ancient properties” (*Tar Baby* 305), Son’s effective murder of his wife, Cheyenne, is treated almost parenthetically in the text:

He went to Eloë, married Cheyenne, left the set early when a fistfight broke out and found his sleeping wife sleeping with a teenager. He was silent then too as he ran his care through the house and the bed caught fire He watched her wrappings but not her eyes in the hospital and still no sound.

(*Tar Baby* 224)

Not only does this particular aspect of Son’s history illumine the harsh double standard between him and Jadine in the novel, it also draws attention to a second flaw in Son (and, by extension, Morrison’s) masculinity model which Morrison fails to treat as a character flaw. Rather than indict Son for his wife’s murder, Morrison frames his wife’s death as the unfortunate side-effect of passion. She notes that the bed catches fire, making the bed the active subject of the sentence, as if this were some kind of unforeseen accident rather than the direct aftermath of a conscious act of violence. Stranger still, Son’s love of the “pie ladies” in the text further overshadows the violence and dangerous possessiveness he exhibits toward his wife, painting him as a lover of womankind rather than a man who would commit the act of manslaughter upon his sleeping wife.

Finally, the implication that Son participates in an act of *sexual* violence in the text cannot be overlooked. In “Descent in the House of Chloe: Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni

Morrison's *Tar Baby*," John N. Duvall interprets a quarrel between Jadine and Son near the end of the novel as a rape scene:

After Son leaves, Jadine 'lay in wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted,' and is unable to use her hands to remove a strand of hair from her mouth. More telling is Son's response when he returns four hours later; he is 'repentant, terrified that he had gone too far.' During their final conversation, Jadine is wearing only a T-shirt, which leads to this description of her from Son's point of view: 'The Cheech and Chong T-shirt was wrapped around her waist and her nakedness below embarrassed him now. He had produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him.'

(Duvall 334)

While Duvall emphasizes this scene as an indirect criticism on Morrison's part of Son's attempt to force Jadine back into the confines of a masculinized agrarian society, I find that his reading overlooks what is most problematic about this 'rape scene' that has occurred between the lines: Morrison's reticence to express that Jadine has been raped. If Duvall's compelling argument that this is in fact a rape scene is taken seriously, why is Morrison once again so willing to let Son off the figurative leash? Just as Son's murder of his wife, Cheyenne, is allowed to glide by without further comment, the possibility that Jadine suffers a rape at the hands of Son is not even overtly expressed in the novel. By this point in my analysis, Morrison seems to sanction Son's homophobia, his violent temper, and even the possibility of his sexual predation as expressions of his essential black masculinity. Morrison extends her sympathy to Son, who expresses his true and ancient properties in ways difficult for most readers to stomach, while at the same time she denies this same sympathy to Jadine, reminding her instead that "there ain't but one kind [of woman]" (282).

Shifting the implications unearthed in *Tar Baby* into the discussion of Morrison's relationship to the tenets of the Black Arts Movement, Morrison's position in the womanist renaissance which followed in that movement's aftermath also becomes problematic. Rather than

the expression of a black masculinity “that eschews homophobia and encourages gender equality” (164) which Lucille Fultz maintains was characteristic of the womanist renaissance movement, Morrison seems to align herself with the homophobic and gender-stratified belief systems employed by Black Arts writers.

That said, it is possible that Morrison is in fact attempting a critique of Son’s attitudes in *Tar Baby*, but that she simply failed to chastise him with the severity she doles out upon Jadine. Maybe Son’s movement at the end of the novel is not an act of apotheosis, as I have previously postulated, but is instead a statement that Son’s belief system is largely impractical in a modern world which he fails to recognize. Returning to Son’s first experience in New York, there is a kind of disillusionment which follows shortly after Son’s alarming homophobic episode:

Son was surprised at himself. He seldom misjudged people. He thought the love thing with Jadine must have thrown his sensibilities off, derailed his judgment But now he thought it was less an error in judgment than it was being confronted with a whole new race of people he was once familiar with.

(*Tar Baby* 217)

While Morrison still seems ready to defend Son’s character in this addendum to the “beautiful men” episode—qualifying to readers that “he seldom misjudged people”—his emphasis on tradition comes across in this scene as decidedly dated. Son is unable to recognize blackness in the context of the modern city, depending on the false heuristic of a “clerk’s little pecan-pie face” (217) to determine questions of trust. In this vein, Morrison’s sympathy for Son may be a sympathy for a man who has outlived his era and must be relegated to the past: a fate which would have recently befallen the now-defunct Black Arts movement at the time *Tar Baby* was published. While, in the end, there can be no doubt that Morrison evokes homophobic language in combination with seemingly sympathetic acts of physical and sexual violence, *Tar Baby*

ultimately leaves readers with more questions than answers as to *why* Morrison has chosen to commiserate this problematic masculine ideal.

IV. “The Nature of the Sin Behind Him”: The Abjection of Paul D in *Beloved*

While neither Soaphead Church’s convoluted sexual identity in *The Bluest Eye* nor Son’s black masculinity paradigm in *Tar Baby* can be discussed without acknowledging to some extent the institution of slavery which necessarily informs all of Toni Morrison’s texts, none of her other novels offer the possibility to interface with that institution as directly as does *Beloved* (1987). This novel, which critics frequently characterize as an attempt on Morrison’s part to conduct a literary “fixing ceremony” for the casualties of slavery and for its traumatized survivors, is also a novel concerned with facing the haunting terror of slavery head on by way of Morrison’s fictionalized plantation, Sweet Home. In this vein, *Beloved* offers an invaluable platform from which I will attempt a fixing ceremony of my own: a ceremony first to explore and then to exorcise the specter of white-on-black homosexual violence as it is represented in the not-quite-silent margins of Morrison’s text. By exploring the site of interracial homosexual violence by way of the “chain gang” scenario at the heart of Paul D’s history, by analyzing the constraints placed upon Paul D and Halle’s sexualities by the confines of slavery in the novel, and by at last exploring *Beloved*’s “rape” of Paul D as a site for potential sexual healing in the text, I will argue that the homophobic attitudes at play in Morrison’s larger body of works stem from the inability of her male characters to acknowledge and transcend the sexual abjection of black male bodies.

Darieck Scott has undertaken a similar mission over the course of two chapters in his book, *Extravagant Abjection*. Drawing attention not only to the primary scene of homosexual violence in the novel—the impressionistic but brutal “chain gang” episode— but also to the failure of Morrison’s text to adequately address the implications of this scene, Scott explains at least part of the silence at play in this scene as a byproduct of homophobic queasiness:

“Homophobia, more than heterosexism, on the part of readers (anticipated and actual) and perhaps even to some degree the author herself, cordons of Paul D’s sexual humiliation by white men in *Beloved*. Paul D and Sethe *know* and yet choose not to take up fully the implications of Paul D’s experience, and this choice is both a reflection and an emblem of what is effectively . . . a homophobic collusion between Morrison and her readers.”

(Scott 153)

This collusion, as Scott depicts it, seems to me to extend well beyond a microcosmic conspiracy between Morrison and her reader, though I agree with him on this account. What I would extrapolate from Scott’s observation is that the vow of secrecy between Morrison and reader in this episode actually typifies the very purpose of fictional analysis, which necessarily provides a space in which to consider ideas and the relationship between them. In the case of Morrison’s homophobic collusion, it seems to me, the willingness to omit the graphic details of this scene actually embodies a wider theme of history—to color over difficult realities with intellectualized or symbolic ones. Where history might reflect upon male-on-male rape as a facet of slave life, it codes this reality in the more removed “emasculatation,” which represents a wide range of violence from rape to castration while only skimming along their surface. Through her reticence to engage with this difficult moment in the text, Morrison may actually make us as readers aware of our own reluctance to explore the possibility of Paul D being the victim of sexual violence at the hands of other men; we are willing to engage with the emasculating consequences of this sexual violence, but we, like Paul D himself, want to quarantine the abject experience. Darieck Scott’s book engages with this idea, which he calls the “untouched . . . question of whether this ‘emasculatation’ of black men might have occurred due to or through *rape of men by other men*” (Scott 132).

Having framed the unspoken question both inside and outside of Morrison’s *Beloved*, it becomes increasingly necessary that the next stage of my analysis be an actual reading of

Morrison's (dis)engagement with white-on-black homosexual violence in the novel—the “chain gang” episode which informs the crux of my entire project. Morrison's short narration of this incident reads as follows:

Chain-up completed, they knelt down. Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none—or all.

“Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hungry, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here you go.”

Occasionally, a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves'.

(108-109)

The language at play in this particular scene is striking on two different levels. First, as Darieck notes so eloquently in his analysis of this passage, the act of sexual violence at the center of this scene is never explicitly described or even named in the text. The euphemism of “breakfast” which the guards employ in their interrogation of their prisoners serves to protect the consciences of three separate parties in this instance: Paul D and his fellow prisoners (who are either coerced to respond in the affirmative or who naively misunderstand the guard's question), the guards themselves (who can distance themselves from the sexual act and perhaps from their own homophobic misgivings by encoding their sexual violence as a sick inside joke), and the reader, who, as previously observed, is in a kind of collusion with the author not to dwell for too long upon the particulars of a disturbing and distasteful oral rape scene. Only in the paragraph following the “breakfast” is the reader fed a little scrap of carnal knowledge which threatens to identify the act: the “bit of foreskin” which allows some prisoner other than Paul D to escape the role of a debased black abject but which Paul D is unaware. This act of retribution, furthermore,

is posed almost as a hypothetical: “occasionally, a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, *maybe*, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus” (italics mine). The actual fate which befalls Paul D in particular can only be arrived at through further dark speculation—the decoding of symbolized groans, some foreskin, and a “breakfast”—never to be addressed by either Morrison or her characters on the level which Paul D would have had to experience it.

The other surprising characteristic of this passage is that Morrison nearly suggests a degree of consent between the guards and their victims. Where Morrison might have described a moment of resistance akin to that gunshot in the head of some other slave, or otherwise delineated a moment of total dread, the prisoners are described in her passage as simply *waiting* for the act of sexual violence which is to follow. Asked if they want “breakfast,” if they are “hungry,” the prisoners respond in a single voice’s affirmative: “*Yes, sir.*” Scott attempts to address some element of this implication of consent by attributing it to the kind of normalcy which would surround sexual violence under slavery—the prisoners have grown used to these kinds of abject experiences. In Scott’s words:

The utter lack of spectacle, of sensation, with which Morrison describes this event also seems to suggest that it, like so many other tales of sexual exploitation in the novel, is what passes for normal under the circumstances: for example, the ex-slave Ella’s year-long capture and rape by a father and son is also mentioned almost parenthetically.

(Scott 133)

While the veracity of Scott’s argument is solid—a large part of the emotional dissonance at play in Morrison’s account does seem to stem from its marginalization and brevity—Morrison’s choice to depict the scene in such a truncated palliated fashion also courts another kind of unutterable possibility: that there is some close cousin of consent which has become entangled with the abject prisoners’ experience. By even suggesting this much, I’ll admit, I run the risk of

sounding like an oral rape apologist; what I would actually hope to argue, however, is that the institution of slavery disrupts sexual experience in ways that are largely inaccessible to us as readers and renders opaque the exact psychology of debasement. In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers expresses a nearly identical sentiment regarding the sexuality of enslaved bodies, voicing that “under these circumstances [of enslavement], the customary aspects of sexuality, including . . . ‘pleasure’ and ‘desire’ are all thrown into crisis (Spillers 221).

This crisis goes far from unacknowledged in other moments in *Beloved*. One of the most revealing insights into the sexual paradigm of Sweet Home appears in a bit of backstory shortly after Paul D and Sethe are reunited in the text—a backstory ripe with troubling implications:

Then a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men.

And so they were: Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man. All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl—the one who took Baby Suggs’ place after Halle bought her with five years of Sundays. Maybe that was why she chose him. A twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change was a serious recommendation.

She waited a year. And the Sweet Home men abused cows while they waited with her. She chose Halle and for their first bedding she sewed herself a dress on the sly.

(*Beloved* 13)

For the Sweet Home men, masculinity is described in this passage as something instilled by their slave-owner, Mr. Garner. The matter of being a man, which elsewhere in the text might be thought about as an essential and irrevocable characteristic, is in this instance something given to them by the agents of the dominant culture: they are *made* and *called* men by their white master. If this unhealthy locus for the masculine ego is not troubling enough, however, the masculinity

described in the paragraph to follow—attributed to Paul D and his fellow slaves in particular—is indicative of a disrupted sexual catharsis. The two main outlets through which the men find sexual release call to mind the litany of perversions attributed to Soaphead Church: there is the bestial outlet (which did not occur to Soaphead but which is enacted by the Sweet Home men), and the fantasy of rape (which can be likened either to Soaphead’s out-of-the-question sodomy or his active molestation of young girls). The only thing the Sweet Home men will not consider, arguably, is the possibility of sleeping with one another. Sex with animals is considered preferable to sex with another man. Beyond the obvious protests of a queer Morrison reader, this powerful eschewing of homosexuality by the Sweet Home men is most worrisome because it is an avoidance of the one possible act of *consensual sex*: the only modes of sexual release which can exist inside Garner’s bestowed notion of masculinity is the avenue of sexual violence.

Returning to the chain gang incident with this masculinity paradigm in hand, the possibility that this moment of sexual violence is susceptible to similar distortions of the sexual instincts is hard to refute: what I have read previously as some form of consent on behalf of the prisoners could be its own iteration of a sexuality under inhuman pressures. Yet, just as easily, the converse could be true: the purposeful refusal to engage in homosexual behavior between slaves could be informed by the chain gang incident, which encodes any kind of homosexual behavior with the repulsions of an anathema. If this is the case, how might we understand the implied consent of the prisoners to the “breakfast” they are offered? In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman addresses the implications of consent to similar acts of sexual violence in her reading of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a memoir of Harriet Jacobs’ experiences under slavery. In her analysis, she observes that while a slave’s ability to consent or refuse an act of sexual violence may be a

strictly illusory one, in nevertheless empowers the black body with the agency to *give* itself rather than to be *taken* against its will: a choice which may palliate the harsh reality of violation even as a negative stigma binds itself both to the Paul D's sense of self and to the possibilities of sexual expression between men.

Having scrutinized this negative stigma which in many respects arrests Paul D's development throughout most of *Beloved*, I would like to conclude this section by examining the possibility of healing for Paul D through his sexual interaction with Beloved late into the novel: a reading I will reinforce with a similar approach attempted in a chapter of Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection*, titled "Slavery, Rape, and the Black Male Abject." The sexual interaction in question, I would note, can be thought of as an act of rape in its own right—one which forces Paul D to relive some aspect of his experience under slavery and which facilitates a process of healing through rememory (to borrow a phrase from Sethe in the novel). Darieck Scott reads this scene in the following terms:

The forced sex recapitulates the conditions of slavery especially as *women* endure it and recapitulates the chain-gang fellatios that also repeat those conditions. But it is not until Paul D is raped again that the phrase "red heart," signifying the opening of his rusty tobacco tin, can occur. Emergence from the fragility and terror of that the trembling seems to him to signify is to emerge into such fragility because of the evisceration of his ideal, and his being stripped down to what he is or can be without its essential defenses; it is to fall back into the empty gap of possibilities which he is.

(Scott 148)

Thus, Scott argues, Paul D is able to strip away the ornamentations of Garner's problematic masculinity paradigm through a kind of forced sexual intimacy with Beloved—who to at least some degree acts as a symbol of Paul D's quarantined past. Thus it becomes possible for Paul D to claim a healthier mode of sexual release: symbolized, in its turn, by his relationship with Sethe

outside the narrow constricts of a toxic Sweet Home. And yet Scott's reading of Paul D's being "raped" by Beloved fails to exorcise one thing: the lingering stigma which the chain-gang episode has saddled upon all of homosexuality, which Morrison eschews treating for the last time by entrenching Paul D in a compulsory heterosexual relationship with Sethe.

V. “Bold as Gomorrah”: Fashioning a Queer Space in *Paradise*

While the two remaining homosexual characters in Toni Morrison’s corpus do not make their appearance until *A Mercy* in 2008, *Paradise* (1997), the third and final installment in the *Beloved* “trilogy,” proves an indispensable contribution to the crossing of homosexuality and black masculinity in her fiction for two principal reasons. First, *Paradise* showcases Morrison’s clearest critique of black masculinity to date and serves as a significant departure from the homophobic essentialism which rendered *Tar Baby* so alarmingly homophobic. By exploring themes of violence, scapegoating, and racial elitism in the all-black, male-dominated community of Ruby, Morrison has in fact inverted two of her earlier novels: *The Bluest Eye* (which, as Susan Neal Mayberry wryly observes, has now become the blackest eye) and *Tar Baby*, in which women were defined by their reproductive worth and acts of masculine violence were sublimated into heroic myth. Second, while the novel still precludes the conceivability of black male homosexuality in the confines of Ruby’s conservative society, the strong foregrounding of homosocial bonds and even implicit homosexual contact between the women of the Convent just outside of Ruby carves out of *Paradise* the most prominent queer space in all of Morrison’s oeuvre. By outlining Morrison’s critique of the interconnected violence, misogyny, and homophobia prominent in the Ruby community, and by exploring the Convent through the lens of a queer space where rigid cultural norms become untethered and malleable, I will argue that the fixing ceremony started in *Beloved* continues to operate in *Paradise* as well—urging black men to open old wounds in order to bring healing to a community which would sooner take lives than engage with the suffering of its ancestry.

The plight of the Old Fathers and their descendants in *Paradise* is inherently a masculine one. The Oven, a large, centrally-located structure which serves in the novel as a shrine to

Ruby's heritage, differentiates the Old Fathers from slavery and reifies the very lifeblood of the Ruby community in the terms of masculinity when Pulliam dictates, "Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men—men, hear me? not slaves, ex or otherwise—the bricks those men made" (85). According to this model, slavery's inherent opposite is the exemplary manhood personified in the city's patriarchal lineage—peppered with names like "Big Daddy" and "Big Papa"—while the élan vital of Ruby itself distends from the handiwork of that inalienable masculine power. In "As if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man: Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," Andrew Read interprets the masculinity model at play in *Paradise* as an internalization of a 19th-century, white American manhood which used the subjugation of black bodies to maintain itself:

For Morrison, a key element of this new [white] masculinity was the subjugation of African Americans; control over men reduced to objects confirmed the "absolute" masculine power of white men. Being denied all the elements that hegemony deemed essential to manhood was a traumatic, dehumanizing experience for black men They could own no property, nor impose their will on any aspect of external reality, not even their own bodies; they were totally unmanned.

(Read 529)

In many ways, this interpretation of black masculinity is redolent of Paul D.'s struggle in *Beloved* (similarly troubled, for instance, with a lack of control over even one's own body). What is unique to masculinity in *Paradise*, however, is the way this masculinity interacts with the notions of womanhood. The subjugation of women—in particular, the Convent women who are eventually slaughtered by the men of Ruby—serves as a mode by which black men in the text can claim the otherwise inaccessible masculine doctrines of the white hegemonic society. Read's article concurs that "the idea that true manhood involves mastery over subjugated others leads the men of Ruby to seek total mastery over the only people they are in a position to dominate:

the women in their community” (535). When it becomes apparent that the Ruby men cannot control the behavior of the Convent women as a way to reinforce their image of black masculinity, they gravitate toward violence as a means by which they can continue to control their world. They “shoot the white girl first” (3), turning violence against women into a twisted reversal of racialized self-loathing, then proceed to kill the other women to ensure ; The violence itself even begins to serve a masturbatory function for the masculine ego, as evidenced during the attack on the Convent when the men begin “fondling their weapons, feeling suddenly so young and so good” (*Paradise* 185). Thus, the masculinity appropriated by the Ruby men from the white hegemony inextricably linked to violence and misogyny in much the same way the Sweet Home men in *Beloved* maintain their masculinity through fantasies of rape.

Having thus established the connection between masculinity, violence, and misogyny in the novel, it is now essential that I draw the primary subject of my thesis into the fold: the subject of homophobia. While the only overt discussion of male homosexuality in the novel is an interpretation of a natural formation in the desert (more on that in a moment), I would make the argument that at least part of the violence enacted by the Ruby men involves these men’s inability to confront the idea of homosexuality, female or otherwise. In the scene leading up to attack on the Convent, the women are indeed characterized in the language of homosexual depravity: “Something’s going on out there, and I don’t like any of it. No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away. Jesus! No telling what else” (276). While this accusation launches into a laundry list of other lecherous indictments before the decision is made to attack the Convent, the fact that the first of the imaginary offenses attributed to the women is that of homosexuality suggests some preoccupation with the idea. Unable to physically control the women outside their borders, the Ruby men are outraged by the idea that these women could

have sexualities independent of masculine partners. In this vein, the idea of homosexuality—albeit among women—becomes the chief agent of emasculation for the Ruby men. Near the end of the novel, Steward, Deek, and K.D. find the site of what the Convent women call the “loud dreaming”: a basement room where the women have traced their outlines on the floor as part of an intricate rebirthing process. This discovery once again foregrounds the fear of homosexual intercourse, as the three men are immediately prompted by the chalk outlines to envision this as a place of “defilement and violence and perversions beyond imagination” (287). We, as readers, can assume that the contours of multiple same-sexed bodies lying together on the floor suggest some kind of homosexual orgy which is repulsive to the men at the same time that it threatens their masculine egos; the men themselves, however, are unwilling even to imagine what this perversion might look like in much the same way Paul D. never overtly confronts the chain gang episode in *Beloved*. Until this particular instance, the Ruby men have been quite willing to concoct elaborate explanations of the things they find inside the convent, including “an old hen, her puffed and bloody hind parts cherished, [one man] supposes, for delivering freaks—double, triple yolks in outsize and misshapen shells” (5). It is only when their findings court the domain of homosexual perversion—festering in the wounds of disrupted slave sexualities—that we return to the idea of the unthinkable.

The same choice expression, “perversion,” meanwhile, also shapes the only explicit discussion of homosexuality in the text. Referring to a natural formation—“a man and a woman fucking forever” (63)—just outside of Wish, Arizona, the text reads:

They would have been, could have been, a tourist attraction . . . except they embarrassed local people. A committee of concerned Methodists, organized to blow them up or disguise them with cement, got started, but it died after a few preliminary investigations. The committee members said their objections were not antisex at all but antiperversion, since it was believed by some, who had looked

very carefully, that the couple was two women making love in the dirt. Others, after an equally careful examination (close up and with binoculars), said no, they were two males—bold as Gomorrah.

(*Paradise* 63)

These “concerned Methodists” have a great deal in common with the men of Ruby. At the very least, the parallels seem strong enough to argue that both parties serve a similar purpose in the novel. Like the men of Ruby, the committee is informed by strong protestant beliefs and situate themselves opposite what they deem “perversions” of natural order (even those perversions which, ironically, manifest themselves in the natural world). What is most interesting about this particular episode in the text, however, has less to do with the judgment of the Ruby-like committee and more to do with what appears to be the restorative function of the formation in the novel. Mikey, the character who originally relates the story of the natural formation in the novel, explains that “the Methodists wanted to get rid of them but they wanted them to be there too. . . . Even a bunch of repressed rednecks, too scared to have wet dreams, knew they needed the couple” (63). This seems to me one of the most redemptive moments in all of Morrison’s novels, as the “redneck” inhabitants of this Arizona town on some level embrace the ambiguity of this natural formation. In a vein totally different from the essentializing view Son attempts to impose upon the “beautiful men” in *Tar Baby*, the conservative members of this society seem to be actively struggling with the assumptions of their cultural consciousness: holding to their traditional beliefs at the same time that they embrace the necessity of what may be two men having sex in the desert.

This is not, however, the only redemptive work Morrison has undertaken in *Paradise*. Enveloped in the novel as a foil to the conservative idylls of Ruby, the Convent is a site where the assumptions of society can be challenged and transcended. The mysterious identity of the

“white girl” whose death opens the novel is perhaps the most powerful illustration of the Convent’s capacity to queer the assumptions of dominant culture. Because this white girl is never identified in the text, the racial identities of the Convent women are all effectively erased: any one of them, save for Consolata, may not be black. In this vein, Morrison uses the Convent as a queer space: a space where a range of possibilities not endorsed by dominant culture can be explored. In another example, the women of the Convent shrug off the trappings of female performativity; as a part of ritual of the “loud dreaming,” the Convent women shave their heads and oil them with wintergreen (284). Most closely implicated in my project, Morrison even suggests the possibility of sexual fluidity within the queer space of the Convent. In a passage exploring Seneca’s self-mutilating tendencies, it is revealed that “the ridges on Seneca’s skin had only been felt [by Gigi] under the covers” (256). Morrison does not overtly indicate that the two girls participate in homosexual activities, but she does put them in bed together and place a strong emphasis on one girl’s feeling another. Finally, the Convent queers even the boundary between life and death, when the women of the Convent mysteriously disappear after they are supposedly gunned down by the Ruby men: “No bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone” (292).

Morrison even goes one step beyond carving out a queer space in the Convent: she goes so far as to implicate the queerness at play under the Convent’s roof in the process of these women’s healing, which is in turn set apart from the ruminating consciousness of the stunted Ruby men: “unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266). The one shortcoming in Morrison’s sudden investment in queering many of the essentialist mandates of her early work is her refusal to involve black males in the healing work. *Paradise* carves out a range of new, variegated possibilities for the women of the Convent, but she refuses

to court these same possibilities for the men of the novel. As has been the case in many of her earlier novels, there is something about black masculinity that repels the possibility of queer comfort.

VI. “Enough to Imagine a Future”: The Pairing of Willard and Scully in *A Mercy*

If *Beloved* and *Paradise* both offer readings in which black male abjection may become an agent of healing in a post-slavery American landscape, *A Mercy* (2008) reimagines the intersection between homosexuality and black masculinity in quite a different way—reaching further into the same nation’s history for a moment in which those two signs might cross without the stigmas of slave-rape culture I have outlined in previous sections. Acting, in one sense, as a vision of life before the descent into that rape culture, *A Mercy* is also the ideal novel upon which to conclude my reading of Toni Morrison’s oeuvre for two chief reasons. The most obvious of these reasons is that Willard and Scully, two characters in the text, form Toni Morrison’s first and only homosexual pair—the active pairing of which transforms them into a marvelous foil for Soaphead Church’s *inactive* and thereby isolated homosexual identity, with which I initiated this line of inquiry. The other reason is that *A Mercy*, the last in the chronology of the five works I have selected for this thesis, facilitates a reading of Morrison’s attitudes toward male homosexuality as a fluid one which has grown more tolerant since her debut novel. According to Lucille P. Fultz, editor of *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*, “*A Mercy* represents Morrison’s most developed notions of homosexual masculinity . . . associating its fluidity with sensitivity to women and children” (Fultz 128). I will concede that Morrison’s depictions of Willard and Scully in *A Mercy* are not completely exempt from the problematic tendencies displayed in many of Morrison’s earlier works—the rhetoric of rape, white racial effeminacy, and bestiality, at least, still crop up in the chapter devoted to Willard and Scully. What insulates Willard and Scully from the detestable misanthropy of Soaphead Church, however, is the range of sympathetic qualities which offset these conflated attitudes. Following the model I have used to interrogate Morrison’s earlier novels, this section will first examine the problematic aspects of

the text before making the argument that while Morrison's delineation of homosexuality in *A Mercy* is an imperfect one, it also demonstrates that the contention between blackness and queerness is a constructed one.

Within the novel, Willard and Scully are two white indentured servants tied to the Vaark property alongside Florens, Lina, and Sorrow—three other iterations of unpaid labor in a 1680's America. To some extent, Willard and Scully exist in the novel as a method of separating the tenets of racism from the institution of slavery; as whites and unpaid laborers, their very being in *A Mercy* calls into question what *Beloved* might present as the unquestionable link between slavery and a racial hierarchy. In an interview with NPR, Morrison expresses her aspirations in the novel are along these exact lines:

I wanted to separate race from slavery. To see what it was like, what it might have been like, to be a slave, but without being raced, because I couldn't believe that that was the natural state of people who were born and people who came here—that it had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized and legalized.

(NPR, "Toni Morrison Discusses 'A Mercy'")

Thus, Willard and Scully are coded with a brand of socio-economic queerness even before the question of sexuality enters the conversation. The duo are members of the same racial group as Mr. Vaark, but are not fortunate enough to share in his fiscal and societal privileges. At the same time, the two share many aspects of daily life with both Florens (a slave and the daughter of an African woman) and Lina (a Native American servant and the last of her tribe), but are unable to relate to either of these girls' traumatic and racially-impacted histories. Compounded by their homosexuality, Willard and Scully embody the liminal essence of the New World—a world built on the enslavement of a multiplicity of peoples but still ripe with possibilities which would be inaccessible elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Willard and Scully are also emblazoned with many of the negative connotations seen elsewhere in Morrison's oeuvre. Describing Scully's background, Morrison inscribes Scully's sexual orientation within the language of pederasty in the Anglican church:

In his twenty-two years, Scully had witnessed far more human folly than Willard. By the time he was twelve he had been schooled, loved, and betrayed by an Anglican curate Scully never blamed the curate for betrayal nor the flogging that followed, since the curate had to turn the circumstances of their being caught into the boy's lasciviousness, otherwise he would be not just defrocked but executed. Agreeing that Scully was too young to be permanently incorrigible, the elders passed him along to a landowner who needed a hand to work a rural area, barely populated, where, they hoped, the boy might at best mend his ways or at worst have no opportunity to corrupt others.

(*A Mercy* 154)

At a glance, Morrison's return to the trope of the debauched priest who molests a child seems like an unsophisticated moment in the text; we can almost finish the story for her—the tale of the pederast who “loves” a child only to abandon him. The underpinnings of this history, however, are actually close to impossible for a reader to resolve. Through Scully, Morrison casts the closure of the affair with the curate in a sympathetic light: Scully does not blame him for doing what he had to do to avoid execution. Yet, we recall, Scully is only twelve years old when he enters this relationship with the curate—a relationship which, ipso facto, we can only think of as predation. Society, meanwhile, is happy to blame the child, Scully, for the affair, and attempts to change his ways by sending him into isolation. There is no direct indication in the text whether Morrison condemns or colludes in the opinions of these unnamed elders, but the fact the adult Scully featured in the novel is both homosexual and sympathetic seems to act as an indirect refutation, on Morrison's part, of the elder's beliefs. At the same time, however, Morrison also allows this backstory to linger without further comment, suggesting on some level that Scully's sexuality is at least in part the product of his victimization—he is taught to love men and to

forgive the man who violates his young body via a kind of identification with the man who victimized him. This unaddressed implication is anything but benign in a setting where slavery is commonplace; it makes Scully, rather, one more victim of the morally depraved, white colonizing “faggot” of the Black Arts movement.

Of all the troubling subtexts at play in *A Mercy*'s characterization of Willard and Scully, the most worrisome by far is the rhetoric of rape which suffuses Scully's thoughts in the novel. In a brief passage devoted to Scully's “wily, sure-shot instinct for the true core of others” (151), he makes a number of disturbing observations about the women of the Vaark property, including that “although he relished Lina's nakedness, he saw a purity in her” (151). This purity, so redolent of Soaphead Church's perverse preoccupation with the “cleanliness” of young girls in *The Bluest Eye*, is coupled with the same sexual confusion which made Soaphead so impossible to read as a homosexual: Scully's inclination to *relish* Lina's female body is out of line with our understanding of homosexual behavior. On its own, one might be able to read this as a singular opposite-sex attraction or a fluid representation of queerness, surprising but utterly benign to the integrity of Scully's character. Unfortunately, the narration uses Scully's appreciation for Lina's body as merely the first entry in a Soaphead-esque litany of *things to do instead*. “If he was interested in seduction, [Sorrow is] who he would have chosen” (151-52), the narrator remarks a few lines later, while “if he had been interested in rape, Florens would [be] his prey” (152). Restricted to Scully's imagination, these observations about the “rape-ability” (152) of the three women also call to mind the rape fantasies of the Sweet Home men in *Beloved*. Where in *Beloved* these fantasies were coupled with the somewhat homophobic choice to sleep with animals and not consider homosexuality as a viable outlet, however, in *A Mercy* these fantasies are the thoughts of an active homosexual. This difference in the range of options available to

enslaved bodies has nothing to do with the availability of women—the Vaark property women are significantly more available than women in *Beloved*, while in actuality there are fewer *men* to be found in Willard and Scully’s environment. The largest difference (and one which is inherently problematic for my project) is that Scully and Willard are *white* indentured servants. Homosexuality is on the table for them and in fact allows them to engage in a relatively healthy relationship with one another; it is only in the case of *black* masculinity that Morrison seems reluctant to even consider these possibilities. Queerness and slavery are not mutually exclusive in Morrison’s novels: only queerness and *blackness*. The only instance in which these two signs are allowed to layer atop of one another for Toni Morrison is in the misanthropic Soaphead Church, and I need not emphasize the devastating consequences of that crossing.

Still, Morrison’s treatment of Willard and Scully’s characters is far cry from an overt demonization. Morrison makes many attempts, in fact, to separate Scully’s fixation on raping female bodies from an actual temptation on his part:

His assessment of her un-rape-ability, however, was impersonal. Other than a voyeur’s obsession with Lina’s body, Scully had no carnal interest in females. Long ago the world of men and only men had stamped him and from the first moment he saw him he never had any doubt what effect the blacksmith would have on Florens.

(*A Mercy* 152)

Regrettably, the attempt is at least partially ineffective. Scully’s homosexuality may, in one sense, protect these women from the seductions and sexual violence which he might otherwise attempt, but the compulsion to think about women in the language of rape is still troubling and misogynistic. The fact that Scully’s place in “the world of men” is presented in relation to the blacksmith, meanwhile, rather than to Willard, traces what in *Beloved* will become another site of unwanted sexual contact—the desire of a white man for a black one.

One would be hard pressed to find a moment in the novel, however, which better encapsulates the queerness and fluidity of racial exchanges leveraged in the text than the relationship between Willard and that free black smithy who sometimes comes to the Vaark farm on business. At first, Willard is jealous of the man's lucrative interactions with Mr. Vaark (an ironic reversal of racial economics from those a reader might presuppose inside slavery). In their early interactions, Willard treats the blacksmith with obvious contempt: "learning the blacksmith was being paid for his work, like the men who delivered building materials, unlike the men he worked with in Virginia . . . [he] refused any request the black man made" (150). This relationship quickly develops into a more amicable one, however, as the smithy's charm works over Willard, in effect elevating the dignity of the indentured servant despite his lowly status:

Arriving at the site, he caught the blacksmith's eye, then his nod, then his thumb pointing straight up as if to signal approval . . . when the smithy said, 'Mr. Bond. Good Morning,' it tickled him. Virginia bailiffs, constables, small children, preachers—none had ever considered calling him mister, nor did he expect them to. He knew his rank, but did not know the lift that small courtesy allowed him.

(*A Mercy* 151)

I would like to read this scene as a variation on the relationship between Mr. Garner and Paul D in *Beloved*—characterized by the white Mr. Garner's ability to *give* a flawed and essentially violent masculine agency to the black Paul D. (who is later emasculated when he becomes the victim of sexual violence). In *A Mercy*, it is a *black* man's approval and a simple courtesy which bestow a masculine dignity to the *white* servant. The masculinity which the smithy bestows, furthermore, is a healthier, more authentic one. The masculinity of the Sweet Home men embraced violence—sex with cows (which can be safely labeled non-consensual) and fantasies of rape—while it vehemently eschewed any trace of homosexual desire. Willard's masculinity, meanwhile, is obviously queer-friendly and encoded with a keen understanding of others:

“Willard understood why the girl, Florens, was struck silly by the man. He probably called her miss or lady when they met for suppertime foolery” (151). Thus, by juxtaposing these two scenes, a correlation between an embrace of homosexuality, a fluidity of racial interactions, and a healthy cultivation of a masculine identity, emerges from the interim between Morrison’s works.

Before concluding my examination of *A Mercy*, the fifth and final novel in the itinerary of my thesis, I would like to examine two last touching moments which serve to reify Morrison’s shift in the portrayal of homosexual men. The first situates Willard and Scully in the context of family life—a context which is significant because it has historically been at odds with the popular understanding of homosexuality. Sorrow, having given birth to her child, welcomes Willard and Scully into the fold of her small family unit: “Having helped with her delivery, they assumed godfather status, even offering to mind the baby if Sorrow needed them to” (146). A complete reversal of Soaphead Church’s pedophilic perversity, Willard and Scully are a source of nurture and compassion for Sorrow’s child. Finally, I find it worth noting that the most hopeful moment in the entirety of *A Mercy*, the hope that emblazons the idea of the New World, is entrusted to Morrison’s first homosexual pair: “Perhaps their wages were not as much as the blacksmith’s, but for Scully and Mr. Bond it was enough to imagine a future” (155). If nothing else, Willard and Scully’s depiction in *A Mercy* allows us as readers to imagine the possibility of a future in which the institution of homosexual rape under slavery might be exorcised from the intersection of black and male signs, at least in the works of Toni Morrison.

VII. Conclusion

Having thus concluded my exploration of black and queer signs in five of Toni Morrison's novels, I must attempt at last to organize the discrete observations of these five disparate analyses into a coherent narrative. Unfortunately, this task is in many ways an impossible one, too bogged down by the ambiguities and fluctuations of Morrison's corpus to neatly package the treatment of homosexuality in her novels as entirely homophobic or entirely devoid of homophobic attitudes. Certainly, there is evidence for progress in Morrison's delineation of male homosexuality in the 38-year span between *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*. Where Soaphead Church was deemed a homosexual as a part of a long list of perversions culminating in the molestation of young girls, Willard and Scully's homosexual relationship is positively construed in the text as a firm bond between two men who are trusted as godfathers and given an allotment sufficient for building a future. Similarly, the immeasurable leap made from the radical essentialism at work in *Tar Baby* to the free exploration of the Convent as a kind of queer space in *Paradise* marks another monumental stride in Morrison's relationship to homosexual themes.

These accolades in place, the persistence of *whiteness* in all three of Morrison's overtly homosexual characters continues to implicate, however unintentionally, a kind of white racial effeminacy at the root of homosexual desire even as late into Morrison's corpus as *A Mercy*. While it would be difficult to call Willard and Scully representations of the Black Arts Movement's faggot epithet, the ongoing correlation between homosexuality and whiteness in all three depictions of homosexual men in Morrison's work still makes it impossible to entirely exorcise the link between homosexual desire and the moral depravity of a white colonial force within the scope of her novels. Furthermore, even as Morrison shows an increasing readiness and

ability to portray queer experiences and characters in a more positive light, her ongoing reluctance to portray a black gay man suggests that this particular intersection is still one which troubles her. If the interpretive work I have undertaken in *Beloved* is used to try and explain this enduring reticence on Morrison's part, I would postulate that the idea of a black man having sex with another man still reinscribes, for Morrison, such terrors as the chain gang episode. Even as Morrison works to rub away at the residue of what Reid-Pharr called the hint of a smell of a slave-owner's cum, she has not yet managed to reimagine black male homosexuality in a space where the masculine ego is not threatened with emasculation.

There is, of course, one other recurring problem in Morrison's delineation of homosexual characters which merits recognition: the close connection drawn between homosexual men in her novels and a penchant for the sexual victimization of women is a habitual theme in Morrison's texts. Soaphead Church's molestation of little girls in *The Bluest Eye* and Scully's fixation on the rape-able female body in *A Mercy* echo the same strange displacement of homosexual desire onto female-coded bodies. This particular idiosyncrasy of Morrison's suggests to me that Morrison's understanding of homosexuality is fundamentally limited. Soaphead Church, for instance, is encoded as a homosexual at the same time that he is clearly repulsed by the idea of same-sex intercourse. In this same vein, Scully relishes the body of Lina at the same time that he is marked by the world of "men and only men." In the same way that Morrison is unable or unwilling to write a character who is homosexual and black at the same time, Morrison demonstrates a reluctance to depict a character who truly isolates his sexual desires entirely to the male form. This particular quirk only proves to be a weakness in Morrison's work, however, insofar as the definition of homosexuality as exclusive same-sex desire is held as a sacred truth. While it is unfortunate that Morrison's complication of the homosexual identity category is

marred by enacted and suggested sexual violence, it is nonetheless commendable from a queer theory standpoint that Morrison grants her homosexual characters some element of sexual fluidity. If the same freedom was attributed to some of her outwardly heterosexual characters, I might be tempted to argue that Morrison is in fact participating in the chief goal of queer theory: disassembling the socially constructed binary between homosexual and heterosexual identities. Because only homosexual characters seem to escape the confines of their narrowly defined sexual identities, however, and because Soaphead Church escapes his homosexual demarcation by actively molesting young girls, it is giving Morrison a touch too much credit to insinuate that she is a true queer author. Nevertheless, Morrison has made an attempt to distance herself from the masculinist and homophobic tenets of the Black Arts Movement as her works have matured. What in *The Bluest Eye* appeared to be a reinscription of the faggot epithet and what in *Tar Baby* seemed like an irreparable apology for Son's chauvinistic traditional ideology have been revisited and in some measure recanted by the time *Paradise* and *A Mercy* have been factored into Morrison's black literary canon. While Morrison's attitudes toward homosexuality will likely always be problematic in some measure, there is at least indication that Morrison is still actively struggling with her prejudices in a sophisticated manner.

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