

Thinking through the Sexual Difference: Race, History and Community in *Paradise*

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The subject of the dream is the dreamer.
Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (1992)

I. The African-American Exodus as traumatized history

In *Freud and the Non-European* (2003) (originally presented as a lecture to the Freud Museum, London), Edward Said explores the profound implications of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) for Middle-East politics today. Revealing a considerable interest in Freud's work and its impact upon his own, Said argues that Freud's insistence that Moses, the founder of Jewish identity, was a non-European Egyptian "undermines any simple ascription of a 'pure' identity." That is, in his attempt to establish the origins of the Jewish people, Freud offers a radical theory of identity which knows its own "inherent limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, and only one, Identity" (54).

As is well known, Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* is a radical challenge to the foundations of Judaism, his own religious and cultural heritage. Freud argues that the Moses known in the Old Testament was not a Jew but an Egyptian, who attempted to force his strict monotheism on the ancient Hebrews and was murdered by those who adopted him as their leader. He was resurrected to their minds centuries later, however, when

another figure, taking the name of Moses, eventually brought them under the stern, demanding single deity. This book, at its most historically sensitive moment, "brought outcries of rage and despair from Jewish scholars and little sympathy from gentile ones"(Gay 796). Yet, what Freud engages in here is not simply to undermine the founder of Jewish identity or the foundations of Judaism. Rather, Freud offers a radical theory of identity which knows its own limits: that is, "identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed" (Said 54). Said believes that such an "unresolved sense of identity"(55)—if embodied in political reality—enables us to see the possibility of forming a basis or new understanding between Jews and Palestinians. Said argues that, while "the diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community" is "a relatively widespread phenomenon" today, "an understanding of what that condition means is far from common." What he finds in Freud's theory of Jewish identity is "an admirable sketch of what it entails"(53).

In her response to Said's address, however, Jacqueline Rose expresses her concern, pointing out the other latent thesis of *Moses and Monotheism*, that "there is no sociality without violence"(75), which is already foreshadowed in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Said's tribute to Freud's last work—his reading of Freud's vision of identity that knows its own "provisionality"—would be a little too "sanguine," if we do not consider the fixity of the identity, that is, the issues of trauma we have in common (74):

For trauma, far from generating freedom, openness to others as well as to the divided and unresolved fragments of a self, leads to a very different kind of fragmentation—one which is, in Freud own word's, "devastating", and causes identities to batten down, to go exactly the other way: towards dogma, the dangers of coercive and

coercing forms of faith. . . . Fragmentation can engender petrification, just as it can be a consequence of historical alienation that a people, far from dispersing themselves, start digging for a history to legitimate the violence of the state. (75-76)

Given the traumatized history of both sides of the conflict in the Middle East, Rose feels less sanguine because “the most historically attested response to trauma is to repeat it” (77). Honoring Said’s act of taking out of Freud’s last work “a vision of identity as able to move beyond the dangers of identity in our time,” Rose wonders “whether any of us ever will be” (78).

It is exactly this issue of traumatized history that Toni Morrison (1927-) engages in her reconstruction of African-American historiography. If we do not consider the problematics of trauma, the centrality of violence in her trilogy, especially black-on-black violence, cannot be fully understood. Sethe’s infanticide of her baby in *Beloved* (1987), and Joe’s shooting of his lover Dorcas in *Jazz* (1992), cannot be fully explicable without the psychoanalytic insight of trauma. In *Paradise* (1998), Morrison foregrounds the black-on-black violence again, opening the novel with the scene of horrific massacre of women by black men. If some reviewers and critics find the motivation of the slaughter less convincing,¹⁾ it is because they fail to consider the issue of trauma, that is, Morrison delineates the community which is constructed around the traumatized history.

Paradise focuses on the African-American experience of the westward movement, history of a construction of an all-black town in Oklahoma territory. It is mainly staged in a small rural town, Ruby, Oklahoma, which was founded by the descendants of freed slaves and survivors from Post-Reconstruction’s devastation. Setting the time of the narrative mostly in the 1970s, the novel traces events from the Post-Reconstruction era through Post-World War II, Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War,

to July of 1976, the year of America’s bicentennial. Narrating the story of an oppressed and endangered people seeking to create a safe haven, Morrison ostensibly utilizes the Old Testament story of Exodus, the most important and enduring myth in African-American Christianity.²⁾ According to Ruby’s communal history, they are the descendants of a group of wandering ex-slaves who were led by a leader, at God’s command, from the land that persecuted and imperiled them. After having been rejected by a number of already established pioneer communities, black as well as white, they eventually succeeded in founding the perfect, all-black town of Haven (and later Ruby after Haven declines) in a secluded place in Oklahoma.

The contemporary residents of Ruby center their history and identity around their ancestors’ traumatic experience of the rejection called “the Disallowing”: the story of how 158 freed black slaves left Mississippi and Louisiana in 1890 and were turned down at every stop not only by whites and Native Americans, but also by other “Negro towns” for being too black and too poor (13-14).³⁾ To the people called “eight-rocks” for their shade of black found deep in coal mines, this insulting rejection by “fair-skinned colored men,” “[b]lue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen”(195) is an epiphany: it drives them into the construction of Haven, their own all-black town, isolated from the rest of the world. After Haven declines with the economic hardship after World War II, they move to a new location and construct another all-black town, Ruby. The name of the town indicates that the community is again centered around the Disallowing: their second town is named for Ruby, a member of one of the original founding families, who died because of the racism and segregation. She was refused treatment because no white hospital would admit blacks and died in a hospital waiting room while the nurse tried to call a veterinarian to examine her. Understood as a reenactment of the Disallowing, Ruby’s death increases the community’s desire to be self-sufficient and solidifies its rigidly patriarchal

structure based on reversed racism, which excludes all who are not so dark as themselves. As Patricia Best, Ruby's schoolteacher and unofficial historian, describes it, the Disallowing becomes "a sacred experience" in which "the disallowed become the elite disallowers"(65).

Thus in *Paradise*, Morrison delineates the community constructed around the traumatized history of the African-American Exodus. According to Albert Raboteau, Exodus functioned as an "archetypal myth" for slaves and symbolized "the common history and common destiny"(13) of black Christians. After the institution of slavery ended, black Americans, facing other types of racial oppression, repeated the story of Exodus decade after decade, which "for so many years had kept their hopes alive" (14-15).⁴ Delineating the all-black community which structures its identity and history on the myth of Exodus, however, Morrison rather criticizes their interpretation of history and their sacred role in that history. Their ideology of quest for home and freedom generates the isolated, exclusive, rigidly patriarchal all-black town based on inverted racism. Then, rendering the failure of ideal all-black towns—one perished and the other on the verge of decline—Morrison, like Freud, challenges her own religious and cultural heritage in "re-membering" the historical past for African Americans.

II. Thinking through the Sexual Difference

Opening with the scene of violent massacre of women by the black men, Morrison reveals that the patriarchs of Ruby repeat the persecution and violence that they themselves have suffered and sought to evade. Yet, why do they have to slaughter the innocent women at the outskirts of town? How is their violence on women related to their dream of constructing an

all-black town, a safe haven free of white persecution?

Ruby's patriarchal structure versus the Convent's matriarchy. Ruby's male-centered, conservative community versus the Convent's unconventional group of women who are alienated from the society. As the overwhelming impressions of reviewers testify, the male/female dichotomy is everywhere evident in *Paradise*.⁵ The opening scene is nothing but the violent culmination of this male-female confrontation, where the slaughter of the Convent women is described through the eyes of the Ruby's patriarchs. The Convent women are "detritus: throwaway people"(4), "slack"(5) and "sloven"(8), "Bodacious black Eve unredeemed by Mary"(18). Exploring the inside of the Convent, they find what they expected to see—"the devil's bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen" (17)—to prove the rumors that the Convent women are temptresses, child murderers, and witches who have turned the Convent into a "coven"(276). Obviously, the Convent women are represented as the feminine Other who threatens their ideal of the all-black town. As one of the attackers justifies his murder:

. . . this town is resplendent compared to his birthplace which had gone from feet to belly in fifty years. From Haven, a dream town in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven, a ghost town in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain. (5)

Foregrounding the male-female confrontation at the opening, Morrison directly connects it to the central theme of the novel, the history of the construction of the all-black town, that is, paradise. Then the obviousness of this male/female divide must be analyzed in terms of Morrison's concern with race, history and community.

In spite of the startling opening line, “They shoot the white girl first” (3), the racial difference among the Convent Women—the identity of “the white girl”—remains obscure throughout the novel. Unlike the racially “pure” all-black town of Ruby, the Convent women seem indifferent to the racial difference or skin color among the residents. Like her short story “Recitatif,” *Paradise* challenges the racial stereotypes or categories in readers’ minds. While undermining racial categories, Morrison foregrounds the sexual difference and reveals how racially exclusive community necessarily becomes sexually oppressive one. That is, the inverted racism within Ruby actually functions as sexism. In Ruby as well as Haven, the “Fathers”(6) rule and the darkest “8-rock”(194), coal-black skin is privileged. As Patricia realizes, “People get chosen and ranked” based on “skin color”: the community forces Menu Jury, for example, to “return the woman he brought home to marry. The pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia”(195); also, Patricia’s mother (Delia) and daughter (Billie Delia) are ostracized for their “sun-light skin”(196). Delia dies because no one will help her to get the medical care she needs. Billie Delia grows up suffering the unreasonable label of “fastest girl in town”(59) and eventually leaves Ruby. It is no coincidence that Ruby’s inverted racism always marginalizes or drives away women. As Patricia recognizes, “[e]verything that worries them must come from women”(217).

In order to ensure their racial purity, the patriarchs of Ruby have to protect/control women. Their idea of safe haven is closely related to the protection of women. There is no “slack or sloven woman anywhere in town” because “[f]rom the beginning its people [are] free and protected.” A sleepless woman can walk without fear at night and “[n]othing for ninety miles around [thinks] she [is] prey” in Ruby (8-9). Yet, their “cult of true black womanhood”(Duvall 142) conceals their anxiety about female sexuality, which is implied in the town’s name itself. As is observed before,

their patriarchal, racially-pure town is named after the woman who is victimized by white racism and segregation. Ruby dies leaving a boy—K.D. who later becomes the only heir of the Morgans, one of the town’s most prominent eight-rock families. Yet as the episode of uncertain identity of Ruby’s husband—only known as her twin brothers’ “Army buddy” who died in World War II—reveals, the name of Ruby connotes their anxiety about female sexuality. As Linda Krumholz aptly puts it, Ruby describes woman not only as an “enshrined jewel” but also as “dangerous sexuality” (24).

Similarly, the sacred Oven, the central icon of Ruby signifies both the protection of women and the anxiety about female sexuality. Originally built by Haven’s founding fathers as both cooking place and a monument of their accomplishments, the Oven was not only the symbol of the town’s unity but also a testament to the protection of women, that is, none of their women ever cooked in a white kitchen. Ostensibly associated with the womblike maternal space, the Oven appears to be a suitable symbol to protect and enshrine for the patriarchal community. Yet, Morrison is quite ironical about such a founding/unifying symbol of the maternal/woman, revealing how the Ruby men consecrate the Oven, whereas the Ruby women secretly resent it. Originally the Oven was Haven’s communal center, nourishing the people physically as well as spiritually. Later the Oven is transported from Haven to Ruby and carefully reassembled brick by brick by new fathers. Yet as the women quietly abhor a “utility [become] a shrine”(103), the Oven has long ceased to be functional as all of Ruby’s households have their own private appliances. As its nurturing, life-giving function has long been lost, the Oven’s physical condition not only suggests “the town’s decay,” “its lost ideals,” or “dormant spirituality”(Kubitschek 184), but also reflects how the patriarchal town has repressed female sexuality.

Thus revealing how the racially-pure community is based on the repression of female sexuality, Morrison does not leave the Oven as an enshrined/idealized symbol of the woman/mother. This symbol of female sexuality (the Oven) subverts and destabilizes the patriarchal structure of Ruby. However secluded in a faraway country in Oklahoma, the town of Ruby is no exception to the sociopolitical turbulence sweeping over the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas the patriarchs attempt to solidify the community into the dogmatic ideology, the younger generation has begun to react against their authoritarian, separatist politics. The growing internal conflict manifests itself in a dispute over the Oven's damaged inscription. After the Oven has lost its "real value" as a place of celebrating baptisms (103), the younger generation begins to appropriate it as their hangout/sexual assignation. When the elders find a painting of a black fist with red fingernails (a Black Power sign) on the side of the Oven, disagreement between the generations ultimately explodes into an open debate over the words of the Oven's incomplete motto. Ruby's older generation insists that the motto should read "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," which is understood as an admonition from God to be obedient and righteous. The younger, more politically active generation argues, however, that the motto reads "Be the Furrow of His Brow," which commands them to be God's instruments and work against white racism.

This debate over the Oven's inscription signifies more than the generational conflict within Ruby. Regardless of the motto's original meaning, both generations share a notion of Ruby as a covenanted community and understand their identity in terms of the ancestral inscription. The ambiguity of its original meaning destabilizes not only the "origin" of their identity but also Ruby's communal history based on the Exodus Myth, their history of idealism, perseverance, and triumph. With the Oven's ambiguous inscription, Morrison obviously problematizes

Ruby's notion of history based on language. As Katrine Dalsgard points out, in Derridian terms, the initial empty space of the motto signifies, the ancestral inscription has no "fixed origin" and "remains unstable and open-ended" (240). Also as the inscription is written on "the Oven's iron lip" at the base of the Oven's mouth" (6-7), its suggestive "oral" position undermines the community's belief in the "written" inscription as their final signified. Yet Morrison takes a step further, undermining even the orality⁶ of Ruby's historiography: ironically enough, the patriarchs' authorized version turned out to be based on the uncertain memory of an old woman, of Esther Morgan's ancient "finger memory" made from passing her fingers over the letters while she was too young to read (83). In other words, Morrison suggests the presence of unspeakable memory, or a history that is irrecoverable, behind the patriarchs' claim based on oral history and memory.

Thus, as the younger generation assembles around it, the Oven functions not as a unifying symbol, but as a site of subversion, division, and conflict. With its incomplete motto, the Oven not only undermines Ruby's communal history and identity, but also problematizes the notion of history itself, questioning how to speak the unspeakable memory. In other terms, given that the Oven is a founding symbol of the community centered around the traumatized history, Morrison again problematizes the maternal figuration of the historical trauma.⁷ This destabilizing, subversive function of the Oven prefigures the possibility of another maternal/woman's space, the Convent and its women at the outskirts of town. In contrast to the dead Oven of Ruby, the Convent is obviously delineated as nurturing maternal space with its big kitchen as well as excessive imageries of food. Always providing food and rest to its visitors, the Convent is open to anyone, male or female. Also the Convent women, who are not attached to men, live freely outside of the patriarchal

restrictions. Then it is no coincidence that the Ruby patriarchs begin to blame the Convent women for the town's degeneration. As Ruby's communal identity and history is undermined, their growing anxiety about female sexuality is projected to the Convent women.

Many critics construe the overt contrasts between the town of Ruby and the Convent. The story of the Convent women is generally read in terms of Morrison's critique of the patriarchal and racially exclusive society, or of Morrison's skepticism toward any national historical narrative, such as (African) American exceptionalism or the American dream.⁸ Many attempt to explore Morrison's alternative vision of race, history, and community into the story of the Convent women: For example, Krumholz argues that Morrison "engages with contemporary feminist, black, and postmodern theorist of representation and poses multiple or nomadic subjectivity against a fixed and unified subject position and displaces whiteness and the power of the white gaze without reifying blackness, and by creating an artistic practice that brings about insight" (22). According to Krumholz's postmodern reading, the Convent women exemplify what Rosi Braidotti calls "a nomadic subjectivity" (24), the men are associated with phallogocentrism (25), and the convent represents history as a densely layered palimpsest (29). Similarly drawing on the postmodern thinkers like Homi Bhabha, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, Katrine Dalsgard reads the convent women's story as Morrison's deconstruction of African-American community's exceptionalist ideal, that is, as "the process of supplementarity at work in exceptionalist discourse"(241). According to Dalsgard, Morrison assigns "any other textual function to the women than that of supplement" and the story of community is impossible to close (243). Further, from the viewpoint of political theory, Magali Cornier Michael argues that *Paradise* "re-imagines agency in terms of a reconceptualization of coalition and

community": that is, "[i]dentity and agency are reconfigured as decentered, multivocal, and always in-process but, nevertheless, as constructive. . . . In a utopian gesture, *Paradise* depicts an alternative community of women actualized through coalition processes" (647). Especially, Michael points out that Morrison's novel moves toward the kind of notion of identity that Chantal Mouffe describes: "an ensemble of 'subject positions' that can never be totally fixed in a closed system" and that remain "always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions."

According to Mouffe, these points at which subject positions meet function as "nodal points, partial fixations," as "precarious forms of identification" that have the potential of constructing "forms of unity and common action" that do not depend on "centered subjects or on pre-existing identities or unities"(Michaels 657; Mouffe, "Feminism" 372, 381).

In a sense, all these readings drawing on postmodern theory demonstrate a variety of visions of identity/community that knows its own "provisionality," as is mentioned before. While their readings seem pertinent and informative, they never fully explain why such visions of identity/community should be suggested by Morrison through the story of the Convent women. In spite of her salient use of male-female confrontation, many critics—if they do not complain about it—consider it mainly as a critique of patriarchal ideology or male-centered society, or reduce it into gender divisions completely free of biological determination.⁹ In other words, while admitting the male-female divide at the heart of the novel, they do not take into account the issue of sexual difference which is, in psychoanalysis, neither biologically nor culturally determined and belongs to the realm of "the real." If they do not consider the issue of sexed body or sexual difference, or the fixity of identity, their arguments end up kind of utopian or "sanguine" ones, as it is pointed out by Jacqueline Rose.¹⁰

In *Paradise*, the issue of trauma and that of sexual difference are hard

to separate. While delineating how the community of Ruby is centered around the traumatized history, Morrison renders how the Convent women free themselves from the traumatized past, which parallels their reconstruction of feminine subjectivity. At the end of the novel, however, the women are mysteriously dead/undead and the final vision of paradise is elusive and ambiguous. Criticizing Ruby's exclusive patriarchal structure, inverted racism, linear history based on the Exodus Myth, what does Morrison suggest through the story of the Convent women? Or to be more precise, how is the sexual difference related to Morrison's alternative vision of race, history and community?

Given Morrison's emphasis on male-female divide/ sexual difference, I find Joan Copjec's analysis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*—along with the silhouettes of Kara Walker, the contemporary black artist—very illuminating in many ways: through the Lacanian insight, Copjec elucidates the radicality of Freud's theory of race and history in terms of feminine sexuality: she illuminates the link between Freud's theorization of racial identity and the feminine subject formation/sublimation, and explicates how Freud, removing "ideality" from his notion of race, uncovered "the anonymous root of racial identity" and reconceived the Jewish racial identity and its history; finding a similar gesture between Freud and Walker, Copjec explicates Walker's feminine act of sublimation, especially her use of the big black mammy of the Antebellum South as her opening "the possibility of conceiving racial identity as repeated self-difference"(107). Like Walker's silhouettes which create "an erotic disassembling" of stereotypical figures, "a mad and vital tussle to break away from their stale scent and heavy burden"(Copjec, *Imagine* 107), Morrison gathers the stereotypical women at the maternal space of the Convent and renders their painful but rapturous break away from the traumatized past as well as the patriarchal construction of feminine. In the

light of Copjec's argument as well as other feminist criticism, I would like to explore how Morrison's representation of the Convent women opens up the possibility of a reconceived notion of race, history and community.

III. Towards the reconstruction of the feminine subjectivity

A. The Convent women as the Feminine Other

In her representation of the Convent women, Morrison utilizes the images of cultural and social stereotypes to emphasize that the Convent women function as the feminine Other for the Ruby men. Morrison seems deliberately invoking cultural and social stereotypes rather than attempting to avoid them.¹¹ If Morrison's aim in her depiction of the Convent women, as she remarked, is "to write race and to unwrite it at the same time"(Oprah), she similarly writes and unwrites the images of the feminine Other and stereotypes in her representation of these characters as marginalized outsiders and female victims. The stories of the Convent women reveal how their identities are constructed into those cultural and social stereotypes in a society largely governed by the patriarchal and racist ideology.

Morrison's intentionality of utilizing the images of feminine Other is particularly obvious in her representation of Connie (Consolata Sosa), the central figure and a longtime resident of the Convent. Connie is apparently a maternal figure, always accepting and nurturing visitors, and giving them necessary care. Later as Consolata, she even becomes a "revised Reverend Mother," taking after the position of Mary Magna. Once having a passionate love affair with Deacon Morgan, however, she is also seen as the sexually unrestricted woman; while making love she bites Deacon's lip and licks his blood, which he finds revolting and savage behavior. He

breaks off their relationship, because she is an “uncontrollable gnawing woman,” a “Salome from whom he had escaped just in time” (279, 280). Moreover, Connie is a witch who not only mixes herbs and medicines, but also has a supernatural power to revive the dead, which is called “step-in.” Or wearing sunglasses for her “bat-vision”(241), and confining herself in the Convent’s cellar, she looks like a Vampire who sleeps in the den to avoid the sunlight.¹²⁾

The twenty-seven-year-old Mavis Albright, who first appears at the Convent in 1968, is constructed as a figure of negligent mother and battered wife. Mavis’s life in urban Maryland is defined by poverty and abuse. In her attempt to please her abusive husband, Frank, she accidentally suffocates her twin babies, Merle and Pearl, leaving them in the family Cadillac. Believing that her husband and three surviving children are plotting to kill her, she leaves the house in a panic-stricken way, not knowing where to go—she has no close friend because Frank has obstructed her maintaining friendship, which is typical of an abusive husband. She drives to her own mother in New Jersey only to find her helpless. After overhearing her mother calling Frank, Mavis attempts to flee to California, offering rides to the hitchhikers who share her gas expenses. She drives westward until she runs out of gas and ends up at the Convent.

In contrast to the mother/wife figure of Mavis, Gigi (Grace) Gibson appears as another female stereotype, sexually enchanting woman. When she arrives at Ruby in 1971, she walks down the central avenue with “pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large”(53), enjoying the “waves of raw horniness slapping her back” (67). Gigi is a free-spirited, sensual and liberated woman of the sixties, who has been involved in a Civil Rights protest in Oakland, California. Gigi has a father on “death-row,” a missing mother, a grandfather “in a spiffy trailer in Alcorn, Mississippi”(257) and a boyfriend who is arrested in a race riot and sent to jail. Gigi and her

boyfriend Mickey plan to meet in Wish, Arizona, where there is a rock formation that looks like “a black man and woman fucking forever”(63), but she cannot find a town of that name. Gigi is gravitated to the Convent, because her search for the rock is eventually replaced by her wish to find a place in Ruby where “two fig trees grow together and entwined like lovers”; Gigi hears the legend from a man she meets on a train that “[i]f you squeezed in between them in just the right way . . . you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate. . . . ‘They say after that can’t nobody turn you down’” (66). As Mavis immediately disapproves Gigi, they are obviously constructed as antagonistic types, which is emphasized by their overt dislikes as well as mutual animosity and continuous bickering.

The twenty-year old Seneca arrives at the Convent in 1973. Abandoned by her teen-age mother at the age of five and sent from one foster family to another, Seneca grows up only to please other people. As Mavis believes that Seneca arrives just in time to save Mavis and Gigi from killing each other, the ever-agreeable Seneca plays a role of placater between them. Her vulnerability has often made her an easy target for those who want to use her, especially as an object of sexual desire. She has a no-good boyfriend in prison, who is convicted for the hit-and-run death of the child, and just before coming to the Convent, she has been picked up by a wealthy woman as a sex worker for three weeks. Seneca has the habit of self-mutilation (usually small cuts), which probably originates in her childhood experience of getting sympathy for the cut accidentally made by her abusive foster brother.

Pallas Truelove, the only daughter of wealthy divorced parents, is also mother-abandoned and sexually victimized. In 1975 the sixteen-year-old Pallas has been taken to the Convent, after seriously assaulted by men—chased into a swampish lake and raped. Her father is a prosperous lawyer in Tulsa, Oklahoma preoccupied with his profession, and her mother—who

left her at the age of three—is an artist painter living in New Mexico. Although she enjoys her materially privileged upbringing, Pallas is starved for parental love. Pallas has not seen her mother Divine in years and decides to visit her with her boyfriend Carlos, a would-be sculptor who works as her high school’s maintenance man. They spend a happy few months together, until Pallas finds her mother and Carlos making love. The shocked Pallas drives away and wrecks her car, which leads to the sexual assault at the lake.

In each chapter entitled with their names, Morrison gives voice to those women and explores their inner lives. They are all distinct types with different backgrounds, personalities and physical qualities, coming from all over the United States. Yet, they are commonly victimized and marginalized in a racist and sexist society and their stereotypical images are nothing but the patriarchal constructions of feminine. Gathering these women of “culturally powerful and shaming images” (Bouson 206) at the Convent, Morrison delineates how they break away from their culturally constructed bodies and explore their own authentic subjectivities.

B. (Re)writing the Female Gothic

Describing how those women have come to inhabit the Convent over the period of eight years, Morrison reveals that their mother-daughter bond is all severed or destroyed: Mavis, whose twin babies are suffocated to death in a car, is not only suspected of murdering them, but also has an obsession that her daughter Sally is plotting to kill her with her abusive husband. Mavis vainly seeks help from her own mother who believes that Mavis should stay in her marriage. Seneca, at the age of five, is abandoned by her teenage mother whom she believes is her sister. Gigi’s mother is mentioned only as “unlocatable”(257). Pallas’s artist mother betrays her, having sex with Pallas’s boyfriend in her view (169). Connie herself is an

orphan who is rescued (or kidnapped) from sexual abuse as a street-child in a South American City by Mary Magna.

It is no coincidence, then, that the Convent functions as a nurturing maternal space for all of these women, providing food and rest immediately upon their arrival. Mavis first meets Connie in the big kitchen of the Convent, where she feels so “safe” that “the thought of leaving it” disturbs her. She decides to spend the night there “because of Mother [Mary Magna]”(46) whom Connie introduces as “[Mavis’s] mother too.” (48). Also, shortly after arriving at the Convent, Gigi ravenously eats abundant food at the kitchen table. Seneca reaches the Convent following a maternal figure, “a crying walking woman” (Sweetie Fleetwood) who reminds her of the day just after being abandoned by her mother. Pallas is not only enabled to tell her “story” through Connie’s maternal gesture—“She just stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap talk-crying” (172)—but also finds that the Convent is “permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain”(177). Significantly once inside the Convent, these women become either infantilized or maternalized—calling one another “babies” or with the names of their own mothers (48, 73, 138, 181). Also, the dominance of the big kitchen as well as excessive imageries of food suggests oral-parasitic relation of mother and child. Here in the Convent, mother and daughter are metaphorically reunited or even merged with each other.

Yet, Morrison never idealizes the Convent as a protected maternal domain, even though it becomes a real retreat for the women. The Convent is simultaneously an uncanny haunted mansion where the supernatural phenomena occur: Mavis constantly hears the voices of her dead-undead children and Connie’s magic revives the dead and prolongs the life of the dying Mother. Also, the history of the Convent’s architecture suggests that it is a locus of ancestral sins: It was originally an embezzler’s mansion

and then the school for the native American girls, that is, a locus of a capitalistic crime as well as the colonialistic desire concealed under the mission of Christianity. Moreover, it is filled with abject imageries—blood, a corpse, pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion—which evoke fear and disgust with the maternal/female body: there is an endless bickering between Mavis and Gigi, which almost gets close to killing each other; Seneca is never able to stop her self-mutilation, cutting “short streets, lanes, alleys into her arms”(261); Arnette, a girl from Ruby, attempts self-abortion during her short stay; even Connie is heavily alcoholic after Mary Magna’s death, confining herself in a dungeon-like cellar.

These characteristics of the Convent—a maternal haunted house, supernatural phenomena, a locus of ancestral sins and abject imageries—spontaneously reminds us of the Gothic tradition, especially that of the “female Gothic” or “female uncanny,” in which a young, often orphaned woman explores female identity through the encounter with the dead-undead mother or maternal substitute within an ancient ancestral mansion (Kahane 334, 343).¹³⁾ Although critics often mentioned the Gothic allusions in the Convent, the significance of Morrison’s utilization of the “female Gothic” or “female uncanny” is not fully explored. Needless to say, since Ellen Moers’s notion of “female Gothic” as a mode of addressing fears about female sexuality, Gothic literature has been studied in the context of a wider movement of feminist criticism that recovers suppressed or marginalized writing by women and addresses issues of female experience and desire, sexual oppression and sexual difference. Theories of the female Gothic have revealed that the female Gothic essentially concerns the exploration of women’s subjectivity, interrogating or challenging the boundaries of patriarchal construction of feminine or heterosexual paradigm. Utilizing the conventions of female Gothic, Morrison suggests that those stereotypical women, those who are constructed as feminine

Other in a sexist and racist society, explore their authentic subjectivities at the Convent.

Seen in this light, Gigi’s section perfectly fits the paradigm of the female Gothic. Arriving at the Convent on the day Mother (Mary Magna) dies, Gigi finds Connie sleeping “like a child” on the kitchen floor. Afraid of encountering the corpse of Mother, Gigi nevertheless explores the inside of the Convent mansion suggestive of the maternal/female body: She notices the trace of sexually explicit ornaments throughout the mansion: “[t]he female-torso candle holders,” “[t]he nursing cherubim” “[t]he nipple-tipped doorknobs,” “[a] Venus or two among several pieces of nude statuary,” and “alabaster vaginas” used as ashtrays(72). Especially, Gigi is disturbed by the picture of “Saint Catherine of Siena” offering “her breasts like two baked Alaskas on a platter”(73).¹⁴⁾ The woman’s “I-give-up face” haunts Gigi and takes the pleasure out of exerting the seductive power of her body over men. (73-74). Gigi has been comfortable with her female sexuality and enjoyed being an object of male desire, but here she recognizes a potential threat of being objectified by male desire and her subjectivity is clearly destabilized. Gigi’s excuse to remain at the Convent is to unearth the “hidden treasure” she finds in the bathroom floor (256), another traditional Gothic metaphor of quest for identity. Thus, when the treasure turns out to be nothing but trash, she realizes that she has “not approved of herself in a long, long time”—that she has been disappointed with herself for losing steadfast commitment to the Civil Rights movement—and cannot decide “where to go or what to do”(257). Gigi’s quest for feminine subjectivity, of course, is pursued through “the woman’s ambivalent relation to the mother,” or “an ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other. . . between mother and daughter”(Kahane, 337) that is at the center of the Gothic structure. The Convent is both protective and tormenting for Gigi: like any other women in the Convent, Gigi is

attracted to the nurturing maternal Connie, who is “ideal parent, friend, companion in whose company they were safe from harm”(262); yet her life at the Convent is characterized with endless conflicts with her antagonist, Mavis, a fugitive mother suspected of murdering babies. Their conflicts (over dislike for each other) eventually escalate into the physical blows: “[u]nder a metal-hot sky void of even one arrow of birds they fought on the road and its shoulder. . . . The bodies roiling dust and crushing weeds. Intent bodies unaware of any watcher under a blank sky in Oklahoma or a painted one in Mehita, New Mexico”(168). As the fighting-women scene reminds Pallas of the “grappling bodies” of her mother and Carlos making love, their grappling and rolling figures subtly overlap the image of a love-making desert couple (rock formation) Gigi has been searching. Moreover, as the rock formation is suggested as “two women making love in the dirt”(63), the fighting scene foreshadows that the women’s struggle turns into a loving embrace. Thus, after this terrible fight, Gigi recognizes her lesbian desires for childlike Seneca. Suggesting the erotic bond between women (mother and daughter), Morrison challenges the heterosexual paradigm of the patriarchal scenario.

Yet, what does the women’s erotic bond mean for the reconstruction of female subjectivity? Does Morrison’s female Gothic only challenge or resist the patriarchal structure? Is it only—as many theorists of female Gothic conclude—the expression of woman’s anxiety about female sexuality or conflicting emotions towards mother? Or at best, like the object-relation theory, does it merely shift emphasis from oedipal father to preoedipal mother? In *Paradise*, the Convent women are finally murdered and the dead/undead women disappear at the end. Does this ambiguous ending, if not conforming to the Gothic convention, only challenge or resist the patriarchal structure? Indeed, as Joan Copjec argues, if the theories of female Gothic stress women’s conflicting emotions towards the mother or

her nonseparation from the mother, they after all confirm the popular oedipal scenario they attempt to criticize: “. . . that woman never properly, or only with great difficulty, accedes to the status of subject. Her subjectivity is jeopardized by her inability to sever the connection to her mother and thus to establish an autonomous identity” (*Imagine* 101). What woman cannot separate, however, is not “the unabandoned mother,” as Copjec elucidates, but “a part object that detaches itself from her.” Moreover, the woman’s nonseparation from the uncanny object is precisely what constitutes the woman as a subject, as being not-all (*Imagine* 102-103):

Woman is haunted by such a surplus, empty object—a breast, say—that forms as a result of her definitive, her radical giving up of the mother. The being of the woman is multiple not because she is doubled by another one, the mother, but because she is decompleted by the addition of a surplus object that interrupts or blocks the formation of a whole the One, of her being. The being of the woman is multiple because she is split from herself. (*Imagine* 102)

This perspective is quite illuminating to understand Morrison’s rendering of the Convent women, especially of their reconstruction of subjectivity. For, the Convent is full of uncanny images—the gaze, the voice, the breast—and what the women repeatedly encounter is not the superabundant mother but these *extimité*¹⁵ objects: as we have seen before, Gigi is haunted by the “breast” of the “I-give-up” woman, St. Catherine of Siena; Mavis never ceases to hear the “voices” of her dead/undead twin babies (259). More than anything else, the women repeatedly encounter Connie’s uncanny “blind eyes” (70, 241, 248, 249, 262), which is a psychoanalytically pertinent image of “the gaze” (as Freud privileged it as a manifestation of uncanniness). As Copjec argues that the experiences of uncanny—“of encountering one’s own origins”—can bring us an act of “invention or

resubjectification”(*Imagine* 104), the Convent women, through their experiences of the uncanny, moves toward their reconstruction of subjectivity. Thus, Connie’s “gaze of the blind”(262) starts her healing ritual, which brings about both sublimation and the reconstruction of subjectivity for the women.

C. The Reconstruction of Women’s Subjectivity

Morrison once again creates a maternal space as a site for women’s resubjectification. Connie’s ritual, like Baby Suggs’s Call in *Beloved*, is performed in a womb-like maternal space, the cellar where Connie has confined herself after Mary Magna’s death. Feeling orphaned and lost again, Connie becomes disparately wine-soaked, full of self-loathing. She is repelled by her “sluglike existence,” and craves “only oblivion”(221), the release of death. Although the convent women feel loved by Connie, she has grown weary of their stories of “disorder, deception and drift” and, with the exception of Mavis, can barely distinguish one from another (221-222). She is annoyed by their “babygirl dreams” and infuriated at their constant tales of lost love. “One by one they would float down the stairs. . . like maidens entering a temple or a crypt, to sit on the floor and talk of love as if they knew anything at all about it. They spoke of men who . . . once had desperately loved them; or men who should have loved them, might have loved, would have.” (222-223). While listening, Connie longs for an escape from the women and even has a murderous rage towards them: “On her worst days, when the maw of depression soiled the clean darkness, she wanted to kill them all”(223). Connie is apparently in a position of the melancholic who, according to Julia Kristeva, refuses to give up a primordial, archaic maternal figure, and feels “the aggressive affect towards the other as well as despondent affect within oneself” (*Black Sun* 29). Also, the women, talking of their lost love, visit the cellar in melancholy. According

to Kristeva, the melancholic disposition is “the constant tendency” of feminine subjectivity, who extols “the problematic mourning for the lost object. . . not so fully lost, and it remains, throbbing, in the ‘crypt’ of feminine ease and maturity” (*Black Sun* 30). Then, this “crypt”-like cellar, which is visited by the Convent women in melancholy, abjection, and later in sublimation, seems the pertinent locus for the exploration of feminine subjectivity. As Kristeva stresses, melancholia has to be overcome for the subject to become a subject of representation: “[s]uch melancholy persons triumph over the sadness at being separated from the loved object through an unbelievable effort to master signs in order to have them correspond to primal, unnamable, traumatic experiences”(*Black Sun* 67).

Connie attempts to prolong the Mother’s life, to keep her alive, although she knows the woman would abhor the practice “On the last day, Consolata. . . raised up the feathery body and held it in her arms and between her legs. The small white head nestled between Consolata’s breasts and so the lady had entered death like a birthing, rocked and prayed for by the woman she had kidnapped as a child”(223). Indeed, as the Mother “entered death like a birthing,” she keeps throbbing in Consolata’s psyche.

Connie recovers from this melancholic position by encountering a strange visitor (251), a strange young man with a cowboy hat and sunglasses. Although Connie does not know him, he replies, “Come on girl. You know me.” His words “[lick] her cheek” and Consolata begins to “slide towards his language like honey oozing from a comb.” Suddenly besides her “without having moved,” looking at her—“flirtatious, full of secret fun,” he removes his hat. “Fresh tea-colored hair came tumbling down, cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He took off his glasses then and winked, a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes, she saw, were as round and green as new apples”(252). This mysterious man, with green eyes and tea-colored hair like Connie herself, has been explained as

“the male counterpart of Connie”(Higgins 135). Also as he is later called “the god who sought her out in the garden”(283), he is explained as “a divine presence”(Duvall 145) or “the deity within or beloved part” of her self (Bouson 209). Apparently this mysterious man, who is both seductive and divine, who represents both eros and agape (Nooy 245), functions as the Kristevan imaginary father figure who designates maternal desire—his physical features recall Consolata’s own when Mary Magna “had fallen in love with” her (223)—and facilitates the reconstruction of subjectivity. After this encounter, Connie revives her subjectivity, declaring herself as Consolata Sosa (her birth name), and becomes “a new and revised Reverend Mother”(264).

With this renewed identity, Consolata presides over the healing ritual, which again parallels the Kristevan process of reconstruction of subjectivities. Consolata returns the women to the preoedipal disposition, telling them to lie down naked on the floor. Then tracing their body’s silhouette on the floor, she addresses the speech that stresses the mother-daughter bond between Eve and Mary:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I cannot get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one

over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (263)

Many critics construe Consolata’s message as rejecting body/spirit dualism central to Christianity and uniting the oppositions into which woman has been divided in Western culture, “the sinning flesh” and “the immaculate soul”: Elizabeth Kella observes, for example, that “Consolata affirms an embodied spirituality, a spiritual embodiment. . . not through the figure of Christ but of mother and daughter, Eve and Mary, thus including sexuality in the union of body and soul” (221). Also, John Duval explicates it as conflation of “the sacred” (Virgin Mary) and “the secular” (fallen Eve/Consolata), arguing that her act of caring the Mother (“I hold it in my arms and between my legs”) gives us an image of “the daughter giving birth to the mother”(Duval 146). Indeed, through the birth image, they seem merged with each other, exchanging the positions of mother and daughter.¹⁶ Yet, does this image only blur the boundary between the mother/sacred/spirit and the daughter/secular/flesh? What is truly radical about Consolata’s address, it seems to me, lies in her conflation of her daughterly love for Mary Magna and her passionate love with Deacon. If her flesh works sexual (“My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him.”), is there any erotic connotation in the way Consolata cares for the mother’s body “in every way flesh works”? Moreover, with the word “bones,” she equates her act of caring the Mother and that of lovemaking with a man: “My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing.” Here, if “flesh” still implies the sexual difference (the anatomical distinctions of the sexes), Consolata eradicates it with the word “bones” and thus implies that there is an erotic bond between mother and daughter, which is structurally the same with that of the heterosexual one.

Here, Morrison’s rendering of the erotic bond between mother and

daughter (between women) is more than a resistance or challenge to the patriarchal/ heterosexual paradigm. It is a condition crucial for women's subject formation because the erotic bond with the maternal body is traumatically lost from the women's psyche in the heterosexual convention. As is well known, Freud's family romance hinges on the incest inhibition which is based on the sexual difference, that is, the anatomical distinction of the genital organs. Therefore the incest taboo is, to be precise, not between mother and child but between mother and son. In the case of the boy, the possibility of the incest with the mother is suggested, precisely by prohibition of the father (the fear of castration). In the case of the girl, the possibility of the incest with the mother is not prohibited but forgotten because of the sameness of their sex. (And later the girl's taking her father as a love object is regarded rather as a normal development, for "Her mother becomes the object of her jealousy. The girls has turned into a little woman"[*SE* 19, 256]). Whereas a subject formation (separation from the archaic mother) is traumatic for both sexes, it is even more so for the girl, because it is forgotten as if it did not exist and not articulated in a heterosexual convention (I did not love her [body] because we are the same sex). Moreover, traumatic erasure of the erotic bond under the heterosexism leads women, in the early phase of subject formation, to internalize the negation of mother, hence leads to internalize misogyny.

Suggesting the erotic bond between mother and daughter, Consolata reminds the women that the mother's body they once loved is simultaneously their own body. Thus, Consolata returns the women's subjectivity to the preoedipal disposition/symbiotic relation (of primary narcissism) with the mother, reducing their bodies into the mere silhouettes with empty spaces inside: "Life, real and intense, shifted down there in limited pools of light in air smoky from kerosene lamps and candle wax"(264). Thus returning the women's psyche to the zero degree of subjectivity,

Consolata's ritual, like Baby Sugg's Call, enacts the reconstruction of subjectivity, more clearly through the process of abjection and sublimation. First, their experiences of abjection arise from "the loud dreaming," in which each woman, being blurred the boundaries of self and other, can "step easily into the dreamer's tale" told by the other women. Through their monologue which "is no different from a shriek"(264), they imaginatively entering each other's tale of unspeakable traumatic event, and undergo a collective and painful process: "Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale"(264). Then after giving voice to their abject experiences collectively, they start to express them in images: they start to fill in the empty spaces of the template with the images of what haunts them, or their unspeakable experiences. Their etchings of body parts and of haunting memories express their experience of abjection, yet transforming the abject imageries into the body arts, they overcome this unnamable loss, which in turn leads them to talking cure: "They spoke to each other about what had been dreamed and what had been drawn"(265). Through this process of abjection and sublimation under the guidance of Consolata, the Convent women begins to transform. They become aware that the bodies they wear are culturally constructed/symbolic bodies, that is, the dead ones: they have "to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive where the alive ones below"(265). Also, they become "calmly themselves" and are "no longer haunted"(266). Their sublimation as well as resubjectification clearly climaxes with the scene where they dance in the longed-for purifying rain which is filled with semiotic elements:

It[Rain] was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces.

Consolata started it; the rest were quick to join her. There are great rivers in the world and on their banks and the edges of oceans children thrill to water. In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain. They would have laughed, had enchantment not been so deep. . . . Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden was the most furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant. Seneca and Grace danced together, then parted to skip through fresh mud. Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby's head, swayed like a frond. (283)

Gathering the stereotypical women at the Convent, Morrison delineates the process they struggle to be freed from the culturally constructed bodies and recover their authentic subjectivity. Yet it is not stabilized, essentialized subjectivity. Rather, as it is expressed in their erotic and ecstatic dancing together in the rain, that is, in *jouissance*, their subjectivity is expressed as multiple, fluid and being not-all.

D. The real/unreal women

On the morning after the celebration of their renewed subjectivity in the rain, the Convent women are attacked and slaughtered by the Ruby men. Although the women fight back against the men, they are too many and as the women attempt to escape through the still-misted yard, they are all shot down. When the only mortician in Ruby, Roger Best, arrives at the Convent, however, there are no bodies of the women and Mavis's Cadillac is gone. There is much controversy over various versions of the raid, yet the only thing clear is, as some of Ruby's citizens realize, that God has "given Ruby a second chance"(297). With the women's bodies disappeared, the town of Ruby escapes the white law. Are the Convent women, as some critics complain, "sacrificial lambs"(Harris 188; Tally 89) or "feminist

martyrs"(Kakutani 3) victimized and exploited for the reinforcement and preservation of the patriarchal system? Indeed, except for Deacon Morgan who walks barefoot to Rev. Misner to repent his sin, the murderers do not seem to regret their crime.

Or does Morrison subvert such a scenario by (presumably) resurrecting the Convent women—either in the flesh or in spectral form—as "a continuing challenge to patriarchal structures"(Michael 658) at the end? Such a challenge is expressed in one of the Ruby women, Billie Delia's hope for the second coming of the Convent women as Amazon-like warriors: "When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? . . . She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors. . . . She could see their pointed teeth" (308). As if to fulfill Bellie Delia's wish, moreover, the women mysteriously reappear to their family with modern as well as classic images of women warriors: Gigi visits her father, with "her army cap and fatigue pants—camouflage colors. Heavy army boots, black T-shirt"(310); Pallas reappears to her mother, with "no hair" and in a "dress—rose madder and umber—swirled about her ankles," "a sword" in hand, baby carried on her chest, looking for a pair of sandals (Huaraches) she had left behind (311). As her name suggests, Pallas is given an image of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of war, wisdom, and art. Further at the final vision, Consolata is united with Piedade, "a singing woman black as firewood"(318), resting her head on the older woman's lap. As many critics indicate, Piedade is given an image of Black Madonna (Bouson 215; Klinghoffer 30) and this "Pieta-like tableau" (Dalsgard 244) conveys a redemptive message or some hope at the end.

Although critics attempt to find some comforting qualities in Morrison's final delineation of the women, their readings nevertheless raise

several questions: is Morrison still mythologizing women with images of women warriors, goddesses, or even God's mother?; why does Morrison still utilize these traditional images after freeing the Convent women from the patriarchal construction of feminine? Moreover, attributing religious allusions to the final scene, does Morrison transport the women to a pedestal or paradisiacal beyond, which is much the same with the treatment of woman in a patriarchal culture? Probably we are not freed from these feminist dilemmas unless we stop imagining that there is an authentic woman or a space outside history. In other words, whether victimizing/abjecting or idealizing/mythologizing women, Morrison rather utilizes those historico-cultural images, suggesting that it is impossible to present the completely dehistoricized women. What is more, Morrison implies that there is no outside of history, that is, no meta-history, which is revealed in her rendering of the real/unreal women at the end. Puzzled with the real/unreal women, critics interpret such ending as reflecting the "mystical transcendence beyond life and death" (Page 46), "the postmodern skepticism" (Dalsgard 244), or "magic realism" (Shockley 719). Yet, as at least one critic aptly puts it, the real/unreal women are "so many Beloveds" (Duvall 146).¹⁷ That is, they function as "the real" in the Lacanian sense, which eternally returns and repeats as uncanny phenomena and which guarantees that "nothing escapes the finite process of history" (Copjec, *Imagine* 97).¹⁸ Why women as "the real"? Because the women's subjectivity, or the feminine subject position is more proximate to the real excess or "object a" according to Lacanian formula of sexuation.¹⁹

Indeed, Morrison has to leave the Convent women real/unreal at the end: it is crucial not only for the novel itself but also for the trilogy as a whole, because it also clarifies why Morrison's historiography—*Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*—is called a "love" trilogy. That is, only through love which opens up the subject to the real excess—which is understood, as we

have seen, as a transference relation based on the structures of primary identification—a new notion of history that contains everything is possible. In other words, through the mode of feminine subjectivity which is more accessible to a transference relation (love),²⁰ Morrison offers a way to reconceptualize history.

Thus, through the story of the Convent women, their feminine act of sublimation which recovers the subjectivity of not-all, Morrison problematizes Ruby's notion of race, history and community, which presupposes the principle of contradiction and exclusion. Thinking through the mode of feminine subjectivity of not-all, Morrison makes the notion of racially-"pure" identity impossible.²¹ As we mentioned before, leaving the identity of the white girl obscure, Morrison undermines the racial categories in the readers' minds. Within the context of the Convent community, the women are indifferent to their skin colors, which poses a stark contrast to the community of Ruby where skin color is of primary importance. The women who find refuge at the Convent seem preoccupied with their personal problems or busy with negotiating their individual differences. Yet, Morrison does not simply efface the notion of race, or reduce it to nothing: once being a school for Native-American girls, the Convent suggests the cross or inter-racial relations; also Connie's green eyes, tea-brown hair, and sandy colored skin and Mary Magna's whiteness are repeatedly emphasized. While emptying the notion of race, Morrison simultaneously makes the community of the Convent open to racial diversity. Also the feminine subjectivity of not-all undermines the notion of a complete and harmonious community. While the Convent women form a kind of open community, the process of making it a home, as we have seen, is rather torturous and intra-conflictual than harmonious.

While Morrison's intention of creating a paradise which is not based on exclusion seems realized at the Convent, it turns out to be temporal as the

real/unreal women leave for a paradise at the ocean's edge. In order to further elucidate Morrison's notion of race and community in terms of feminine sexuality, it is necessary to examine the final vision of paradise.

IV. Rewriting the Fantasy – Morrison's final vision of paradise

Morrison privileges a mode of feminine subjectivity again at the final vision of paradise, which foregrounds the mystic union of mother and daughter.²²⁾ As we have seen before, recovering the bond with the maternal body (the real in the Lacanian sense) is crucial for women's subject formation. Imagining paradise through a blissful recovery of mother-daughter union, especially that of primary identification, Morrison suggests a way to conceive a paradise which is not based on exclusion.²³⁾ Yet, as Kristeva articulates at the opening of "Stabat Mater," any discourse on motherhood involves "the fantasy that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory" and what is more, it is "an idealization of primary narcissism" (*Tales* 234). Then how does Morrison deal with the issue of fantasy at her final vision of paradise which foregrounds the mother-daughter union? In this section, I would like to analyze the final vision of the novel, the vision of paradise/home, as Morrison's response to Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," that is, as her attempt to create an adequate representation of the mother-daughter relation or the maternal body for modern women. Especially, I would like to elucidate how Morrison's representation of paradise, of one's own true home/origin, rewrites the fantasy which remains bound to primary narcissism.

As many critics point out, there is an ostensible religious allusion in the final representation of mother and daughter: Piedade's name

(suggestive of a female version of Pieta) and the posture of Consolata resting her head on Piedade's lap make the final vision "Pieta-like tableau" (Dalsgard 244), which reminds us of artistic representations of the Pieta that show Mary holding the dead Christ in her lap; Piedade, who is "black as firewood" (318), is given an image of Black Madonna. Then, it is no coincidence that the final chapter is entitled "Save-Marie," a name of the dead daughter of Jeff and Sweetie Fleetwood, which symbolizes an end of the "compact" between God and the original families of Ruby (Nerad 122). As we have seen before, there are obvious Marian metaphors in this novel: the women's story is mainly staged at the Convent presided over by Mary Magna; Consolata's speech about repudiating the Mary-Eve contrast is crucial for women's subject formation. At the final vision of the novel, I would argue, Morrison attempts to rewrite the representation of the Virgin Mary, which, according to Kristeva, traditionally offered an image of the idealization of the mother in primary narcissism, and provided the motherhood/maternal body a symbolic status.

Drawing on Marina Warner's famous study, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" analyses the cult of the Virgin and its implication for the Christian discourse of motherhood and femininity, as well as for the development of women's self-identifications. According to Kristeva, maternity is a boundary between nature and culture, between the bodily drives and the signifier. The unspeakable drives weigh on the maternal body because it is "a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology. . . . the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier. . . . explodes violently with pregnancy" (*Tales* 259). With the image of the Virgin Mary, Christianity controls this move between nature and culture in the maternal body and incorporates it into the symbolic order. By representing her as a virgin, Christianity attempts to deprive Mary of her bodily *jouissance*,

which “threatens to make her a subject rather than the Other against which man becomes a subject”(Oliver 50). The immaculate conception also makes Mary embody “the gathering of the three feminine functions (daughter-wife-mother) within a totality where they vanish as specific corporealities while retaining their psychological function”(Tales 243). In other words, the Virgin Mary embodies “a kind of perfection of fulfilled femininity”(Lechte 178) within the patriarchal order. Moreover, not marrying the flesh, but the Word/Ideal as such, Mary occupies all three symbolic positions of mother, daughter and wife of Christ/God, thus enters into the symbolic order on an equivalent status with the Father.

In Christian discourse, the Virgin Mary’s relation to the child has been designated as a relation to the unreachable Other, The Transcendental, God. Yet the mother’s experience of the child is not transcendental but real; she has bodily proof of it and bodily *jouissance* is still retained in her tears or milk, “the privileged signs of the *Mater Dolorosa*”(Tales 249), which are “the metaphors of non-speech,” the maternal semiotic. The Virgin Mary’s tears and milk “re-establish” the non-verbal semiotic drives, and “[add] to the Christian trinity and to the Word” “the extra-linguistic regions of the unnamable,” “the heterogeneity” (Tales 250) that is not subsumed in the symbolic order. The trace of this bodily *jouissance* remains within the symbolic discourse as the Virgin Mary’s tears and milk, which are “the representatives of a return of the repressed in monotheism” (Tales 249-250). In other terms, with the myth of the Virgin Mary, Catholicism absorbs the pagan belief in the mother goddess and thus preserves the maternal order within the paternal one.

Thus Kristeva explicates the double function of the Virgin Mary, which, while satisfying the desire for the maternal drives/*jouissance* (the heterogeneity), simultaneously gives woman a symbolic status and incorporates her into the patriarchal system. The Virgin “was able to

attract women’s wishes for identification as well as the very precise interposition of those who assume to keep watch over the symbolic and social order”(Tales 256). The cult of the Virgin functions to satisfy both man’s and woman’s desire for self-identification: “Man overcomes the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place—in the place and stead of death and thought” (Tales 252). As for woman’s desire for self-identification, Kristeva suggests that the cult of the Virgin traditionally offered “a way of dealing with feminine paranoia”(Tales 258), which is understood as “a condition produced by the repression of homoerotic desire” for the mother (Weir 176). That is, while satisfying women’s desire for primary identification with the mother, the Virgin allows women to enter the symbolic order.

Yet, the identification with the Virgin is after all an identification with the symbolic mother. By suggesting the image of “A Unique Woman,” the identification with the Virgin simultaneously facilitates “the repudiation of the other women (which doubtless amounts basically to a repudiation of the woman’s mother)”(Tales 258). This repudiation of other women prevents women from developing singular identity. Kristeva argues “the war between mother and daughter” as “masterfully but quickly settled by promoting Mary as universal and particular, but never singular—as ‘alone of her sex’”(Tales 261):

A woman will only have the choice to live her life either hyper-abstractly (‘immediately universal,’ Hegel said) in order thus to earn divine grace and homologation with the symbolic order; or merely different, other, fallen (‘immediately particular,’ Hegel said). But she will not be able to accede to the complexity of being divided, of heterogeneity, of the catastrophic-fold-of ‘being’ (‘never singular,’ Hegel said). (Tales 248-249)

After all, the Virgin Mary does not provide an image of the mother as

a complex speaking subject. According to Kristeva, due to the demise of the cult of the Virgin, as well as the decline of religion in general, we are left without a satisfactory discourse on motherhood today. At the end of “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva suggests the need for a reconceived notion of the maternal body as well as new understanding of the mother-daughter relationship.

As if to answer Kristeva’s advocacy for a “post-virginal” discourse, Morrison creates a new representation of the maternal body as well as of the mother-daughter relationship. As Piedade’s name suggests, Morrison’s “feminist Pieta”(Menard 82) does not consist of mother and son but of mother and daughter. Unlike the image of the Virgin Mary which facilitates “the repudiation of the other woman (which doubtless amounts basically to a repudiation of the woman’s mother)”(*Tales* 258), Morrison foregrounds the blissful recovery of the mother-daughter bond, which is based on neither a desire to repudiate nor a desire to merge with the other woman. Presented side by side, Piedade and Consolata are not fused but intertwined. While creating a Pieta-like tableau, this figure of mother and daughter implies not death and agony but life and “solace”(318), suggesting the emerging subjectivity of the daughter Consolata. Instead of silent “tears and milk” of the Virgin Mary, Piedade’s song and the poetic description of paradise contain the maternal semiotic. Consolata talks to the Convent women of a place:

. . . where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums
swam alongside children. . . of fruit that tasted the way sapphires
look and boys using rubies for dice. Of scented cathedrals made of
gold where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congrega-
tion. Of carnations tall as trees. Dwarfs with diamonds for teeth.
Snakes aroused by poetry and bells. . . of a woman named
Piedade, who sang but never said a word. (263-264)

Consolata’s poetic description of the place is not only filled with semiotic elements (the ocean, children, gems, sparkling colors, and above all, Piedade’s song), but also consists of surrealistic imageries of heterogeneous beings (animals, human beings, and divinities).

Presiding at the ocean’s edge (maternal watery element), Piedade, “a singing woman who never spoke,” embodies the maternal semiotic: Her songs “could still a wave, make it pause in its curl listening to language it had not heard since the sea opened”(285). Piedade is clearly described as a maternal figure from Consolata’s point of view as a child. According to Consolata, Piedade “bathed [her] in emerald water” and “[a]t night she took the stars out of her hair and wrapped [her] in its wool. Her breath smelled of pineapple and cashew”(284-285). The words, such as “bathed,” “wrapped,” “breath,” imply the closeness between the mother and child, a preoedipal disposition of the primary identification. Also at the final vision, a younger woman who looks like Consolata rests her head on “the singing woman’s lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl—fuse in the younger woman’s face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue”(318). Consolata’s “emerald eyes” adoring the mother’s face again evoke an image of the primary identification. Especially, Piedade’s “black face framed in cerulean blue” functions as “the gaze” in the Lacanian sense,²⁴ bespeaking the emerging subjectivity. As several critics argue, Piedade’s black face and Consolata’s face of “all the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl”(318) suggest “the idea of cross-racial identities”(Bouson 215)²⁵ or “interracial love”(Kella 230). In other words, through the semiotic element of colors, the emerging subjectivity suggested here makes the racial category inoperative. Then, this final vision of mother and daughter epitomizes Morrison’s intention to write race and to unwrite it at the same time.

At the end of “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva suggests that a new discourse

on motherhood/maternal body is a heretical ethics—insofar as it replaces the Christian representation of the Virgin—and this ‘herethics’ would be a new ethics of music and love (*Tales* 263). Similarly, Morrison’s final representation of the mother and daughter is imbued with music and love, that is, Piedade’s song which evokes memories of a beloved home.

There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade’s song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun. (318)

While comforting the listener’s soul, Piedade’s song evokes “memories neither one has ever had.” For, memories of a true home/origin can be only imagined, as one’s original state can be only retroactively constructed as a myth. As Kristeva points out in “Stabat Mater,” any discourse on motherhood involves the retroactive fantasy “of a lost territory,” or “an idealization of primary narcissism” (*Tales* 234). Morrison’s representation of paradise, of one’s own true home/origin, also involves a fantasy that remains bound to primary narcissism. The pictorial and surrealistic imageries of the paradise, especially the visual and tableau-like/fixed quality of mother-daughter union, reveal itself as fantasy.²⁶⁾ This is why, as some critics point out, Consolata’s description of paradise seems “Edenic” (Page 646), “idealized” (Kella 230) and even marked by “nostalgia” (Krumholz 31). Yet, at the final vision, the surrealistic imageries and the fixed/immobile quality of fantasy/idealization are subtly countered by the more realistic images which evoke the temporality of the scene: Piedade’s “[r]uined fingers”; “sea trash,” “[d]iscarded bottle caps,” “a broken sandal,” and “a small dead radio” on the beach. Moreover, coming to Piedade’s beach are the estranged, shipwrecked people, “crew and passengers, lost

and saved, atremble”(318), who seek a place to feel at home. With those images suggestive of the temporality, Morrison creates a vision of paradise which involves a fantasy, simultaneously providing a way to traverse such fantasy.

Thus at the final vision, Morrison rewrites the fantasy necessary for women’s subject formation as well as for the construction of community which is not based on exclusion. Morrison’s rewriting of the fantasy corresponds to what Kristeva argues in “Stabat Mater” as well as in “Women’s Time”: that is, we need an image of mother that can found, rather than threaten, the social relationship (*Tales* 235); given that there can be no society without a “socio-symbolic contract” or a “founding separation, some sort of break-producing symbolism” (“Women’s Time” 210) we need a symbolism, which is different from—either defense against, or celebration of—the archaic mother, a symbolism which is not predicated on the sacrifice of the Woman/Mother (Weir 173).²⁷⁾ As psychoanalytic insight elucidates, each individual’s fantasy is the support of his or her being, and fantasy is a kind of frame through which we constitutes our reality. Moreover, if “community organizes its way of life” within “the fantasy-space”(Žižek 215), we need a fantasy-space, which functions less oppressive or exclusive toward the Other, or which reveals the impossibility of the notion of a whole and complete society. Perhaps in *Paradise*, Morrison attempts to create such fantasy-space through the mode of feminine subjectivity of not-all. For, as Morrison suggests in the final line, such an imagined/fantasy space is where people “will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise”(318). Indeed, paradise is where people keep engaging in the endless work, the construction of community that is not based on exclusion.

Notes

- 1) For example, Geoffrey Bent argues that the massacre that begins the novel lacks sufficient motivation (146).
- 2) According to Albert Raboteau, “No single symbol captures more clearly the distinctiveness of Afro-American Christianity than the symbol of Exodus”(9). Contradicting the white Christian claim that Africans were intended by God to be slaves, the Exodus story is used to cultivate internal resistance among the slaves and to prove that slavery was “against God’s will”(13). Moreover, “[i]dentification with Israel . . . gave the slaves a communal identity as a special divinely favored people. This identity stood in stark contrast with racist propaganda, which depicted them as inferior to whites, as destined by nature and providence to the status of slaves. Exodus, the Promised Land, and Canaan were inextricably linked in the slaves’ minds with the idea of freedom. Canaan referred not only to the condition of freedom but also to the territory of freedom—the North or Canada” (14).
- 3) Morrison, *Paradise* 13-14. Subsequent references to the text will be cited in parentheses.
- 4) As Raboteau reminds us, Martin Luther King, Jr., invoked this very old and evocative tradition in his last sermon: “. . . And I’ve seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But I want you to know. . . that we as a people will get to the Promised Land” (14-15).
- 5) Michiko Kakutani entitles her review, “Paradise: Worthy women, Unredeemable Men,” and complains that the novel is “a contrived formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women,” whom we are asked to believe are “feminist martyrs”(1-3). Also, Brooke Allen, while praising the novel as “her best work of fiction to date,” expresses a reservation that “the male-female dichotomy” is a “cliché, and Morrison plays it too heavily. . .”(6). Colin Walter condemns Morrison’s treatment of gender: “What disappoints . . . is Mrs. [sic] Morrison’s valorizing of her women characters over her men, turning an otherwise engaging story . . . into a gothic gender war”(B6). Linda J. Krumholz also indicates that “Throughout *Paradise* the men are associated with phallogocentrism, with fixed authority, unitary meaning and individual acquisition and control, while the women are associated with movement, multiple meanings, and shared labor and goods” (25).
- 6) According to Kubitschek, “*Paradise* plays up the flaws of even a vital oral

- tradition” of African-American culture, and the episode of the Oven indicates that “Ruby has lost the call-and-response development central to orality” (185).
- 7) Ruby also signifies the maternal figuration of the historical trauma, given that the reenacted “Disallowing” is figured as the loss of mother/woman. As Ruby signifies the victimized mother and the tilted Oven symbolizes the damaged maternal space, both the town’s name and its founding symbol signify the maternal figuration of the historical trauma. As the foundation of the Oven tilts near the end of the novel—significantly, the rain, which brings *jouissance* to the Convent women, soaks its foundation on the night of the raid—the crumbling, dead Oven with its cold brick eventually becomes the suitable symbol for the patriarchal town, which has the name of the dead woman/mother. In other words, the patriarchal town of Ruby is based on the sacrificial logic of woman/mother.
 - 8) For readings of *Paradise* in terms of the (African) American exceptionalist tradition or the American dream, see Dalsgard and Widdowson.
 - 9) For example, Krumholz argues that “these gender divisions are not biologically determined” because “[Richard] Misner and Deacon Morgan show the greater insight by the end of the novel” (25).
 - 10) For example, Magali Cornier Michael and Philip Page interpret the Convent women’s story or the ending of the novel rather positively and redemptively: Michael considers the convent women “as indestructible in the sense that their engagement in . . . a dynamic alternative coalition process grounded in caring and intersecting subject positions in conflict with the patriarchal status quo will continue to emerge” (659); Page also argues that “the story of the convent is from chaotic fragmentation to a liberating fusion,” in which readers open themselves to multiple perspectives, therapeutic renewal and endless possibilities (645).
 - 11) Although some earlier reviewers complain about the undeveloped or stock characters (see Kakutani, Bent, Shockely), Morrison doubtlessly utilizes variety of stereotypes in her characterization of the Convent women, in order to free them from the patriarchal construction of feminine.
 - 12) Linden Peach points out that the chapter entitled “Consolata” informs the numerous allusions to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and the many vampire narratives from which it was derived. She argues that Morrison inverts the conventions of the vampire narrative, which reflect nineteenth-century, especially Victorian anxiety about sexual disease and prostitution as well as Victorian society’s need to govern and control women’s bodies (162).
 - 13) As Clair Kahane points out, in the female gothic tradition a house functions as

- the maternal body and pregnancy and childbirth, which can arouse fears about bodily integrity that are intimately related to one's sense of self, are primary Gothic metaphors for women writers to express their anxiety about female sexuality. The theories of female Gothic have focused on women's ambivalent relation to the mother as the center of the Gothic structure (345). Of course, Freud points out that the house symbolizes the body of the mother and stresses this ambiguity in that the body of the mother represents both home (*heimlich*) and not home (*unheimlich*), presence and absence, the promise of plentitude and the certainty of loss ("The Uncanny" 152-153).
- 14) Interestingly, the male sex organs are removed and hidden in the maternal space of the mansion: ". . . the brass male genitalia that had been ripped from sinks and tubs, packed away in a chest. . ." (72).
- 15) According to Copjec, "*extimité*" (extimate) means that "they (the objects) are in us that which is not us." (Read 129) The term "*extimité*" is developed into a central theoretical concept by Jacques-Alain Miller.
- 16) Although Duvall indicates the conflation of her daughterly love for Mary and sexual love for Deacon, he seems to quickly equate the daughterly love with the spiritual hunger saying "in the logic of Consolata's representation this bodily hunger is simultaneously spiritual hunger" (146).
- 17) Although Duvall means by "so many Beloveds" "paradoxical embodied spirits" and relates them to the "transcendent embodiment," the Lacanian real is that which negates the transcendence. Morrison suggests the women's function as the real through Richard Misner who sees the window in the Convent garden, and it feels "beckon toward another—neither life nor death—but there, just yonder, shaping thought he did not know he had" (307).
- 18) Copjec explains Lacan's definition of the real as follows: "that which, in language or the symbolic, negates the possibility of any metadimension any meta-language. It is this undislodgable negation, this rigid kernel in the heart of the symbolic, that forces the signifier to split off from and turn around on itself. For, in the absence of any metalanguage, the signifier can only signify by referring to another signifier" (*Imagine* 95).
- 19) For the account of Lacan's formula of sexuation, see Copjec, *Read My Desire* 201-236.
- 20) For the relation between woman and love, see Alain Badiou, "What is love?"
- 21) It is, of course, revealed in Patricia's discovery of an anonymous root of the founding fathers' racial identity in her effort to write Ruby's history.
- 22) Although there is no clear indication within the text, Page considers Piedade as

- Connie's mother and Consolata/Connie's vision of paradise as her "idealized memories of her childhood life with her mother" (646, 647). Of course, there is no denying that Piedade is rendered as a maternal figure.
- 23) According to Marcus, Morrison explains her intention of creating paradise which is more "accessible to everybody" as follows: "I tried to make it possible to think that Paradise was within our imagination. . . . I wanted this book to move towards the possibility of reimagining Paradise. The thing is, if paradise had everybody in it, there would be no Paradise at all—that's because we think of it in terms of seclusion. But if we understood the planet to be that place, then this is all there is. So why not make it that way?" (23-24).
- 24) Bouson interprets the Black Madonna image in terms of racial categories: she reads in the final scene, multiracial identity of Consolata, and "the idea of cross-racial mutability and mutuality," indicating the "merging of racial identities—as the white Mother Superior becomes the Black Madonna" (215).
- 25) For an example of the face of woman functioning like the gaze, see Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman* 74-76.
- 26) For the relation between the surrealism and fantasy, see Wright 419.
- 27) As Weir explains, "the self-identities granted by the Virgin to both men and women are illusions, caught in the realm of the imaginary. The unitary identity, whole and undivided is a fantasy; one cannot have nor can one be the dreamed-of Mother" (177).

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