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**OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE IN THE FICTION OF
TONI MORRISON:
ISSUES OF RACE AND GENDER**

**MAGISTER EN INGLÉS
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Abstract

The situation of oppression black people, and particularly black women, have experienced in the United States has been portrayed in the fiction of Afro-American writer Toni Morrison, whose novels The Bluest Eye (1970), Song of Solomon (1977) and Beloved (1987) challenge white male hegemonic power. Morrison not only reconstructs this world of oppression but at the same time creates strategies that dismantle such oppressive world order. The approach of the present study combines a perspective that draws on post-colonial and Afro-American studies and criticism together with feminist and black feminist concerns. The challenging subversive strategies identified in the three novels studied involve the revision and re-characterization of the female role; the deconstruction of family models embedded in a racist and patriarchal society and the problematization of the construction of historical knowledge and its implication in the building of a cultural past. Morrison's fiction destabilizes "a habit of seeing" that works to perpetuate domination and impose an oppressive silence. In so doing, Morrison's novels stand as an act of resistance, a subversive transformation of silence into voice, of absence into presence.

To "my best thing",
Sofía and Juan Cruz

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INTRODUCTION

I am made melancholy when I consider that the act of defending the Eurocentric Western posture in literature as not only “universal” but also “race-free” may have resulted in lobotomizing that literature, and in diminishing both the art and the artist.

Toni Morrison¹

The origin of the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent, what is known as African-American Literature, goes back to the slave narratives of the XVIII century and has entered the XXI century in a solid position after long years of struggle and days of important achievements as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Along these years there has been a constant preoccupation that connects to the relation between the Afro-American community with the larger context of the American society; a relation that demands the analysis of the socio-historical situation of the Afro-American community, which developed out of unequal relations, discrimination and oppression based on prejudices connected to race and the condition in which black people were inserted in the American colonies: the institution of slavery. In this context, the literature of African-Americans in the United States can be approached from a post-colonial perspective, for such analysis becomes associated with a position against imperialism and Eurocentrism, and sets itself to study power relations in a critical position as to Western ways of knowledge production and dissemination.

Post-colonialism and Afro-American studies come together in their shared goals of destabilizing racial hierarchies and discussing power relations. In the United States the two approaches are relevant to understand issues of domination and racism towards minority populations (what bell hooks has

¹ Morrison in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American presence in American Literature” 13

labeled “internal colonialism”). Such fusion can be best summed up in Homi Bhabha’s definition as to the aim of post-colonial or black critique, which is to transform the conditions of enunciation (The Location of Culture); or as Henry Louis Gates Jr. puts it, to create a narrative space able to capture the black experience, “the complexity of the Negro’s existence in Western culture” (The Signifying Monkey xxv).

Central to post-colonial inquiry is the issue of identity. The contact between colonizer and colonized brings about a psychological impact on the colonized that frequently translates into negative self-image and alienation. Such circumstances derive from the imposition of an image of the colonizer as superior, sophisticated and civilized as opposed to that of the colonized which emerges unprivileged, inferior, savage. The internalization of such binary oppositions stands as the genesis of the practice of “Othering”, that is, distinguishing between those who are included in the group as “US” and those left outside as “THEM”. In Orientalism and later in Culture and Imperialism Edward Said exposes the relevance of the concept of “the Other” for the colonial enterprise, as it has functioned as an instrument of dominance for Western powers. Studies on the subjugation of the colonial subject have highlighted the situation of the oppressed as one of entrapment. The contributions of W.E.B. Du Bois in relation to the concept of double consciousness or double vision, as well as Homi Bhabha’s notion of unhomeliness have provided important insights into these issues. Both terms capture the essence of the conflict of the colonial subject as a feeling of being caught between two antagonistic cultures, two antagonistic ways of perceiving the world.

It follows then that the post-colonial identity both includes and is antagonistic to the imperial power, thus the validity of classifications such as hybridity and syncretism. Walter Mignolo has elaborated on the potential of such hybrid space to be transformed into a new space of enunciation, a liminal locus that gains visibility: the silenced, hidden, forgotten stories are brought forward creating “an epistemology of and from the border of the modern/ colonial world system” (51), that is, installing a coloniality of power, a vision of “the modern world system from the colonial perspective” (51).

In this context, the situation of Afro-American women deserves special attention. Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, which has pervaded religious texts, literature and mythology, as well as legal, political, educational institutions and the consumer culture. When oppression is enforced and sanctioned through such institutions, it becomes institutionalized and the resulting consequence is the perpetuation of power imbalance that is reinforced by the internalization of an oppressive situation as natural, or normal, which in turn results into psychological injuries. The perpetuation of traditional gender roles together with the belief that women are innately inferior to men (biological essentialism) is used to keep men in their position of power while women continue to be oppressed. Women then, become "the Other", that is, marginalized and defined by their difference to male norms and values; women become trapped in a set of binary oppositions that are devastating for their self-image for they reinforce the idea of their inferiority. The cornerstone of male domination is sexism: denying women their full human rights and dignity.

Even though the situation of women as far as oppression is concerned presents shared problems and goals, attention to specific differences needs to be paid. These individual differences imply understanding gender issues in a cultural context in which patriarchal domination interacts with other oppressive systems connected to race, economic class, sexual orientation, educational experience, religion, nationality. bell hooks has acknowledged in the Preface to the second edition of Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center that "looking at the interlocking nature of gender, race and class was the perspective that changed the direction of feminist thought" (xii). In her influential study Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, Patricia Hill Collins states Afro-American women have been subjected to multiple levels of oppression within a broader "matrix of domination" (221). She argues that a Eurocentric masculinist worldview has worked to foster black women's subordination in a very complex form. Her paradigm sees oppression as a set of interconnected systems that simultaneously combine oppressive forces along three distinct axes: race, class, and gender, shaping interconnected forces that are historically created rather than natural or biological. These axes are part of one overarching

structure of domination in which each oppressive system needs the others in order to function. Hill Collins' model, *Black Feminist Thought*, replaces the additive approaches for a view of oppression as "interlocking systems" (221). In the same line, Eve Browning Cole in *Philosophy and Feminist Criticism: An Introduction* states that black women experience "triple jeopardy" or better "multiple jeopardy", that is, "they stand at the crossroads of cultural forces that privilege white skin, male gender and economic advantage ... they bear none of these privileges and therefore they are denied three times " (25).

In the hegemonic intent to perpetuate the situation of oppression black people and especially black women experience, the virtual absence of Afro-American literature and history from white mainstream canon goes hand in hand with the attempts to maintain power. The literary canon, up to the 1960s, was dominated by a Eurocentric definition of universalism. The dividing line between "Us" and "Them", or center and periphery, stands as one of the main features of Eurocentrism. It was in the 1960s when both Afro-American artists and critics denounced not only all the facets of racism but also unveiled the nature of literary texts, exposing the texts' attempts to reinforce or undermine racist ideology. As the literary canon was accompanied by a canon of theory and criticism as well, it became necessary to develop a suitable language to refer to these new texts. The interpretation of black literature required tools that gave credit to the Afrocentricity of African American texts.

Toni Morrison, among many other women writers belonging to the Afro-American community, began to voice these concerns in her fiction and critical articles. In the collection of lectures that shaped *Playing in the Dark – Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison challenges the conformation of the American canon, for:

traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States.... This presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. ("Black Matters" 4-5)

Thus, Morrison claims the need for a distinctly black voice to break the silence in which her community has been trapped by the domination of oppressive forces. Morrison felt the need to revise and openly question the imposition of

forms, stereotypes and silences, what she calls an “invented Africanist presence” (6) , that is, the ways in which “a nonwhite, Africanlike presence or persona was constructed in the United States” (6). As a writer, she feels it is her task to unveil the “elaborate strategies undertaken to erase... [Africanism] from view” (9) denouncing that “In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (9).

Morrison is aware of a master narrative, an official narrative that speaks “for Africans and their descendants, or of them” (50) never allowing their own voice to come to life. Acting as a subversive counter-discourse, her fiction encourages the reader to see the oppressive forces only to dismantle them. As she states in the same work “What I am interested in are the strategies for maintaining the silence and the strategies for breaking it” (51). It is the objective of this work is to explore the ways in which Toni Morrison challenges traditional western order and patriarchal programming in three of her novels: The Bluest Eye (1970), Song of Solomon (1977) and Beloved (1987) creating a space for struggle, resistance and liberation empowering the black female voice through a recovery and celebration of Afro-American culture exposing what Morrison considers to be the essential quality of the black text:

What makes a work “Black”? The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language – its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language. (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Afro-American Presence in American Literature” 11)

My approach aims at reading the selected corpus as aesthetic productions of the creative artist and establishing as well the connections between the novels and the oppressive forces that shape the culture from which they emerge to demonstrate how the author challenges such forces through the use of subversive strategies. Echoing Said, “I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology ... , but authors are ... very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure” (Culture and Imperialism xxii). The first chapter of my work deals with the theoretical categories from Post-colonial, Afro-American and Feminist theories and criticism that make up the framework for the analysis of the selected corpus. I devote the three following chapters to explore the subversive strategies identified in the novels, that is, the second

chapter deals with the re-characterization of the female role while the third chapter explores the role of the family challenging both racist and patriarchal inscriptions attached to the family. Finally, the fourth chapter focuses on the role of history and historical knowledge, problematizing the representation of the past and advocating for a renegotiation of such problematic and silenced past.

CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I. A- Post-colonial and Afro-American studies

I have one right alone: that of demanding human recognition from the other.

Frantz Fanon²

Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses"

W. E. B. Du Bois³

The European empire, which consolidated over several centuries, reached its peak of extension in the years previous to the First World War and disintegrated after the Second World War. The study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period, that is, former European colonies, is the arena of post-colonial studies. Though the term post-colonial may suggest what follows colonization, in post-colonial studies it is used to refer not only to the period after the departure of the imperial power, but also to the period before independence, the term post-colonial is used "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2).

The growth of Empire led to the naturalizing of constructed values such as civilization and humanity, which conversely, established savage, native, primitive, as their antithesis. The constitution of opposing pairs, center-periphery, canonized-uncanonized among others, privileged the first term at the expense of the second. The constitution of the colonial subject was, therefore, infused with the understanding of such unprivileged position; a position that Eurocentric power tried to maintain and reproduce.

In the context of the imperial enterprise and its goal of perpetuation of domination, literature becomes core, as Toni Morrison very well acknowledges

² Frantz Fanon Black Skin, White Masks 229

³ W. E. B. Du Bois in The Souls Black Folk, the references to this work are to be found in the Norton Anthology of American Literature 878

“canon building is empire building” (“Unspeakable” 8). In The Empire Writes Back - Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures, Bill Aschroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin state that the development of post-colonial literatures, which emerged out of the experience of colonization, moves along different periods which begin with stages of national or regional consciousness to the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre. This body of literature is characterized by their attempt at “foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial” (2). They also state language plays in this context a central role, for it becomes “the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of truth, order and reality become established” (7). The effect of imperial domination on contemporary literatures is the focus of Post-colonial criticism; practices that seek to understand the operations of colonialist and anti-colonialist forces at different levels: political, social, cultural, and psychological.

It is the emergence of an effective postcolonial voice what begins to counter-act cultural hegemony. Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin delineate key notions of paramount importance for the study of post-colonial literatures. Central to these notions is the post-colonial crisis of identity. The self is damaged by different processes inherent to the colonial-imperial enterprise:

a valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by *dislocation*, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or “voluntary” removal from indentured labor. Or it may have been destroyed by *cultural denigration*, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. (9) (original emphasis)

The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies, one strongly linked to the identity crisis for when the individual fails to establish a satisfactory relation between self and place alienation of vision and crisis in self image result.

In Culture and Imperialism Edward Said also highlights, especially in the second chapter of his study, “Consolidated Vision”, the fact that imperialism produces “troubling self-images” (65). Said is indebted with the work of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose insights on the colonial subjectivity are

revealing. His contributions have been very apt to understand colonial alienation, neurosis in the colonized, and the practice of mimicry. He states the colonized builds his identity through the eyes of the white colonizer, his fantasy, (the fantasy of the black colonized) is to assimilate himself to the colonizer. The image of the colonized then suffers from the desire to be assimilated that cannot be fulfilled to the impossibility to escape the controlling images imposed by fixed stereotypes. In the Introduction to Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon denounces the imperial context as the force behind the identity crisis in the colonial subject:

The effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic; subsequently, the internalization-, or better, the epidermalization- of this inferiority. (11)

According to Fanon, and in contrast to Freudian explanation, the identity crisis and alienation of the black man develops as a consequence of contact with the oppressive white world rather than in the nucleus of the family, that is, he emphasizes the relevance of the social context for an understanding of the psychological problems of the colonized: “White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro” (14). He sets to demonstrate that black identity, as presented from the Western perspective is “a white man’s artifact” (14); and that division of the self is “a direct result of colonialist subjugation [...]” (17).

The imposition of stereotypes worked to legitimize a way of classifying the black man that resulted in a trap, a prison that decivilized him. The title of this work precisely suggests this trap, establishing a connection between black skin and clothes worn, “the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him” (34). Fanon explores the damaging effect of the unprivileged position granted by the imposition of stereotypes as well as the building of identity through the understanding of binary oppositions that result in his conviction of a certain degree of inferiority:

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man ... the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself... his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict

with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (110)

In his recount of his experience of becoming color conscious, aware of classifications, he echoes W.E.B. Du Bois' statement that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (877).

Fanon's conclusion in Black Skin, White Masks is central to the problem of identity in the colonized black subject:

what am I getting at? Quite simply this: when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego... the goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for the Other alone can give him worth [...]. (154)

Half a century before Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, a pioneer in raising African American cultural consciousness, in the Forethought to The Souls of Black Folk also recounts a childhood experience, an anecdote that acted as a revelation for him as to what it meant to be black; this experience caused him to become aware of the damaging implications of his difference, "[...] then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others [...] shut out from their world by a vast veil" (879). Du Bois elaborates the problem for the black man of the existence of such "veil". The metaphor of the veil is apt to capture the key concept of the "twoness of African Americans", that is, the situation of the black man was to be described as that of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (876).

Du Bois defines this two-ness or double-consciousness as "... a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, that sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others..." (879). The trope of the eyes became since then a recurrent figure used to express the problem of identity. Fanon agrees with Du Bois on the damaging effect for the image of the colonized of such identification, so much so that he refers to the development of an "inferiority complex" (Black Skin 18) that forces the colonized to deny his local cultural to struggle to elevate himself "... above his jungle status". In so doing "he becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (Black Skin 18).

Assertion of the distinctive qualities of Black culture and identity began to be voiced artistically and politically in the concept of Negritude, first expressed

by Martinican Aimé Césaire. Négritude claimed a distinctive African view of time-space relations, ethics, metaphysics and aesthetics which separated itself from the supposedly universal European standards. This concept reoccurs in the work of the Afro-American intellectuals and artists of the 1920s, Langston Hughes being one of the outstanding voices. He beautifully denounces the pretense of white universal claims in his famous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", whose echoes resonate in later artists with the cry "I'm Negro and beautiful". Fanon was likewise going to reflect later in his work Césaire's teaching as to this concept. In spite of being the earliest attempt to create a consistent theory of modern African writing, Négritude embraces the very essential binary structure it tries to escape from. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. puts it,

Negritude already constituted a claim of blackness as a transcendent signified, of a full and sufficient presence; but to make such a claim, [...] is already to reveal too much about perceived absence and desire. It is to take the terms of one's assertion from a discourse determined by an Other. ("Criticism in the Jungle" 7)

Nevertheless, the influence of Negritude has been important in the development of Afro-American Black consciousness movement which was going to acquire nationwide status by 1960s. Henry Louis Gates Jr. restates this problem and goes beyond defying the situation for the black text "the problem for us can perhaps be fully stated in the attempt to posit a 'black self' in the very Western languages in which **blackness itself is figure of absence, a negation** ("Criticism in the Jungle" 7), (my emphasis). His is an attempt to break through the trap, "the enclosure of negation" (7). He elaborates on the relation of the individual talent and tradition; in the case of the writer of African descent, two traditions, a European or American and a black tradition, must be acknowledged for "the 'heritage' of each black text written in a Western language is, then, a double heritage, two-toned, as it were. Its visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular" ("Criticism in the Jungle" 4).

Henry Louis Gates Jr points out that because the situation of Afro-Americans has been undeniably one of struggle, literature has suffered the classification as being merely part of another struggle. He calls for a new emphasis to be given to the nature and functions of figurative language as

manifested in specific texts. These texts must be put to different readings, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that a literary text “can never be related satisfactorily to a reality outside itself merely in a one-to-one relation” (“Criticism in the Jungle” 5) if we are to recognize its formal status as a work of art. He asserts Black literature has generally been “taught and analyzed through an interdisciplinary methodology, in which sociology and history (and, for African literature, anthropology) had virtually blocked out the ‘literariness’ of the black text” (“Tell Me Sir, ...What is ‘Black’ Literature?” 15). Thus he argues for attention to be paid to the explication of the formal properties of black writing.

Black writing employs the language of the oppressor, English, in a transformed way. The appropriation of the English language is the first of a range of appropriations which establishes a discourse announcing its difference from the center. According to Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, through the processes of abrogation, that is, denial of the privilege of English and rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication; and appropriation, reconstitution of the language of the center, the capturing and remoulding of the language to new usages, post-colonial writing seizes the language of the center and replaces it with a discourse fully adapted to the situation of the colonized. Language is of paramount importance for the situation of black enslaved people all along the Atlantic coast, for their enslavement entailed the loss of their voice. The dialects and languages they brought with them from Africa became silent after one or more generations, the new language available for communication was that of the master. Without a voice, black people were not only enslaved, they were also muted.

Post-colonial writing, as Afro-American literature, is inscribed in a liberating project. It is through the appropriation of the power invested in writing that discourse can take hold of the marginality imposed on it and transform hybridity and sincreticity into the source of literary and cultural redefinition. By writing out of the condition of “Otherness”, post-colonial texts assert the complexity of intersecting peripheries as a rightful locus of experience. This liberating project involves the use of subversive strategies that revise and challenge the standards imposed as privileged. Salman Rushdie’s phrase “the empire writes back to the imperial center”, which made its way as the title of the work by Aschroft and his colleagues, is an apt synthesis of the imaginative

creative responses that subversive post-colonial writing aims at. This project entails not only nationalist assertion but also a critical questioning of the bases of Eurocentrism, it calls for a challenge to “the world view that can polarize center and periphery” (Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 33).

In the same line, both Fanon and Said have also exposed their claims for liberation emphasizing the role of the re-writing process. In Fanon’s words, “we must strive to liberate all mankind from imperialism; we must all write our histories and cultures respectively in a new way” (qtd. in Said Culture and Imperialism 274). Post-colonial texts’ deliberate intention to disrupt European ordering of time, notions of history and traditional stereotypes stands as a destabilizing force that works to revise and rewrite such traditional notions. From the point of view of the margin and through the voices of the victims of oppressive and destructive forces, the voices of the post-colonial texts have found the power to act as a counter-narrative undermining official narrative. As Homi Bhabha postulates through the very title Nation and Narration, nations are narrations, thus the power of the word, the power to narrate needs to be revised and appropriated for a colonized culture to free itself from the cultural ties of imperialism. Toni Morrison is part of this project of liberation, not only from racial but also from gender oppression, for she “represents a way of seeing and of knowing that disconcerts and finally discounts the very structure which excludes it” (Hill Rigney 1).

CHAPTER I –THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I. B - Feminist and Black Feminist Thought

The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, midwifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge [...] it must be rejected, altered and exposed.

Toni Morrison⁵

In many societies, women share with colonized groups and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. As Simone de Beauvoir exposes it in The Second Sex, the woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man, not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (screen 4). Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin postulate women have been relegated to a position of marginalization, “in a metaphorical sense, ‘colonized’ [...] (174). Therefore there are important parallels between the concerns of post-colonial and feminist theories; they posit that both lines of study exhibit a preoccupation to

reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, [...] to invert the structures of domination [...], unmasking the assumptions upon which [...] canonical constructions are founded, moving first to make their cryptic bases visible and then to destabilize them. (175-176)

Both post-colonial and feminist theory and criticism share their subversive nature. While the former questions the nature of the colonizer-colonized relation, the latter challenges patriarchal structures by exposing and rejecting oppressive definitions of gender roles.

In its broadest conception, feminism stands for gender equality. Its aspirations are both social and political, that is, to end the systematic domination of women by men through male control of cultural, social, and economic institutions giving voice to women whose chances for expression

⁵ Nobel Lecture, 1993. Complete transcription in Peterson, 267-273



have been reduced or invalidated by patriarchy. Patriarchal values present themselves as “natural” and “universal”, thus they stand strongly and solidly built. In Sexual Politics, Kate Millett states the need to disarticulate such solid patriarchal bases: “when a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud. When its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change” (58).

The androcentric assumption of a natural and universal male order is challenged by views on women’s subordination as constructed historically. It is gender, feminists argue, conceived as a product of historical process, which is responsible for fixing women’s roles in society rather than a biological essentialism determining men and women’s place in society. Biological differences have served as a means of justifying the so-called women’s natural inferiority. Feminism challenges this view denouncing patriarchy and therefore women’s subordination are historically constructed, claims first voiced in the XVIII century by Mary Wollestonecraft, who, in A Vindication of the Rights of Women observes that “women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, [...] will obtain for them the protection of man” (262)⁶. Taught in such fashion, gender differences should be understood as being “the products of socialization and education rather than natural or biological facts” (Browning Cole 3). Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir claims women are structured into social institutions in segregate positions.

In Sexual Politics Kate Millett echoes de Beauvoir stating “the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is “Other” (46). Millett identifies the cause of women’s oppression in the interaction of forces related to ideological indoctrination and economic inequality. In Millett’s words, patriarchy’s biological foundations are denounced for they should not be seen as a universal or natural order, but as “an acquired value system enforced through conditioning” (31).

Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature and other cultural productions reinforce or undermine patriarchy, exploring the multiple

⁶ In The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English.

conditions that shape the oppression of women. Its concerns have to do with the circumstances that perpetuate a “habit of seeing” shaped by patriarchal values, that is, a way of looking at life that uses male experience as the standard by which both groups, men and women, are to be evaluated. Feminists have denounced patriarchal programming results in a “devastating effect upon [the woman’s] self image” (Millett 54). The internalization of patriarchal programming undermines women’s self-confidence and assertiveness and then “points to the absence of such qualities as proof that women are naturally and therefore correctly self-effacing and submissive” (Tyson 85). Patriarchal programming is responsible for imposing and working to perpetuate stereotypes that cast men as rational, strong, protective, decisive while women are seen as emotional, irrational, weak, nurturing, submissive.

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women exercising a coercive force that needs to be counter-acted. They claim the texts of patriarchy have generated images such as “angel” and its opposite “monster” as “eternal types” (17). They agree with Virginia Woolf that these types have to be transcended, but “to kill the angel in the house” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 17) as Virginia Woolf puts it, the origin and nature of such images need to be understood. The origin of the ideal woman can be traced back to the Middle Ages, in the cult of the Virgin Mary as the symbol of purity, whose Victorian equivalent is “the angel in the house”. Gilbert and Gubar expose the danger of such stereotype for the female image: “the aesthetic cult of lady like fragility and delicate beauty associated to the moral cult of angel-woman [...] recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead” (25), “the metaphysical emptiness of their purity signifies they are [...] self-less” (21).

Binary oppositions distinguishing between “Madonna-whore”, “angel-bitch” have been strong images used by patriarchal cultural programming for the fulfillment of prescribed gender roles and have therefore worked for the main target of patriarchal ideology which is to maintain male dominance. The study of social historian Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy, exposes how patriarchy becomes established and institutionalized through the interrelation of multiple factors: male control over women’s sexual and reproductive capacity, the role of the patriarchal family as a unit at the service of patriarchy, the role of

enslavement of conquered groups, women subordination enforced by law codes and the state. Lerner emphasizes gender is a category that “became created, defined and established” (212) and which requires women’s cooperation achieved by various means, among them force, economic dependency and class privilege.

The situation of women of color adds another significant dimension to the forces of patriarchal oppression. Black women have historically suffered oppression not only because of gender but also due to their skin color. Black Feminist Thought, or Black Feminist Epistemology developed in an attempt to give an answer to such specificity trying to end oppression in the context of a dominant multi-ethnic society, as is the case of the United States.

Studying the position of black women in the American society requires attention to be paid to interlocking oppressive forces. In Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center, bell hooks exposes the condition of black women as being one of marginal status, in the Preface to the first edition she states “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body [...] living [...] on the edge” (xvi). In that position, hooks argues, black women have developed a mode of seeing that allows them to complement the views of white feminists living at the centre. hooks highlights the fact that Feminism in the United States did not emerge from those women who are most victimized by sexist oppression. White feminism spoke about “women who wanted more than husband, children and a house, ignoring the existence of non-white women and poor white women” (1). Thus, her argument urges for the abandonment of this one-dimensional perspective on women’s reality. For a complete understanding of the complexity of oppression for women several forces need to be identified and defied.

The complexity of such oppressive system can be better appreciated through notion of “the matrix of domination” (Hill Collins 221), which refers to the overall organization of power in society. This matrix of domination is characterized by two key features: first, the particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression is to be understood as historically and socially specific. Secondly, these intersecting systems of oppression are organized through four interrelated domains of power: structural (social structures such as law, politics, religion, economy), disciplinary, (control

mechanisms), hegemonic (legitimizing mechanisms), and interpersonal (everyday life). The oppressive forces that traditional Western thinking entails are rooted in the belief that “the superior should control the inferior” (hooks Feminist Theory 36). The unconscious maintenance of such forces results in the impossibility to recognize these forces and thus struggle against them. Therefore, recognition and awareness constitute the first step in the struggle against oppression and towards redefinition.

Black Feminist Thought challenges Eurocentric, positivist knowledge offering an alternative epistemology, that is, a way of knowing and validating knowledge that defies the status quo and emphasizes the relevance of lived experience, the connectedness between object of study and that who studies rather than “objective distance”. In this context, lived experience is not to be understood in an individualistic way but rather studied in the context of a matrix of cross-cutting interests

In Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, Patricia Hill Collins argues for a re-conceptualization of race, class and gender as “interlocking systems of oppression” as well as for the need to assign black women a key role in defying oppression, for they possess a valuable power which derives from their being “agents of knowledge”. For subordinate groups whose knowledge has been subjugated, that is, not recognized as legitimate by the dominant knowledge makers within a given group, to know about their own experiences is in itself empowering, an act that resists domination, not merely at the level of individual consciousness but more importantly, at a social level for it fosters social change.

Black feminist philosophy works to tear down oppressive frameworks and build in their place creative reconstructions that recover an African ancestry as well as an Afro-American past. One of the means through which the oppressive systems hold power is by the imposition and perpetuation of controlling images. Controlling images can be defined as stereotypes created by the dominant white culture that have acted to prevent the subjugated group from truly understanding themselves as well as having been vital in the preservation of dominance by the group in power. Controlling oppressive images can be counter-acted when subjugated groups attempt self-definition. According to Hill Collins, black women are agents of knowledge for their concrete experiences

are transformed into the centre of epistemic significance. Subjective wisdom is, in fact, the essence of Black Feminist Epistemology. By placing Afro-American women at the centre of analysis, Eurocentric views can be challenged along three important dimensions:

- a- Critical analysis and deconstruction of stereotypes. Hill Collins discusses four types of controlling images. "The mammy" is depicted as cheerful provider and as deriving fulfillment from her service to white people. "The matriarch" is self-supporting, works outside the home and has frequently been abandoned by husband/lover. "The welfare mother" is the image of the breeder woman, and finally "the jezebel" type is the whore, sexually uncontrollable woman. Of these four stereotypes, the only acceptable by the white culture is the mammy.
- b- Critical analysis and defiance to Eurocentric and patriarchal notions of family. Masculinist perspectives on family have prevailed for the patriarchal model is deeply rooted in the Eurocentric view. With this restriction, the Afro-American model, which places the mother in the center, has no place. Western culture does not offer the matriarchy as an alternative model.
- c- Critical analysis and defiance to Eurocentric and patriarchal notions of community. The Eurocentric view on community is a market model, that is, the market model is structured by competition and domination and thus emphasizes individuality. In opposition, the Afrocentric model highlights connections, caring, personal accountability, sense of belonging and emphasis the role of black women's actions in the struggle for group survival.

Hill Collins argues then for a challenge to all set prevailing definitions, and advocates for different ways of understanding power: not just as domination but as energy that can be fostered by creative acts of resistance deconstructing Eurocentric masculinist analyses that rely on controlling images. Thus, all sites of domination are potential sites of resistance, what evidences the complexity of a system that is paradoxically both confining and oppressive and at the same time can be freeing and empowering. In this sense, Hill Collins' position recovers the concept of double-nature Du Bois posed at the beginning of the twentieth century as the defining feature of the black text.

Toni Morrison's works of fiction and criticism reflect the combined concern for feminism and ethnicity. Especially in her novels, she has been able to capture and expose the damage that sexist oppression has caused both inside and outside the ethnic group. Morrison's achievement is precisely to capture artistically and aesthetically the intersection of race and gender. According to Patricia Hill Rigney in The Voices of Toni Morrison:

[Morrison's] own language and her theory of language [...] reflect a consciousness that she writes both from and about a zone that is "outside" of literary convention, that disrupts traditional Western ideological confines and modifies patriarchal inscriptions. (1)

Morrison can be said to articulate the "yearning" of many, the yearning to make the voice of the oppressed free from the entrapment of an imposed silence. As bell hooks claims,

Yearning is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice. Specifically, in relation to the post-modernist deconstruction of "master" narratives, the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced is the longing for a critical voice. (Yearning 27)

By freeing such critical voice, Toni Morrison has been able to speak from the margins, from the periphery, questioning male Eurocentric standards. As a counter-acting force, Morrison's novels denounce and celebrate the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed out of the oppressive conditions that have shaped their history. By giving her works words to utter the stories of the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Beloved 276), Morrison subverts the story of silence and oppression, and offers new ways of seeing that resist totalizing concepts of self, gender, and race.

CHAPTER II - RE-CHARACTERIZING THE FEMALE ROLE: THE RESTORATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MORRISON'S "TAR WOMAN"

Colonial discourse, as defined by Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture, is understood as a set of discourses that are employed to regulate colonial-imperial relations. Colonial discourse is of paramount importance in the process of building an image of the colonized as inferior to that of the colonizer for it builds the official knowledge of subjugated peoples,

Discourse, as an integral part of the social imaginary, reflects the stereotypes that dominate the social world, and stand for what is allowed and forbidden, what is good and evil, what is beautiful and ugly, what is valuable and worthless, establishing a hierarchy as well as the rules for inter and intra personal relations⁷. (Celi and Harrington, "Introduction" 10)

The concepts and categories he develops are linked to the work of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Bhabha's postulations focus, as well as Fanon's, on the alienation of the colonial subject, the neurosis of the colonized, and the tendency towards mimicry. Of the concepts he develops, those of stereotype and mimicry are relevant to the study of characterization in Morrison's novels.⁸

The concept of stereotype implies the substitution of the colonial subject through his so-called salient features, which contribute to fix a negative image of the colonized, an image of inferiority. This image is vital for the oppressor to perpetuate dominance for it justifies subjugation; it offers the colonizer a feeling of control since seeing himself in opposition to the colonized strengthens him. However, the colonized suffers the opposite, for such image provokes a devastating effect, it leads to a crisis of identity. This crisis is condensed in the problematic of seeing and being seen⁹, as it results from the clash between the colonized's self-image as opposed to the image offered by the group in power. Bhabha states the representation of identity for the colonized and the colonizer is metonymic, that is, it identifies the subject by displaying it in part. The other is

⁷ My translation

⁸ Other concepts complete Homi Bhabha's postulation of interstices and liminal space. See Nation and Narration, edited by Homi Bhabha

⁹ This problematic derives from Lacanian psychoanalysis, from his postulation of the mirror stage as central to the building of identity.

represented as “invariable, known and predictable”¹⁰ (Vega, screen 4). This partial display emphasizes the positive features in the case of the colonizer and the negative ones in the case of the colonized involving ambivalence, a constant process of both rejection and identification with the other, that is, there exists both a tension between the desire to continue being the same and the desire to be like the other. At the same time there is duplication, that is, the desire to occupy two places at the same time. These desires entail ambivalence, which stands as a salient feature in characterizing both colonial discourse and colonial identity.

Bhabha’s concept of mimicry can also be linked to Fanon’s work. Bhabha uses Fanon’s metaphor of the mask for his definition of mimicry. Bhabha maintains colonial education, at the service of imperial goals, encourages the desire to be the other, to reject the native self and to struggle to reach the superior status of the colonized. This practice, defined as mimicry, involves the anxiety for whitening and the uneasiness towards blackness. Bhabha sees in mimicry not only a desire to be similar to the other but also a potential for menace. He links mimicry to the military practice of camouflage and posits mimicry can be a menace, a sign of resistance. He opens the chapter “Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse” quoting Lacan’s words in relation to the concept of mimicry: “it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled” (qtd. in Bhabha, The Location 85).

Mimicry, then, leads to hybridity, for “it repeats rather than represents” (Bhabha, The Location 87). In this sense, mimicry and hybridity problematize imperial power. Thus, mimicry can be seen a strategy for inclusion, a desire “not only to be accepted but also to be adopted and absorbed” (Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 4) but also as a subversive strategy, “a moment of civil disobedience, a sign of resistance” (Vega, screen 8). Marjorie Perloff elaborates on the strong potential of Bhabha’s concepts of “hybridity, liminality, interrogative, interstitial space” stating that these notions defy “a retrograde historicism that continues to dominate Western critical thinking” (screen 1). Rather than thinking in binary oppositions, Perloff sees Bhabha’s interstitial space as “border situations and

¹⁰ My translation

thresholds ... the sites where identities are performed and contested" (screen 1). As Walter Dignolo has pointed out, such hybrid space is transformed into a new space of enunciation, a liminal locus that gains visibility: the silenced, forgotten, hidden stories are brought forward creating "an epistemology of and from the border of the modern/colonial world system" (51), that is, these stories install a coloniality of power, a vision of "the modern world system from the colonial perspective" (51).

Western master narrative that spoke for and of African-Americans created and worked to perpetuate a set of fixed stereotypes that allowed social and historical differences to be made into universal, natural ones. Fanon denounces the fictionality of such characteristics and exposes the colonial dichotomy colonizer-colonized as the product of a Manichaeism delirium that establishes opposing pairings such as white-black, good-evil which enforce the denial of blackness. Though this awareness is important, black feminists such as bell hooks claim a further consideration needs to be made. Fanon and other thinkers express the problem of oppression in terms of the condition of "the black man", leaving unmentioned the situation of the black woman. In their denunciation, black feminists emphasize not only oppressive Eurocentric standards but also patriarchal binary distinctions seeking to unmask and destabilize their assumptions as well as engaging in a process of re-definition.

The characterization of female roles that Morrison offers in her novels depicts black women that defy stereotypes. Morrison exposes the damaging components of sexist and racist oppression and their effect on black women, who have had to cope with the perpetuation of such stereotypes by the larger society. One of these stereotypes is linked to the beauty myth which derives from a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self worth, a standard that transformed blonde hair and blue eyes into features of female beauty and virtue. Such equation implies that "women who are not Anglo-Saxon are not beautiful and hence inferior" (Denard, "The Convergence" 172). There are also recurrent figures of black women as breeders, objectified in their economic role under slavery; and once slavery was abolished images of black women portrayed them as "mammies" working in the house of the white man.

Morrison's black female characters embody the cultural values of their community as well as the traditional beauty of black women, they are "tar women". As Carolyn Denard states in "The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," "the women that Morrison celebrates in her fiction are those who exhibit the traditional values of black womanhood: "drawing from the myth of the 'tar lady' Morrison calls the historical ability of black women to keep their families and their households together the 'tar quality'" (175). Morrison's fiction offers a characterization of the female role in the line of these "tar women". In the words of Toni Morrison herself:

"tar baby" is also a name ... that people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things, it came naturally out of the earth; it held together things *For me the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together*¹¹ (qtd. in Ryan 81)

The tar woman is an evident strategy to deconstruct stereotypes. In "Contested Visions/Double-Vision in Tar Baby", Judylyn Ryan explains the significance of the tar quality attributed to black women. She states it stands as a symbol for a positive cultural potential.

Barbara Christian in "Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison" states Morrison has had to struggle against the stereotype of the black mammy, thus her task has been to "kill the mammy in the Big House" (23). Christian claims that due to the different cultural backgrounds of both Virginia Woolf and Morrison had to face different obstacles, that is, had to deconstruct different stereotypes. While Woolf had to "kill the angel in the house" (Gilbert and Gubar 17), meaning the ideal image of a woman as mother-wife; Toni Morrison has encountered other negative stereotypes, for example, the negative image of the black woman who cared for a white family's children, the stereotype of the black woman as "the mammy". As J. Brooks Bouson points out, in her novels Morrison emphasizes "the damaging impact of white racist practices and learned cultural shame" for the African-American experience, revealing "the shaping and shaming power of corrosive racist

¹¹ Emphasis added by Judylyn Ryan

stereotypes and discursive repertoires in the construction of Afro-American identities as racially inferior and stigmatized" (4). The female characterization Morrison displays in her fiction works to undo such stereotypes.

Many tar women who defy stereotypes exist in Morrison's novels: Claudia in The Bluest Eye, Pilate in Song of Solomon, Sethe in Beloved. In creating characters such as these, Morrison has contributed, as Carolyn Denard observes, "to alleviate prejudices and misconceptions and to seek ways to reinforce the value that racism and sexism would take away from the beauty, the work and the cultural values of black women" ("The Convergence" 178).

II. A - Claudia, the tar girl in The Bluest Eye

As it has already been stated, Morrison's female characters act as a destabilizing force against stereotypes created by white Eurocentric standards. One of the ways in which Morrison deconstructs such stereotypes is through the construction of female characters that embody the features and values Morrison celebrates: the tar quality woman is not merely highlighting color, it represents the strength of black women.

In "Contested Visions/Double-Vision in Tar Baby", Judylyn Ryan argues that the oppressive treatment of European / Euro-American imperialism results in negative images of the self that can be challenged through what she calls "a efunesque transformation" (70). She claims the initially negative experience of alienation and identity crisis characteristic of double-consciousness which derives from the imposition of stereotypes and negative images of the African identity "... can be cleansed, transformed into a positive potential – double-vision" (71). This transformation is metaphorically rendered through the trope of the efun. An efun is "a ritually prepared chalk which is used for cleansing in Yoruba religion. It is said to have the power to transform the negative energy within an entity into a positive potential" (70). Thus, this efunesque transformation allows the female character to move beyond the perspective of the dominant culture and view herself through the eyes of her own "culturally informed, historically meaningful and communally affirmative perspective" (Ryan 71).

In The Bluest Eye, the tar quality can be seen in the character of Mrs Mac Teer as well as in the tar-woman to be, Claudia. However, it is nine-year-old Claudia, the narrator, the one who most fiercely defies white standards challenging stereotypes of female beauty. Through her voice, the image of the white, blond angel is problematized. Claudia exposes the symbols the dominant culture presents as the models to be admired and imitated and defies them. Her defiance is evident early in the novel when she resists to be caught by Shirley Temple's spell, a force her sister Frieda and Pecola Breedlove have been unable and unwilling to challenge:

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She [Pecola] was a long time with

the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-te Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. (19)

Claudia's rejection of the Shirley Temple cup represents her rejection for the white standard of female beauty and further extends to her rejection for the blond, blue eyed dolls. Instead of being moved to love the baby doll, this object infuriates her, moves her to violently destroy it:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (20)

Dangerously, this desire to destroy the dolls is what Claudia would like to do with white girls, "but the dismembering of the dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls [...]" (22). As Kate Millett states "under patriarchy, the female did not develop the symbols by which she is described" (46), that is, the images of women have been designed and imposed, fashioned to suit the needs of patriarchy. By articulating Claudia's anger, Morrison questions white models of femininity that trap black women and provoke damaging effects to their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. The image of the ideal beauty, the ideal woman, activates its opposite, the image of the monster woman. Gilbert and Gubar warn about the effect associated to this negative image is "self-loathing ... of their own female bodies" (34). bell hooks has referred to the danger of being unaware of the symbols of patriarchy and their effects: "unconscious maintenance and perpetuation of white supremacy is dangerous, because none of us can struggle to change racist attitudes if we don't recognize that they exist" (Feminist Theory 56). Though Claudia escapes the entrapment of black fixation as negative, other characters are caught by the constructed web of symbols that reinforce white supremacy and lead to self-loathing, notably, Pauline Breedlove and her daughter Pecola.

Pauline's contact with the white world through the movie screen provoke a disillusion, a dissatisfaction that grows into self-hate. She tries to imitate the models of femininity as they appear embodied in the actresses on screen.

However, her mimicry is never satisfactory, for she desires to be like the imposed model, but never attains full identification. Her disillusion is released in anger, as bell hooks points out, "to vent anger and rage at injustice at one another rather than at oppressive forces" (57) leads to internalized racism and self-hate. Her daughter Pecola is even more vulnerable to the images of white supremacy and even more inclined to internalize their message.

Living in the same community, Claudia is also bombarded by images and symbols that enforce privilege on the basis of skin color. When a new girl, Maureen Peal, arrives at her school, she is clearly alert at what her presence causes among peers and teachers. She notices "...there was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk. She enchanted the entire school" (62). Again, her reaction fuses the admiration for what the dominant culture values as virtue with the anger she feels for being left outside such standards, for being different: "Frieda and I were bemused, irritated and fascinated by her. We looked hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium, but had to be content at first with uglying up her name, changing Maureen Peal to Meringue Pie" (63).

In opposition to Pauline and Pecola who are unable to resist the message of white supremacy, Claudia defies these imposed standards. Her defiance goes beyond dismembering white dolls, and insulting a light-skinned girl such as Maureen Peal; both worrying attitudes for they make visible a hatred, an anger that is dangerously being released. Both Claudia and Frieda decide to face a whole group of boys who, in the school playground, are laughing at Pecola, insulting her mainly for her skin color. Her blackness and her own conviction of ugliness combine to make her vulnerable to their attacks:

a group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove. [...] they surrounded her. Heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of a majority, they gaily harassed her. ... Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked [...]. (65)

Pecola cries unable to defend herself. Even if she had had the strength to do so, she had no control neither over her skin color nor over the sleeping habits of her father. Strikingly, those boys insulting Pecola are themselves black. Their reason for using skin color, their own skin color as an insult is one more indication as to the internalization, or the epidermalization as Frantz Fanon calls

it, of self-hatred. Among all the school peers, only Frieda and Claudia defy such standards and defend Pecola:

Then Frieda, with set lips and Mama's eyes, snatched her coat from her head and threw it on the ground. She ran toward them and brought her books down on Woodrow Cain's head. The circle broke [...]

You cut that out, you hear? I had never heard Frieda's voice so loud and clear.

You shut up, Bullet Head" I had found my tongue. (66)

By exposing and questioning the symbols that have helped the dominant culture to impose its standards of value and worth, by letting Claudia "find her tongue", Morrison defies sexist and racist oppression. Expressing her dismay at the Western notion of physical beauty as virtue, Morrison testifies to the damaging consequences that this idea has had within the black community, "when we are urged to confuse dignity with prettiness, and presence with image, we are being distracted from what is worthy about us: for example, our intelligence, our resilience, our skill, our tenacity, irony, or spiritual health" (qtd. in Woidat 184), that is, their quality as "tar woman".

II. B - Pilate, the far presence of the ancestor in Song of Solomon

In Song of Solomon, Morrison presents a far woman through the character of Pilate, who defies in many ways Western Eurocentric stereotypes. Her name and the conditions of her birth already signal her special position in the novel. Blind selection of names from the Bible was the rule for every child born, except the first male. We are told that upon Pilate's birth, her father:

confused and melancholy over his wife's death in childbirth, had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees. (18)

He copied the name on a piece of paper, as best he could and asked the midwife to read it, for it would be the baby's name; and she said "Pilate". He was confused and asked for clarification, "like a riverboat pilot?" "No...like a Christ-killing Pilate" (19). The biblical allusion her name triggers would indicate that there is an evil, negative force in her character. However, her actions in the novel subvert Western knowledge and symbolize resistance, redefining her name. The power to rename represents a reclamation of agency as well as a way of creating historical self-identity, an "efueneque transformation". Metaphorically Pilate is, in fact, what her father thought the pronunciation of her name meant, "a riverboat pilot," since she becomes a spiritual guide to her nephew Milkman Dead, who is, so to speak, spiritually dead.

Pilate's physical appearance also signals her defiance of Western models and stereotypes, "Short hair cut regularly like a man's ... large sleepy eyes and busy lips... smooth smooth skin, hairless, scarless, and wrinkleless." (138). Perhaps, the most striking physical feature is that "the place in her stomach where a navel should have been and was not. Even if you weren't frightened of a woman who had no navel, you certainly had to take her very seriously" (138). We are told that she was born out of pure will, some minutes after her mother died, and that her navel healed without leaving any mark.

Pilate's worldview is also in opposition to white Western standards since she possesses "powers" connected to magic and has also the ability to communicate with the dead. Pilate is credited with having exercised her powers for Milkman to be born and for him to stay alive, even in the womb of his

mother, Ruth. We are told she gave something to Ruth for her to become pregnant: "She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to pit in his food ... it worked too. Macon came to me for four days... and two months later I was pregnant" (125). When Macon found out, he ordered Ruth to get rid of the baby. Ruth was too scared to face Macon on her own and it was Pilate the one who helped her face the fury of her husband, "Pilate helped me stand him off. I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life. And yours, Macon. She saved yours too" (125-126). Not only is Pilate involved in causing Ruth's pregnancy, but also she is the only one who dares to face her brother Macon and the only one who helps Ruth. As Ruth would not obey Macon in his order to get rid of the baby, he began to hit her while being pregnant. Ruth looked for Pilate for protection,

Pilate put a small doll on Macon's chair in his office. A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly. Macon knocked it out of the chair with a yardstick pushed into the bathroom, where he doused it with alcohol and burned it. [...]. He left Ruth alone after that. (132)

Pilate's role as a "life giver" to Milkman is expressed in a double way, first, Pilate is acknowledged for being involved in the biological birth of her nephew. More important still, she is the one that opens the possibility of a spiritual life unknown to him under the tyranny of his father.

Pilate's powers involve the use of magic and ritual practices as well as her capacity to communicate with the dead since her concept of life and death is culturally rooted in the beliefs of the Afro-American community. Pilate's concept of life and death transcends Western understanding. As she explains to Ruth, her sister in law, one thing is to be shot and a different one is to be dead:

"You saw your own father die... you saw him killed. [...]"
 "I saw Papa shot. Blown off a fence five feet into the air. I saw him wiggling on the ground, but not only did I not see him die, I see him since he was shot." (140)

Thus, for Pilate, physical death is not the end of life. Even though Ruth is also credited with having had contact with her dead father, these two women are set apart by their tar quality: while Ruth can be seen as tar-less, blues-singing Pilate is the tar woman who symbolizes the ancestral characteristics of the community:

They were so different... one black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependant on money for life, the other indifferent to it. [...]. (139)

According to Sandra Adell in "Song of Solomon: Modernism in the Afro-American Studies Classroom", Pilate's view of death should be connected to the spiritual realm of many West-African societies which consider death "as a process by which a person is removed from the physical world but continues to exist, in the collective memory of the people, in one of two dimensions of time. Sasa ... Zamani..." (Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison 65). Sasa is a Swahili term which refers to the immediacy whereas Zamani is "the graveyard of time" (65), the period after which nothing can go. In this cosmology "the dead dwell in personal or collective immortality, but always in the present" (65).

The knowledge of the world Pilate embodies presents a synthesis of what the novel seeks to express. The novel presents beliefs and cultural practices of non-Western societies which work to counter-act modes of Western thought. Adell points out that an important thematic line for the discussion of the novel is the presence of the ancestral figure. She highlights three characters emerge as ancestors:

Pilate; her father, Jake, later named Macon; and the midwife Circe. Each of the three possesses a generosity of spirit that Morrison seems to suggest is the mainstay of the community and of communal values. They also possess a special knowledge that enables them to serve as intermediaries between the material and the spiritual worlds. (64)

Thus, Pilate stands as the link between the material world Milkman inhabits and the spiritual world of his ancestors. Her power resides in her role as a tar woman, a figure able to fuse both worlds with a tar quality.

Morrison subverts, therefore, the negative associations that connect Pilate to a Christ-killing figure. As Linda Krumholz observes, "as Pilate's pedagogy initiates Milkman, Morrison's novel initiates the reader into new possibilities of perception, interpretation and imagination" (Approaches 106). By re-defining her name, Morrison embarks in a project of re-definition of the self that needs to be carried out from within, that is, European standards have

imposed notions and stereotypes that are not appropriate to appreciate the black characters. Pilate, far from being a Christ-killing figure, stands for life. She is a life-giver: she saves Milkman both physically and spiritually. Her tar quality, that is, her potential as a cultural positive force is linked to her role in awakening Milkman to the treasure of his past, which is at the same time, the past of his community. Thus, she can be said to possess the tar quality of holding things together, in this case, the present and the past, the only way in which a future can be conceived. In another "efunesque transformation", Morrison shows Milkman's growth in association to Pilate's central role: that of spiritual guide, helping him transform his barren present into a meaningful life.

II. C – Sethe, the tar mother in Beloved

In Beloved, Morrison exposes, rather than the facts of slavery, the effects of slavery on black life and black humanity. She moves beyond statistical summaries to what slaves actually experienced, their interior life. Such exploration allows Morrison to undo the image of the slave mother as “a breeder of stock”, as defined by the language of slavery. Instead, Morrison presents black characters that are, as Carolyn Denard observes, “agents of their own humanity rather than ... resigned victims of the values of their white enslavers” (“Beyond the Bitterness of History: Teaching Beloved” 42). Denard argues

the largest portion of the self-defining humanity of the black characters in *Beloved* is their manifestations of love ... In the foreground of this text is a story of the varying ways in which a people tries to impart human love in inhuman times. (42)

Rejecting the stereotype of the black female slave as breeder and presenting Sethe as a mother defining motherhood in her own terms adds a further dimension to the characterization of her role, that of accommodating the implications derived from self-definition to survival. In this sense, Sethe appears as a tar quality woman who claims her right to motherhood, a right denied by the oppressive force of slavery.

As a slave in the Sweet Home plantation, Sethe is in a position with few to no chances. She is the property of her master, “chattel”, and worse yet, her children, “her best thing” as she calls them, are the property of the master as well. Being pregnant, she plans to run away. Her desire is not to escape on her own, she plans to leave after her children have been safely taken away. Sethe cannot think of any other fate but to be with her children, therefore, when she learns schoolteacher is planning to sell some slaves, she decides she cannot wait. In spite of being six months pregnant, she encourages the rest of the slaves to run away.

The plan to escape is risky. Since Mr Garner died, Mrs. Garner received the help of “schoolteacher” in running the plantation. Schoolteacher’s voice stands for the discourse of oppression. He symbolizes the view of the white man, the master in possession of the word and the power to define. Sethe, as a

slave and a woman, is subjugated in a double sense: oppressed due to her skin color and her female condition. In the novel, Morrison explores precisely this double oppression and possibly the most dreadful situation a woman suffered in the context of slavery: the denial of motherhood. Sethe's life ordeal - the mammary rape, the terrible whipping that followed, so terrible it opened a "chokecherry tree" on Sethe's back, her escape being pregnant and badly hurt, giving birth in the way to her fourth child, Denver - presents a dark contrast with the short period of freedom she enjoyed once she reached North and lived for twenty-eight days in 124 Bluestone Road with Baby Suggs, her mother in law, and her children: Howard, Burglar, the crawling-already? baby and the newly born Denver. Morrison not only explores the suffering, the pain Sethe goes through but she also challenges it with a language as violent as the oppressor's. Sethe's response to schoolteacher stands as her reclamation of motherhood in the most paradoxical form, a love that kills.

What Sethe went through in Sweet Home did not make life "sweet". It definitely did not make the plantation appear as something she could call "home." Under the system of slavery she was denied her voice, and treated as an object, traded as commodity. The long enumeration that follows ironically condenses the suffering and the pain for slaves, especially for slave mothers:

in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers ... Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years... given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her- only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not and did. That child she could not love, and the rest, she would not. "God take what he would," she said. And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing (23).

After Baby Suggs is granted freedom, Sethe is bought to replace her and left in a silence that is reinforced through her isolation and the language of violence. Sethe has no chances of articulating her pain verbalizing it, sharing it with other women for she is now the only slave woman in Sweet Home. Halle will become Sethe's partner, her husband, though no ceremony is to bless their union.

Under the institution of slavery slave women were "breeders," their status as wives or mothers was not recognized.

Sethe's plan to escape can be read as an answer, restricted by the possibilities available to her, to schoolteacher and the institution of slavery. The journey up North is not easy, Sethe recalls

making her way up in the hills where no house were likely to be... how (her feet) were so swollen she could not see her arch or feel her ankles. Her leg shaft ended in a loaf of flesh scalloped by five toenails. But she could not, would not stop [...]. (29)

In spite of the pain, the uncertainty of her condition, Sethe keeps on, she even delivers her fourth child, Denver in the way. As she emphasizes, what kept her moving was the fact that she had to give the crawling-already? baby her milk. Images connected to milk abound in the novel, and they contribute to highlight the maternal drive that pushes Sethe to continue.

The twenty-eight days of a new life she enjoys in 124 Bluestone Road offer Sethe possibilities unknown to her, there her children are hers to love, to claim. However, after twenty-eight days of enjoyment, Sethe faces the worst nightmare: schoolteacher and three other horsemen - a sheriff, a nephew and a slave catcher - appear in the horizon and very much as the Apocalypses horsemen come to announce the end of the world, that is, the end of Sethe's life as a free woman, as a mother. As the narrative voice points out "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). Sethe answers schoolteacher with the language she has been taught to obey: the language of violence, which stands as the central paradox of the novel. Sethe's love for her children and her terrible action to try to kill them has to be read in the context of slavery. Sethe's action, however, does not end in the killing of the baby itself. She both metaphorically and literally lives with the consequences of her action. After trying to define her role as a mother in her own terms, Sethe lives with the grief and guilt that her complex decision entail.

When confronted with a newspaper clipping given to Paul D by Stamp Paid, Sethe answers: "I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (163). As Houston Baker Jr. points out, "for the black slave, the white externality provided no ontological or ideological certainties, in fact, it

explicitly *denied slaves the grounds of being*¹² (The Journey Back 30). Such denial is at the center of Sethe's attempt to explain her decision. As she cannot find the words to verbalize her actions, a narrative voice intrudes in an attempt to say something coherent in the middle of a situation that is "unspeakable" as Sethe and Baby Suggs tacitly agreed after "the Misery",

No .No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful ... [took them] where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

Death and safety become, paradoxically, interwoven. Sethe redefines motherhood in her own terms. Not only killing the baby, but loving the baby can be seen as a defiance to traditional conceptions for the role of a slave woman who was assigned the category "breeder". Through Sethe Morrison challenges the conception of motherhood imposed under the institution of slavery. Sethe, as a tar mother, attempts to maintain her children safe and together, though this presents itself as something complicated to achieve for slavery works against the possibilities of motherhood. In spite of the adversities, Sethe attempts self-definition, first by refusing to allow her children back into slavery and later by trying to maintain a newly shaped maternal space that includes the dead as well as the living. The language of this "tar mother" becomes a counter-discourse to the language of the oppressor and the imposed traditional image of the slave woman as servile, submissive breeder.

All in all, the three novels under analysis exhibit female characters that defy stereotypes, characters that run the risk of attempting self-definition. These are "tar women" who

held things together inside and outside the home; they understood the historical circumstances that limited their own potential as well as that of their men, yet they took that and created their own positive images. They took care of their families, loved their husbands, and were not preoccupied with physical standards of beauty as a measurement of self worth. (Denard, "The Convergence" 176)

By exposing the obsession with a white image of virtue, and other stereotypes that focus on the "animal characteristics" of black women, on their status as

¹² My emphasis

“breeders” and “mules”, Morrison has been able to denounce the indoctrination black women have suffered and the damaging effects it brings about. The Black women of Morrison’s fiction, such as Claudia, Pilate and Sethe, subvert the standard views, and, in an “efunesque transformation”, reclaim and represent the humanity of the tar quality woman allowing for a revision of set stereotypes and images that emerges both transformative and restorative.

CHAPTER III - DEFYING RACIST AND PATRIARCHAL INSCRIPTIONS ATTACHED TO THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

As Nancy Peterson observes in “Say, make me, remake me”: Toni Morrison and the reconstruction of African American history”, Morrison’s novels provide “a much different, more complicated explanation of the fractures and fissures in black families than sociological historical accounts...” (209), that is, the image of the black family suffered fixation in negative terms very much as the female stereotype explored in the previous chapter. Morrison’s project towards the revision of the female role and the transformation of negative images into positive possibilities also embraces her defiance of racist and patriarchal impositions attached to the family, which derive from the oppression experienced in the context of a white Anglo society.

Morrison’s treatment of the family places in a central role the woman to woman bonds as an essential condition for healing. These bonds are established amid terrible conditions. As Morrison observed in a 1977 interview with Ntozake Shange,

what they say to each other and what they say to their daughters is vital information. Without this passing down of wisdom, the daughters cannot have livable lives and an entire generation of African Americans will be affected adversely because of the wounds these motherless or sisterless black women carry with them. (qtd. in Peterson 209)

The black women in Morrison’s novel subvert the patriarchal notion of family and present an alternative model that puts the woman at the center of the maternal space inhabited by other women. As Barbara Christian points out, Morrison’s novels “usually include a three-woman household, recalling an older mythic familial structure” (24). This household is the site for the resilience and creativity of black women to act towards a reconstruction of their lives and those of their families.

White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy uses the family as a unit for the acceptance and perpetuation of hierarchical rule and coercive authority. bell hook observes how important it is for patriarchy that both hierarchical rule and coercive authority appear as natural. She describes the Western family as a site of “authoritarian male rule and authoritarian adult rule”, which “works to socialize us into accepting group oppression and the use of force to maintain

authority” (Feminist Theory 120). Kate Millett has also emphasized the role and impact of the family as the chief patriarchal institution “the patriarchal family is both mirror of and connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (33). The conditioning the patriarchal family reproduces casts aggression as a male trait while passivity is seen as the female feature. In consequence, aggressiveness indicates the master class, while docility the subject group.

The obstacles Morrison’s female characters encounter in trying to achieve a sense of family are in great measure overcome by the role of the “tar woman”. As an alternative to the patriarchal figure of the father as head of the family, and the submissive role assigned to the mother, Morrison presents a character analogous to the role she conceives black women have as writers, that is, “black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure.... They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both. We don’t find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive.” (qtd. in Christian 24). Rather than emasculate the father, Morrison empowers the mother, exposing how her situation has been more complex due to the double oppression she has experienced.

In this context, the institution of the black family has been the site of special suffering. Slavery destroyed any coherent sense of family and the historical changes that followed did not do much to alter the suffering. As W.E.B. Du Bois has said in relation to the black man at the turn of the twentieth century, he experienced “lack”, absence, he felt the “...dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings” (882). What Du Bois aims at emphasizing is the damage caused by material circumstances to the institution of the black family,

Nor was [the black man’s] burden all poverty and ignorance. The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race..., but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home. (882)

In the same way as female models that perpetuate white privilege and are thus threatening to the black self need to be exposed, the same damaging effect

regarding the model of the family needs to be first identified for subsequent problematization.

In her novels, Morrison exposes how the black family as an institution has suffered mistreatment, but at the same time she allows for alternatives to the conventional patriarchal and racist model. The three novels selected for analysis assign the concept of family a central role, so much so that it could be said that in the three of them family drives the narrative. Instead of "a family", Morrison works with different configurations of families that involve parents and children, older generations in an extended family type, and a configuration that extends even further to include not just the living, but also the dead. As Keith Byerman has observed in "Songs of the Ancestors: Family in Song of Solomon", the families in Morrison's fiction are "both loving and deeply troubled; the two characteristics are in fact often indistinguishable. Love destroys as often as it creates, and trouble often leads to the reconstruction of identity and relationships" (135); it is precisely this potential for subversion and healing what Morrison explores through her treatment of family in her fiction.

III. A - Defying racist and patriarchal inscriptions attached to the role of the family in The Bluest Eye – deconstructing the Dick-and-Jane family model

Morrison's novels can be described as a "revision, inversion and subversion of traditional value systems" (Hill Rigney 26). As well as celebrating those symbols that enrich her community, Morrison has exposed and denounced those that perpetuate suffering in her community. One such case can be the ideal image of the family as contained in the Dick-and-Jane primer. As if it were a mirror, in The Bluest Eye, Morrison places the ideal white model of family, represented by the Dick-and-Jane family and sets in opposition the black world, Pecola's world. The world of Dick and Jane is an illusion, a devastating one for it contributes to set standards of worth based on images that respond to the white privileged world. Morrison challenges this dominant cultural view of the family subverting the traditional Western notion that privileges Dick and Jane's world, raising questions about the white institution of the family.

"In *New Myths and Ancient Properties: the Fiction of Toni Morrison*", Anne Warner denounces "the irrational yoking of goodness with [the commercialized blue-eyed idea of beauty] and the obsessive desire for the touted purity of whiteness contribute to ... multiple catastrophes..." (4), such catastrophes are connected to racial issues that have to do with intra-racial racism, self-hatred, Pecola's ostracism and madness. It is Pecola's state the one that best captures the damaging effects of the internalization of the white-Anglo model. In her story, as in Morrison's other novels, silence as well as voice, absence as well as presence coexist. In "Reconnecting fragments: Afro-American folk tradition in The Bluest Eye", Trudier Harris states "Pecola lives the blues rather than voice them, unable to articulate the pain she feels or channel it through the form of the blues" (75). Pecola is unable to transform her pain in an efunesque way, so to say, but her silent suffering reveals a lot in relation to what Morrison wants to say about her story.

As Frantz Fanon states in The Wretched of the Earth,

In capitalist societies, education religious or secular , among other aesthetic forms of respect to status quo create around the colonized an atmosphere of submission and inhibition. His world is swept in two parts – contradiction and ambivalence – the colonized desires the world of the colonizer but at the same time rejects it¹³. (33)

Fanon had highlighted in his previous work, Black Skin, White Masks that alienation implies the recognition of economic realities and the “internalization – or better epidermalization - of this inferiority” (Black Skin 11). The situation Fanon describes for the Antillean is appropriate to enlighten our view as to the situation of the black community Pecola is part of:

we can say that every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation ... in an Antillean is the product of his cultural situation. In other words, there is a constellation of postulates, a series of propositions that slowly and subtly – with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio – work their way into one’s mind and shape one’s view of the world of the group to which one belongs. (Black Skin 152)

Without the presence and active contestation of a counter voice, such situation creates a view of the world that is shaped by a white perspective. Fanon highlights the strong influence, in such a context, of the model of the white family, “the white family is the agent of a certain system. ... the family is an institution that prefigures a broader institution: the social or the national group” (Black Skin 148-49).

Therefore, in the Eurocentric model, the collective unconscious of the group, that is, the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes, links the black man to the opposite of virtue, that is, “The black man is the equivalent of sin...” (189). The archetype of the lowest values is represented by the black model:

Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation; and on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. A magnificent blond child [...]. (Black Skin 189)

Fanon emphasizes “the collective unconscious is not dependent on cerebral heredity; it is the result of what I shall call the unreflected imposition of a culture” (191), what is more, “The black man becomes the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself” (192). Fanon recounts his experience of becoming color conscious, aware of

¹³ My own translation. Los Condenados de la Tierra

classifications when a girl in the street told her mother: "Look at the nigger!... Mamma, a Negro!" and she responded "A Martinican, a native of our old colonies". What follows, Fanon's mental elaboration of the incident has an incantatory tone very similar to the opening of Morrison's The Bluest Eye. Both suggest the indoctrination black people have suffered by "a galaxy of erosive stereotypes" (129). He feels he is "being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*" (116). The motif of the eyes is surely of great relevance in the novel.

Through Pecola's eyes we get to see the world she sees, what she suffers. Her story of silent toil allows Morrison to expose the power white models have in imposing views that are damaging for the black community. One such model is the world of Dick and Jane. In the same way as Fanon notices the printed material for children in the Antilles provokes a damaging effect, the Dick-and-Jane model of the family presents an image neither Pecola nor her community can attain. In the Antilles, Fanon claims

the magazines are put together by white men for little white men. This is the heart of the problem.... The Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage, are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always an identification with the victor, the little Negro, as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary "who faces the anger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes." (Black Skin 146)

Little by little, Fanon claims, the young children in the Antilles learn to see the world through a perspective that exhibits their identification with the white world, a situation that will clearly lead to alienation and identity crisis inherently linked to "the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white" (148).

In the Dick-and-Jane world of the school primer, the family, made up by Mother, father and the two siblings Dick and Jane, stands as a world of comfort and care, a postcard of happiness. The house where they live is pretty. The children play, the mother laughs and plays with her children, the father smiles and also plays with them. This picture of a perfect white world which is set in stark contrast to the family environment of Pecola's world. The structure of the novel emphasizes this contrast. Each time a section on Pecola's life begins, it is announced by an excerpt from the Dick-and-Jane primer all in capital letters

and without punctuation marks or spaces: "HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETTYITISVERYPRETTYPRETTY" (33). The repetition suggests the recurrence of a message such as the model of the perfect family learnt through school books. And what follows, the description of the house where Pecola and her family lives, marks a contrast to the Dick-and-Jane world:

There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the grey frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy. Visitors who drive to this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighborhood, simply look away when they pass it. (33)

By juxtaposing these different images, Morrison is exposing the problems of identification derived from the differences between the world of illusion of the Dick-and-Jane primer and the real world.

The presence of love in the picture of the Dick-and-Jane family stands in opposition to the virtual absence of such feeling in Pecola's family, an absence foreshadowed in details of the furniture of the house, such as "a tiny artificial Christmas tree, decorated and dust-laden for two years"(35), or more revealing still in the metaphor of the stove, which was placed in the center of the bedroom, for the even distribution of heat. This stove appears as "the only living thing in the Breedloves' house ... , which lived independently of everything and everyone..." (37). In the same way the ironic family surname reveals there is not much warmth or love in Pecola's family, they do not breed love.

The following section opens with another fragment: "HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHERDICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREENANDWHITEHOUSHEYAREVERYH" (38) which is again set in contrast to Pecola's situation. Immediately after the fragment of family harmony, we learn in Pecola's house outbursts of home violence are not unusual, and are generally connected to Cholly's drunkenness:

The noises in the kitchen became louder and less hollow. There was direction and purpose in Mrs. Breedlove's movements that had nothing to do with the preparation of breakfast. This awareness, supported by ample evidence from the past, made Pecola tighten her stomach

muscles and ration her breath [...]. An escapade of drunkenness, no matter how routine, had its own ceremonial close. (40-41)

There is a difference in the reaction of the children to these battles: "Sammy cursed for a while, or left the house, or threw himself into the fray [...]. He was known, by the time he was fourteen, to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times" (43). Pecola, on the other hand,

restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance. Though the methods varied, the pain was as consistent as it was deep. She struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die. (43)

Upon witnessing her parents' violent outbursts, she prays "Please, God" ... "Please, make me disappear" (45). Pecola not only receives indifference and mistreatment at home, more devastating still, in the section beginning "SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONGFATHERWILLPLAYPLAYWITHJANEFATHERISSMILIGSMILEFATHERSMILESMILE" (132) she is raped by her drunk father. bell hooks has pointed out that male violence against women in personal relations "epitomizes the actualization of the concept of hierarchical rule and coercive authority" (*Feminist Theory* 120). She observes black women and men are most frequently trapped in "a cycle of violence that begins with psychological abuse in the public world" (122). The black man suppresses this violence and releases it in a "control situation", a situation that presents itself as an easy outlet for such repressed violence. hooks states the home offers the possibility for a violent outburst to proceed without fear of retaliation and generally the target for abuse is among the female members. This is a most adequate observation for Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father.

In the Afterword to the novel Morrison modestly states she has been unable to recreate Pecola's situation. She claims

the shattered world I built (to complement what is happening to Pecola), its pieces held together by seasons in childhood and commenting at every turn on the incompatible and barren white-family primer, does not in its present form handle effectively, the silence at its center, the void that is Pecola's "unbeing." (214-215)

Contrary to her judgment, the novel successfully constructs a world made of fragments and pieces difficult to handle and of great consequence in identity formation. As Rafael Perez-Costa points out, the novel "traces the racial identity

American society has erased... " ("Tracing and Erasing" 21). Presenting Pecola's void, her sense of non-being is what Morrison tragically achieves in the deconstruction of the white family model at the center of The Bluest Eye.

III. B - The maternal space as a site of spiritual growth in Song of Solomon

In defying racist and patriarchal inscriptions attached to the role of the family, Morrison generally employs a space characterized by its maternal quality symbolized by the image of the female triad. This pattern of women living together "is an arrangement that is not unusual given the historical and sociological realities of Afro-American economic exigency" (Hill Rigney 15). The female triad offers the characters the possibility of material restoration, the negotiation of the shock and trauma, and the transformation of pain. Thus, the maternal space is as bell hooks states "a site of resistance" (Yearning 41).

In Song of Solomon, Morrison sets the primacy of the maternal space through a grouping of three generations of female characters: Pilate, Reba, and Hagar. The maternal space, the site for ancestral knowledge to thrive, is represented by Pilate's humble house. Her family household stands in stark contrast to her brother in many different ways. While Macon Dead's house is the site of material progress and status, Pilate's house is the site of spiritual communion. In it she stands as a conjure woman, the woman with the power and strength to summon the forces of the past and transmit her ancestral knowledge to those around her, particularly her nephew, Milkman Dead. Pilate rules a maternal space inhabited by a female triad in opposition to Macon's world ruled by the patriarch. According to Hill Rigney, the female worlds made up by "the central figures living in the houses of their mothers and grandmothers" stand as "matriarchal social structures" (15).

Pilate's and Macon's worlds, symbolized by the houses they inhabit and the models of family they embody, are set apart in two extreme poles. Macon, "solid, rumbling likely to erupt without prior notice, [...] kept each member of his family awkward with fear" (10). He is the representative of the "propertied Negro" (20), who had climbed up in the social ladder and had achieved economic growth and material gain. As Milkman's friend Guitar observes, "your father is a very strange Negro. [...] he behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man" (223). His dwelling is a big house located in a very important street in town. Macon is very proud of his economic growth. He fears, though, that his

low connections may threaten what he has achieved. As Keith Byerman observes, Macon's family "epitomizes the negative connotations of the term *black bourgeoisie*" (135). When Macon sees Pilate again, after years of separation, he charges her: "Why can't you dress like a woman... what's the sailor's cap doing in your head? Don't you have stockings? What are you trying to make me look like in this town?"(20). He fears the unconventional look and behavior of his sister might provoke a negative effect on what he has been able to achieve. Having internalized the dictum of the American Dream, Macon understands success in terms of economic growth and possession. His view of the world privileges individualism to the detriment of family and community. According to such standards, Pilate is a menace,

He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank- the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses – discovering that this raggedly bootlegger was his sister. That the propertied Negro who handled his business so well and who lived in the big house on Not Doctor Street had a sister who had a daughter but no husband, and that daughter had a daughter but no husband. A collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the streets [...]. (20)

In opposition to Macon's status and economic position, Pilate's house is a humble though lovely, and lively environment despite her lack of wealth and unconventional family structure. Her house is located on Darling Street and described as "a narrow single –story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity, because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas" (27). However, Pilate's spell is strong, even Macon with his coldness that distances himself from emotions, feels her power as he approaches Pilate's house, "Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music" (30).

While Pilate's house is full of music, laughter and memories of a communal past, Macon's is as dead as the family name he bears. What people say about the car, the fact that it "... had no real lived life at all. So they called it Macon Dead's hearse" (33) is also true of the house and the family name, and by extension to the family ties among them. Macon is unable to enjoy life. His solely source of enjoyment emanates from what he possesses. In his blind pursuit for material gain, he has lost his capacity to enjoy family relations. The family rides on Sunday afternoons account for this inability, for they become

“rituals and much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man” (31). His daughters are aware that the joy he derives from his possessions is heightened by its display.

Magdalene recalls the emptiness of such car drives,

He took us to the ice-house once. Drove us there in his Hudson. We were all dressed up, and we stood there in front of those sweating black men, ... But we stood apart, near the car in white stockings, ribbons and gloves. And when he talked to the men he kept glancing at us, us and the car. The car and us. You see, he took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him. (215)

Milkman Dead stands both literally and symbolically between these two houses, these two worlds. He has been effectively indoctrinated into Macon's world, he has learnt the codes of his father, but perceives himself as trapped in that world. He feels tempted to step on Pilate's world “his father's sister [...] had [Milkman and Guitar] spellbound” (36). However, his father warns him not to go near her:

Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too... I'm going to teach you how. (55)

Macon's materialism opposes Pilate's spirituality and Milkman is caught in this tension; a tension that is resolved the more Milkman advances in his journey south, since what begins as a quest for gold in obedience to his father's instructions is little by little changing into a new understanding of life and of himself,

I just know that I want to live my own life. I don't want to be my dad's office boy no more. And as long as I am in this place I will be unless I have my own money I have to get out of that house and I don't want to owe anybody anything when I go. (222)

His contact with Pilate enlightens Milkman in a new way. The first lesson he receives occurs the day he visits Pilate's house for the first time with his friend Guitar. Upon seeing her, Milkman realizes what people say about her is not so accurate. She is unkempt, but not dirty; she is not drunk and though Milkman cannot describe her as “beautiful”, “he knew he could have watched her all day” (38). The important teaching Milkman gains that day initiates a change in him, a literal and metaphorical journey into his family past. When

Guitar seeks confirmation of the family ties that link Pilate to Macon, Pilate answers she is his sister, adding the comment "Ain't but three Deads alive" (38). Milkman, without being able to consciously explain why, suddenly feels the need to claim belonging, to be included as one of those "Deads". Her surname in Pilate's mouth resonates with a new, strong force unknown to Milkman:

Now he was behaving with this strange woman as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride, as though she had tried to expel him from a very special group, in which he not only belonged, but had exclusive rights. (38-39)

Milkman's appreciation of his name begins at Pilate's house, a place that acquires more significance as Milkman spends more time there. He is caught in a whirl of new sensations, the smell is addictive for Milkman, as much as Pilate's voice is. Milkman awakens from his lethargy of death to these sensations in Pilate's maternal space, "the pebbly voice, the sun, and the narcotic wine smell weakened both [Milkman and Guitar], and they sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on ... " (40). Pilate's stories trigger Milkman's thirst for knowing and finding out about his past. She is the one who offers Milkman new possibilities of understanding "you think black is just one color but it ain't ... may as well be a rainbow" (40-41).

Pilate's maternal space redirect Milkman's life. Even though the trip south begins with the complicity of his father to get the gold Macon believes Pilate has kept hidden there, little by little, it changes as Milkman's interest for his family history replace his material drive. As he makes progress deeper and deeper into the south, his interest shifts towards his past. Pilate is Milkman's teacher and pilot in this growth, one which is complete when, towards the end of the novel, Milkman acknowledges his respect and admiration for the woman who has taught him to fly away from an oppressive home and leap freely into the air as a new man, "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly " (336).

III. C - Utopian – dystopian configurations of the maternal space in Beloved

As in Song of Solomon, in Beloved Morrison also works the primacy of the maternal space by means of the image of the female triad, in this case made up by the mother, Sethe, her daughter Denver, and Beloved, the daughter that returned from the dead. The particular configuration of the maternal space in this novel cannot ignore its context, that is, the institution of slavery. In "Beloved: A Question of Identity", Christina Davis emphasizes the context of slavery creates a damaging situation,

a situation where family structures, traditional cultural links – those which create identity – have been destroyed and replaced by forms of identification – places, roles, words, even names – imposed by the institution of slavery and its economic organization. (151)

In "Postmodernism and Post-utopian Desire in Toni Morrison and E. L. Doctorow" Marianne DeKoven argues in Beloved Morrison constructs "a space of maternal restoration and completion very explicitly as utopian. The three women form a closed whole of perfect mutual gratification" (118). However, the relation among the females mutates from a utopian configuration to nightmarish pictures very much linked to dystopia.

The utopian-dystopian relation can be seen not only in the image of 124 Bluestone Road during the 28 days of Sethe's freedom as utopia, as opposed to all her years in the Sweet Home plantation as dystopian; but also in the utopian configuration of 124 when inhabited by Baby Suggs, Sethe, the crawling-already? baby and Denver, as opposed to the dystopian nature the place acquires when inhabited by Sethe, Denver and Beloved. Morrison's configurations of the maternal space are not fixed, and the transformations from utopia to dystopia and vice versa are to be understood in relation to the oppressive force of slavery. Through such visions of the maternal space, Morrison exposes the difficulties slave women first and then freed black women had in restoring a site that had been brutally damaged by the institution of slavery and at the same time, she shows the restorative potential of the maternal space amid these deep scars.

In her treatment of the maternal space and the family in Beloved, Morrison questions the possibilities of conceiving an Edenic home under slavery, questioning both the status of Sweet Home and the authority of the patriarch as invested in schoolteacher. The image of Sweet Home as an Edenic paradise, a home, is clearly ironic. Dekoven maintains the dystopian images of homes can be read as Morrison's "clear indictment of the possibility of utopia in a slave country" (114). Houston A. Baker Jr. points out that patriarchy and economic paternalism provided the foundations for the system of slavery, "the southern planter [...] conceived of himself as a beneficent patriarch responsible to the full population of his state. This populace, in fact, was deemed an "extended family" [...] (27).

It is interesting to note that while an Edenic home is connected to the power of the patriarch, in Beloved, patriarchal authority is contested. If Sweet Home is the site of patriarchal authority, 124 Bluestone Road is not. Baby Suggs stands as the matriarch at 124 Bluestone road, which can be seen as the maternal utopia until schoolteacher is back to claim for his "property", the runaway Sethe and her four children. After the "Misery", Stamp Paid's designation for "Sethe's rough response to the Fugitive Bill" (171), that is, the unspeakable horror of Sethe killing one of her daughters, the utopian configuration of 124 Bluestone Road is destroyed, even the matriarch, Baby Suggs, collapses, announcing Stamp Paid she "was going to bed to think about the color of things" (177). Baby Suggs, who had endured previous traumatic experiences, cannot cope with "the Misery": "...suddenly Baby declared peace. She just up and quit. By the time Sethe was released she had exhausted blue and was well on her way to yellow" (177). After Baby Suggs's collapse, a new alternative maternal space emerges with the haunting presence of the dead child.

"The Misery" is the climatic instance of a dystopian configuration of family and motherhood that requires the context of slavery to be interpreted. Under the system of slavery, the possibilities of building a sense of "family" was, for blacks, unachievable. The violence that takes hold of Sethe in the woodshed is present also in other females, for example Ella, who would not nurture the baby born from the forced relation with her master. Another case is that of Sethe's mother, symbolically unnamed to signify the break in the individual identity as

well as in family histories for the disconnection caused by the use of different languages. She also employs the language of violence to challenge the white oppressor. The flashbacks to Sethe's memories about her mother extend to cover recollections about the Middle Passage. Sethe remembers having been told by Nan, the one-armed black woman who nursed her, that

her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you... the one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. I'm telling you, small girl Sethe." (62)

Sethe's mother was raped and became pregnant several times, but never kept the babies, except in the case of Sethe, for she was the result of a union based on choice and love. She not only kept her, but named her as well.

Several salient features emerge from this recollection about Sethe's mother. The act of killing her own babies, not as an attempt to "protect" them from a more terrible fate, but as an act of defiance, speaks a language of violence that answers slavery back. The contestation to slavery can also be observed in the decision of Sethe's mother to name only Sethe, the daughter of the black man she loved. By naming her and not the other babies that resulted from a violent union, a rape, she is claiming Sethe as her daughter and challenging the voice of slavery. The crossing of the Middle Passage not only stripped black people from their status as free men and women, but also stripped them of the language of their culture and the possibility of naming, of claiming kin. This impossibility is symbolic of the loss of a voice. Sethe's recollection shows this imposed silence:

Nan [...] used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing. What Nan told her, she had forgotten along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back [...]. (62)

These memories, or to employ Morrison's terminology "rememories" trigger glimpses from the past that contribute to construct a dystopian picture of family life under the institution of slavery. Slavery denied black people not only their

humanity but also prevented them from constructing any coherent sense of home and family.

The dystopian images from slave days stand in contrast to the utopian vision of 124 Bluestone Road during the twenty eight days of Sethe's freedom. As bell hooks states "black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects... "(Yearning 42). The house becomes then not a possession one can be proud of owning, but a site that allows its inhabitants the possibility of becoming human. Homeplaces acquire great significance in the context of the novels under analysis and black literature in general, for they are sites of resistance, "places where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole" (hooks Yearning 49).

This is precisely what Sethe experiences during her twenty eight days of freedom. For the first time in her life she feels the right to love her children freely and wholly, to be a mother. 124 Bluestone Road acquires a new configuration, from the solitary place where Baby Suggs lived to the home of a family made up by the matriarch, Baby Suggs, her daughter-in-law, Sethe, and the third generation of children: Howard, Buglar, the crawling-already? baby and Denver. Denver's evocation of the period before the Misery shows the utopic quality of the place:

She remembered how it was before: the pleasure they had sitting clustered on the white stairs – she between the knees of Howard and Buglar – while they made up die-witch! stories with proving ways of killing her dead. And Baby Suggs telling her things in the keeping room. (19)

124 Bluestone Road is transformed into a home with Sethe's arrival, a place where she can heal her physical and spiritual wounds and dream of reconstructing her family. They are all so happy that Baby Suggs decides to celebrate making some blackberry pies with the fruit Stamp Paid got from the riverbank. The celebration grew into "a feast for ninety people" (136). The multiplication of the pies, alluding to Christ's powers to multiply the bread and fish, made the black community angry, "the scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air" (137). Baby Suggs' powers allowed her to feel their disapproval and to sense another smell behind, a "dark and coming thing" (139). These signs

foreshadow the transformation of 124 Bluestone Road from a utopic place into a dystopian world.

When "the four horsemen" (148) come - schoolteacher, his nephew, the slave catcher and the sheriff - the inhabitants at 124 Bluestone Road recognize the apocalyptic nature of the image, "the futility of outsmarting a whiteman and outrunning a rifle" (148). The first to understand what their presence means is Sethe, who takes her children with her to the woodshed with the intention of taking them and herself to a safe place, a place out of the reach of the property claims of schoolteacher. What takes place in the shed is unspeakable. The picture of what the witnesses see create a void, a silence that can be felt. The juxtaposition of the images of the eyes, the inert ones of the dead baby girl and Sethe's ones appearing as if she were dead though she is alive become symbolic of Sethe's emptiness and pain that cannot be expressed in words:

Little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that that held her face so her head wouldn't fall off... but the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn't have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind. (150)

The Misery alters the maternal space in 124 Bluestone Road. The house number can be taken, in fact, as a foreshadowing sign of the absence that was going to characterize the place: of her four children, the third is absent. However, the absence in human form does not indicate absence of presence. The spirit of the dead baby girl haunts the house and her presence is felt all throughout the novel. The narrative voice acknowledges this in the opening line: "124 was spiteful- full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims" (3). The family configuration at the beginning of the novel is of a very peculiar nature. The three-woman household is made up by the mother Sethe and two daughters, one present as a human being, the other, as a supernatural ghostly form that moves furniture, shatters mirrors and scares the dog out.

Such configuration is broken when Paul D, a former slave from Sweet Home, arrives. He becomes acquainted with the dead child's presence through Denver's voice, "we have a ghost in here", "my sister" ... "she died in this house" (13). Denver's emphasis on "we" leaves Paul D out, and exposes the triad formed by Sethe, Denver and the ghost living together under their own

configuration of "home". As hooks points out, the maternal space is to be acknowledged as a site of resistance:

houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women. (*Yearning* 41-42)

The traumatic circumstances of their past make it impossible for Sethe, Denver and Beloved to establish an unproblematic sense of "home". The maternal space they have built results from the fractures experienced and their attempt to restore a sense of "family". As bell hooks points out, homes for the black community are not only connected to food and shelter but to the possibilities of reconstructing a meaningful life.

This ghostly maternal space is threatened by the presence of Paul D. It is his presence, as Denver observes, what drives the ghost out, "Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had" (19). Paul D's presence destabilizes the female triad configuration and at the same time encourages a new one, for the ghost will no longer haunt the house but will transform itself into a young girl, Beloved, who one day set her feet on 124 Bluestone Road after having "walked out of the water" (50). The way her lungs hurt, her new flawless skin, her thirst and other details indicate her passage from the other world to life. Life changes for Sethe, who "was flattered by Beloved's open, quiet devotion" (57). The three women establish a bond that does not include him. He becomes upset for he feels Beloved has become an obstacle for his plans with Sethe, at the same time Sethe feels the family she could reconstruct with Paul D is no longer valid now Beloved is with her. Trying to interpret the meaning of the hand-in-hand shadows she saw in the way to the carnival when Paul D, Denver and herself were walking there, , Sethe, after an afternoon skating together with Denver and Beloved, reconsiders her thoughts,

Obviously the hand-holding shadows she had seen on the road were not Paul D, Denver and herself, but "us three". The three holding on to each other skating the night before; the three sipping flavored milk. And since that was so – if her daughter could come back home from the timeless place – certainly her sons could, and would, come back from wherever they had gone. (182)

Sethe decides that the only family worth reconstructing involves her children and herself. She begins to ignore Paul D's concern about the strange presence of Beloved and accuses him of resenting the children she had, "They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it" (131).

The female apparently utopian world gradually gives way to a dystopian configuration for Sethe is consumed by Beloved. Beloved "feeds on" Sethe. Her demands weaken Sethe both spiritually and physically. Sethe's worsening condition marks a stark contrast with Beloved's energy and strength. By rejecting Paul D and what his company might have brought about, Sethe disconnects herself from the outside world and sets herself to live a life for her daughters. However, little by little, Sethe's consumption becomes evident. She does not eat, work or care about the house. It is Denver, in the end, the one who seeks help outside the vicious environment of her home, tries to get a job and help her mother. Denver's voice awakens the black community, and those who had isolated Sethe before go to 124 Bluestone Road to exorcise the place showing that if slavery annuls the possibility of "a sense of family", the black community has the potential to restore it.

The survival of the concept of family in the context of slavery is indeed a problematic one. Beloved exposes how slavery denies the mother her rightful role by considering black women mere "breeders" of stock. In Toni Morrison's Fiction, Jan Furman denounces schoolteacher's arrival's threatening effect on Sethe. It is such presence what "reduces Sethe again to a list of parts and jeopardizes her self-confidence" (76). The type of family for the slave under the system of slavery is necessarily fractured, for it has been shaped by this oppressive legal institution. As Gurleen Grewal states, the central conflict of the novel

gets to the heart of the trauma of slavery: Sethe is the slave mother who dares to claim her children as her own property instead of the slaveholder's. If the master could subject the slave to a slow "social death," the mother could release them through physical death. (97)

However, Beloved offers an alternative to such fractured family space. The multiple configurations of female to female bonds in the novel render the maternal space as a site of healing which transcends racist and patriarchal inscriptions. The three-woman household mutates from utopian to dystopian

shades because the oppressive system intrudes and breaks the harmony that could have been enjoyed had it not been for schoolteacher's reclamation. To such patriarchal voice claiming for property, Morrison opposes Sethe's voice, that is, the voice of a black slave woman claiming for her right to be a mother.

To conclude, all three novels offer configurations of families that stand in stark contrast with the patriarchal unit that has served the purposes of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Contesting the authority of the patriarch, Morrison's families can be said to be under the rule of the female. This female rule is not authoritarian but nurturing, in fact, a dynamic force that touches all family members in maternal spaces characterized by the recurrent image of the female triad. The three girls, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, struggle to make meaning in their child world which is at odds with the white idealized world of Dick and Jane in The Bluest Eye. Pilate, Reba and Hagar's maternal space nurture Milkman and allow him to be merged with the family of his ancestors in Song of Solomon while Sethe, Denver and Beloved bridge the worlds of the living and the dead in a maternal space that attempts to reconstruct a sense of family disrupted by the oppressive force of slavery in Beloved. In all three cases, it is in the site of maternal nurturing that healing is possible.

CHAPTER IV - PROBLEMATIZING HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE: TOWARDS A RENEGOTIATION OF THE PAST

Toni Morrison is immersed in a reconstruction project which aims at recovering a silenced past and opening it up to the new generations through a voice that was denied as marginal, peripheral, uncanonized. By giving voice to the voiceless and allowing them to tell their personal stories about their lives and past, Morrison re-negotiates the traumatic memories from the past through her characters' collective effort. This reconstruction offers possibilities to overcome such trauma, for "rememory" is a strategy to transform such painful past into a less damaging one that allows the characters to face their lives, heal themselves and forge a future. Morrison's purpose is condensed in the concept of "rememory". As Nancy Peterson puts it in " 'Say , make me, remake me': Toni Morrison and the reconstruction of African American history", through the concept of rememory "Morrison claims the power of engaging in compelling narratives and stories to contest and displace disabling hegemonic narrative's in a culture's memory" (217). For a complete understanding of the past, a counter-narrative made up by a set of stories, rather than a single story, stands as the foundation for the reconstruction of a meaningful past for African- Americans.

Morrison's novels problematize the role of narration and posit interesting questions as to the role of history and historical language. Without question, her novels are linked to the history of the African American people in the United States, however, her treatment of historical issues is not conventional. Morrison does not write historical novels that align with the traditional definition of the genre. Rather, her work is inscribed into what Linda Hutcheon defines "historiographic metafiction" ("The Pastime of Past Time" 54, A Poetics of Postmodernism 5), that is, novels that "reintroduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge" ("The Pastime of Past Time" 54). One of the premises Morrison challenges about historical discourse is its totalizing nature. As Peterson has highlighted, "the danger of narrating a monumental history lies in creating a master narrative in which there is no space to articulate any local narratives that run counter to it" (209). Thus, her novels do not attempt at replacing one totalizing view for another. Instead, Morrison is concerned about the relation between Afro-

Americans and Americans as well as the representation of Afro-Americans in American history.

Morrison's historical treatment in her novels employs the structure of recursive presentation of events. Instead of moving from one event to the next in a cause-effect relation, her novels interweave the narration of present events with interruptions from the intruding past, the telling of "background" stories erupts on and off. This treatment allows her to present multiple points of view, multiple centers of narration. Morrison's focus is "to consider what does not get recorded about the realities of black life in America ..." (Peterson 205), that is, Morrison works to make visible the terrible events kept in a black collective memory through the voice of her characters; in so doing she engages in internal historicizing.

By insisting on the narrative and fictive – the storytelling- aspects of history, Morrison's novels "align themselves with current trends in the postmodern novel, a genre ... obsessed with history" (Peterson 215). The self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction and its nonlinear design invite the reader to participate in the construction of the story, which presents itself as a dazzling puzzle which has to be reassembled by putting together the characters' voices; the emphasis is placed then on "the mutual and collective construction of the story" (Peterson 216). As Linda Hutcheon observes, "postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write and to re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" ("The Pastime of Past Time" 59).

In "Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread: Beloved as a Postmodern Novel" Rafael Pérez-Torres points out that the subversive nature of Morrison's narrative method lies in the fact that "the fictional characters and communities of Morrison's novel... transform an essential absence into powerful presence. A sense of self emerges from experiences of exploitation, marginalization and denial" (91). Morrison's project works to free the voiceless from the silence enforced upon them by oppressive forces. Her method for narrating a set of stories presents a striking similarity to the nature of black music, in particular blues and jazz. The line of both genres is founded on the pattern of repetition with subtle variation, a line that resists predetermination, and thus, defies closure. In the same way, Morrison does not offer a final, ultimate word as to

the ending of her works. Neither does she respect linear progress or chronological succession of events. These characteristics, very much connected to postmodern issues and challenges, together with the voice given to the marginal, make Morrison's novels succeed in "confronting a facelessness the dominant culture in America threatens to impose on black expression, forges out of cultural and social absence a voice and identity" (Pérez-Torres 91).

To sum up, Morrison's treatment of both narrative line and point of view shows her avoidance of linearity and her preference for the multiple subjects of enunciation, choices that reveal her conception of history and order. There are no conventional sections that could be labeled beginning, middle or end. Thus, there is no unique climax, no final resolution. Instead, the voices overlap, as it were, juxtapose themselves through a process of compilation of multiple point of view, varieties of interpretation of events, repetition and reiteration. Instead of a single protagonist from whose consciousness we see the action of the story, multiple central characters reveal bits of information. The fragmented pieces revealed through dialogue, action, interior monologue blur boundaries and fuse with the narrative voice in a manner that allows for multiple centers of narration. The narrative authority given to the marginalized and the disregarded, as well as the reflection upon the textualized access to the past, problematizes the notion of history and historical knowledge as human constructs and counteracts the master narrative and official history allowing for a renegotiation of the past in The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and Beloved.

IV. A - Problematizing white notions of beauty as fictional human constructs in The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye is perhaps the most revealing of Morrison's novels in making visible the absence, the facelessness African Americans have experienced. The story of Pecola Breedlove places her at the centre of events, however, she hardly speaks all throughout, except for the conversation she maintains with an imaginary friend in the final part of the novel. Her facelessness is accompanied by a voicelessness resulting both from the damaging effect of the internalization of codes imposed by a Eurocentric view of the world which excludes her, denies her while it idealizes whiteness. A parallel could be established between what Barbara Christian notes as Morrison's purpose in Beloved and Morrison's intention for The Bluest Eye. Christian argues in "Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison" Morrison was not so much interested in the Garner case in Beloved, that is, being faithful to the Garner story, but she aspired to "fill those silences and to involve [...] the reader in such a way as to feel the experience, both viscerally and as an idea" (29). In the same way, in The Bluest Eye Morrison sets herself to fill in Pecola's void world in a double attempt: to present the absence and transform it.

In an anecdote in The Souls of the Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois refers to a childhood experience he had that provoked a change in him. He had not experienced difference in any shocking way at school until "... one girl, a tall newcomer refused my card...then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others....shut out from their world by a vast veil. " (879). The veil Du Bois refers to is "the problem of the color-line" (879). He feels his blackness makes him different. This realization is the psychological trigger that sets in motion the damaging effects that taken to extreme may result in racial self-loathing. Du Bois states,

the Negro is [...] born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It

is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, that sense of always looking at one's self through **the eyes of others**¹⁴ [...]. (879)

As Morrison points out in the Afterword to the novel, written in 1993, she began this story recovering an experience very much connected to the one Du Bois experienced himself. She recalls that while in elementary school, a black girl confessed her that she wanted blue eyes. Morrison remembers she was moved by the sorrow in her voice, but also by anger. What had happened, she elaborates, in the mind of such child, which made her think blue eyes would solve whatever the problem she had? She concludes a process of indoctrination into a white idealized world had convinced her that whiteness was to be equated with perfection and happiness, while her blackness came to be seen as the source of all her troubles. This same process shapes Pecola's vision of the world, "it had occurred to Pecola ... that if her eyes ... - if those eyes of her were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different (46). Pecola dreams about "*Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes... blue-sky eyes. Blue like Mrs Forrest's blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes. Alice-and Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes.* Each night without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (46).

Morrison questions not only the white standard of beauty, but also the eyes that contemplate. As the saying "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" suggests, different beholders would assign the category beautiful differently. Morrison problematizes this possibility, for she shows the eyes of the beholder are not free to assign value so easily, but are taught and trained to see the world in a particular way. This enforcement works so subtly and in so many yet simultaneous ways that it is very difficult to escape the influence of its force.

In The Bluest Eye, Pecola's vision of the world has been shaped by a master narrative that works to indoctrinate blacks. The lack of recognition from the others is as important in framing Pecola's vision of herself as the messages that confirm her ugliness. The passage on Pecola buying candy is symbolic of the force of such lack of recognition. She goes to Yacobowski's Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store. She enters the store, stands before the counter, decides to buy Mary Janes. In the commercial exchange that follows, the only word Pecola voices is "them" pointing to the Mary Janes, "the quietly inoffensive

¹⁴ My emphasis

assertion of a black child's attempt to communicate with a white adult" (49).

There is, in fact, no interaction, for the shopkeeper, Mr Yacobowski,

looms up over the counter. He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. ... he looks toward her...he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary ... see a little black girl? (48)

What the excerpt reveals without saying it, is "The total absence of human recognition" (48) Pecola feels, something "not new to her. ... she has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. ... The distaste must be for her, her blackness" (49). Thus, the concept of beauty is one of the mechanisms employed in the white world to mark a difference not just at the physical level, since the white standard of beauty is transformed into a measure of self worth.

The design of the story, that is, the way the story is told, reveals much about how Morrison understands history and historical knowledge. Rather than offering a univocal tale of Pecola's events in a tidy chronological fashion, Morrison puts together fragments from different voices and demands from the reader an active participation for the construction of meaning. Such design exhibits points of contact with Morrison's understanding of history and her challenge to official historical accounts. Morrison's conception of time is presented as opposed to the mechanical march of the years. Time is seen rather "as it marks an event in human society and in nature, which ... includes the folk as much as the seasons" (Christian 32). Christian has noted that in Morrison's works there is a two-way relation between outer and inner time,

inner time is always transforming outer time through memory. But since memory is not only individual, but merges with others to create a communal memory, outer time also transforms inner time. It is that reciprocity between the individual inner and the communal outer which [Morrison's work] seeks. (Christian 32)

The Bluest Eye captures this reciprocity. It is through Pauline Breedlove's interior monologue that we are allowed to enter her world, to see the way she sees. The comments of the narrative voice contribute to reveal the damaging effect of two white Eurocentric notions she has incorporated through her "education in the movies": one is romantic love and the other is physical beauty, "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (122). By

establishing a parallel between physical beauty and virtue, Pauline “stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (122). The impact on Pauline of such messages received is devastating, for “she was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty” (122).

In the same way as the center of narration varies, time in The Bluest Eye moves back and forth. We are given pieces of a story that come from different voices and from different points in time. Pecola’s story moves back and forth in the frame of a seasonal structure which suggests the cyclical nature of the events to be narrated. No conventional beginning, middle or end is to be found in the novel. In fact, what could be traditionally employed as a climatic point, that is, the fact that Pecola will be raped by her father and become pregnant, is announced from the very beginning “there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” (5). The reader is nevertheless trapped to go on reading not to find out “what happens” in the traditional sense, but rather, as Claudia says, “there is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (6).

Defying conventional exposition of information to open the novel, Morrison “overlaps” three different openings freeing multiple voices, all linked to different times and viewpoints but at the same time interconnected, as the reader will discover while advancing in the story. The first opening might appear disconcerting upon first reading. It is made up by a sequence of the same fragment repeated three times, with variations in punctuation marks. The first fragment presents conventional punctuation marks, the second is repeated without punctuation marks and the third fragment “runs” without punctuation marks or spaces between words:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are happy.....

Here is the house It is green and white It has a red door It is very pretty Here is the family Mother Father Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house They are happy.....

HereisthehouseItisgreenandwhiteIthasareddoorItisveryprettyHereisthefamilyMotherFatherDickandJaneliveinthegreenandwhitehouseTheyarehappy [...]. (3-4)

The source of the fragment is a school primer that places as the core of the teaching lessons the lives of a “model” family, the family of Dick and Jane. The Dick-and-Jane world is a white, idealized world that set the basis for the knowledge constructed by young children learning to read in The United States. The illustrated book series was developed by William Gray and the reading consultant Zerna Sharp for the educational publisher Scott, Foresman and Company in the late 1920s. It is estimated eighty –five million children were taught how to read from the 1930s to the 1960s using the world of Dick and Jane. The choice of a fragment from this primer as opening for the novel suggests the numerous times the same message was repeated over and over again. White Eurocentric standards were incorporated in a sort of brainwashing process that made its way into the subconscious through repetition. This repetition was not only to be found at school but present in every conceivable medium.

The second opening provides a sense of intimacy, as if a secret were about to be shared to someone of a common background. We do not know exactly at what point in time the narrator places herself, for we just guess time has passed between the story about to be revealed and the actual time of evocation of such story. We know the story will take us back to 1941, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” (5). However, there are no hints as to the time that has elapsed between the events and the present time in which the narrator is situated. The third opening is announced with the title “Autumn”, and the sections that follow bear the titles: “Winter”, “Spring”, “Summer” and use a plural “we” that includes the voices of two sisters, Frieda and Claudia, who are ten and nine years old. The choice of the Dick-and-Jane primer as intertext for a story to be told by a girl and about a girl reinforces the theme of meaning being constructed out of the messages received from the cultural context in which we are immersed and the seasonal progress of the story adds up to the idea of recurrence of the messages received.

Glimpses at Pecola’s story will flow from multiple points of view. It is her story the center that unites the voices of other members of the community that will contribute with pieces of information, bits to be reassembled by the reader.

In relation to such method, Morrison has said that her purposes for her stories are

to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken, to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator [...] to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book [...] what is left out is as important as what is there. (qtd. in Christian 32)

In The Bluest Eye, what is left out is Pecola's voice herself. However, the fact that she cannot articulate a voice is as meaningful as the voices of those who do speak in the novel. The interconnected voices whose fragments we are to reassemble speak through interactions with other characters in the form of dialogues and by means of sequences of interior monologue. According to Christian these speeches differ from stream of consciousness of writers such as Joyce for they are not centered on the self of one character, but articulate the tension between the inner and outer life. She argues Morrison's interior monologues "... were carefully crafted to reveal not only the quality of that particular character's mind, but also his or her ways of perceiving the world" (Christian 29). Linda Dittmar has observed that Morrison's "dismantling design acknowledges the insufficiency of any one voice. It posits, rather, that knowledge is constructed by the many and that reading is a process of active re-shaping by readers" (143).

In The Bluest Eye, the problematization of historical knowledge addresses the indoctrination process that leads to the belief that it is possible to equate whiteness with the measure for self worth. As Hill Rigney sates "just as she reinscribes femininity and identity, Toni Morrison reinscribes a history that is less individual than racial and national" (61). Transforming Pecola's voicelessness into a challenge, Morrison raises questions about cultural definitions of beauty and self-worth seeing these issues from a feminist and Afro-centric perspective.

IV. B - The role of black music and black mythology in the reconstruction of the past in Song of Solomon

Morrison's questions about the fictional nature of white Eurocentric standards in The Bluest Eye, echo Hayden White's postulations in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact". In the same way White states historical narratives should be considered verbal fictions, "the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (82), Morrison exposes the fictional status of standards that appear as natural and universal. In Song of Solomon, Morrison emphasizes the need not only for unveiling such fictions, but also for constructing versions of the past from an Afrocentric perspective. The protagonist, Milkman Dead, embarks himself in a journey that leads him to recover the past of his ancestors and allows him to understand himself and his role as part of the black community. Milkman's journey south moves along the rhythm of black music, an essential foundation in the reconstruction of Afro-American history.

The historical significance of this novel can be enriched by further reference to The Souls of Black Folk. In it, W. E. B. Du Bois invites readers to share some glimpses of the world he inhabited in post-reconstruction America, "Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses" (878). Some of the glimpses contained in this work connect to the meaning of black music, in particular to what he calls "sorrow songs", "some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past" (878). Du Bois recognizes in these songs a collective force, since they are not just a solitary piece of melody, but bring with them the force of the black community. He highlights these songs are "full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past" (894) and stand for "a haunting echo [...] in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men [...]. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine" (893). These sorrow songs were ignored, disregarded,

and so by fateful chance the Negro folk-songs –the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and mis-understood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (894)

These songs recover traces of African music and give voice to the slaves not in a direct way but “veiling” hidden messages. This is precisely the source of the richness of these songs, for the “eloquent omissions and silences” (897) reveal as much as they hide. They can be seen as articulations of the African-American history in oral form, passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, as Du Bois notes “The child sang it to his children and they to their children and so for two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children” (895).

In Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison sets herself precisely to recover this sort of African-American past through the traces, the pieces contained in an ancient rhyme the protagonist is to disentangle together with the reader. In a kind of puzzle, these pieces are placed into a meaningful whole that makes the core of the story. Morrison’s project answers positively to Du Bois’ concern as to the restorative power of the sorrow songs. Du Bois states “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change to triumph and calm confidence [...].Do the Sorrow Songs sing true? (899). By giving the Afro-American voice a place and a chance to break the silence and recover their past, Morrison defies official history.

Not only black music but black mythology as well play an essential part in the reconstruction of the past in Song of Solomon. In relation to black mythology, the treatment of both time and death is significant. Time presents itself as circular rather than linear and death does not mark the end of being; characters, people continue to live in memory, dreams, ghosts. These ghosts stand both as actual and figurative representations from a past that is both historic and mythic. As Mari Evans states, time and death are linked to the supernatural world that is part of the real world:

the supernatural – rooted in the real world ... - neither taking precedence over the other. [This vision] is indicative of the cosmology, the way in

which Black people looked at the world ... superstition and magic [are] another way of knowing things. (qtd. in Hill Rigney 79)

Song of Solomon incorporates this mythic past through the ancient rhyme of the Flying African. In "One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness", Wendy Walters examines the legend of the Flying African as "a canonical tale throughout the expressive traditions of that part of the African diaspora which has known slavery in the New World" (4). Canonical tales as pieces of folklore contain the cultural codes internalized by the members of the community. The legend of the Flying African is such tale and versions of it abound in the African American, Cuban and Jamaican traditions, all of them touched by the Atlantic slave trade that produced a collective mythology.

Folk culture, which encompasses both practices and rituals, is of paramount importance in preserving and passing down historical, communal values and life strategies. The large population of black people that were enslaved in the New World brought with them a variety of languages, social structures, religions and rituals. Though the conditions of slavery prevented them from developing a unified or monolithic culture, African "retentions", that is, cultural inheritances kept by slave communities, have laid the foundations of the folk culture of black people in the New World. In "An analysis of African American Folklore and Literature" Barbara J. Wilcots points out these remains were not preserved in an unchanged way, for as they became in contact with the white culture they suffered a process of adaptation. One of the central views retained from the ancestral past is the conception of the universe as a natural order that unites the sacred and the secular worlds in contrast to the anthropocentric view that places humankind at the center of the universe. The African worldview sees all orders, natural, mystic, moral, religious in relationship to themselves. The whole group and the individual are then interwoven in a relation of bondage with nature.

This way of seeing the world derives in a particular sense of identity, understood not in relation to the individual alone, but in connection to the whole group, that is, a sense of collective identity that extends to include not just the members of the family and the group but also the deceased and the unborn. The legend of the Flying African in Song of Solomon fuses black orature and

the mythic past. It acts, as Genevieve Fabre defines it, both as “genealogical archaeology and aesthetic production” (qtd. in Hill Rigney 65).

Milkman is trapped in a world of material gain ruled by his father, Macon Dead, who stands for the “isolating individualism that erases the memory of the South” and thus threatens both “spiritual and moral identity” (Lee 1). However, little by little the contact he establishes with his aunt Pilate begins to trigger in him sensations never felt before. It is in Pilate’s house where Milkman is introduced to black music, through the female voices of Pilate, Reba and Hagar humming in perfect harmony under Pilate’s lead:

*O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me ...
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (49)*

It is in the fictional southern town of Shalimar where Milkman becomes in contact with a children’s singing game that sounds very much like Pilate’s blues, but that is incomprehensible for him:

*Jay the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirl about and touched the sun
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee... (264)*

Once Milkman is able to put the pieces together he is able to learn about his past and himself. The trip South can be read as a subversion of the traditional initiation story that takes the initiate from a rural setting to an urban one. In Song of Solomon, however, the opposite movement takes place. To mature and grow, Milkman abandons the paternal urban North and travels South. His search originally for gold is definitely to take a turn once he realizes that the children’s round game is the key connecting him to his past and family:

Milkman could hear them singing... the boy in the middle of the circle...spun around with his eyes closed and his arm stretched out pointing. Round and round he went until the song ended with a shout and he stop. Then they all dropped to their knees and he was surprised to hear them begin another song at this point, one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time: “O Sugarman don’t leave me here,” except the children sang, “Solomon don’t leave me here.” (299-300)

The song ignites a change in Milkman. He begins to consider all the ways in which he has failed those around him. He feels ashamed for the way in which he treated his parents and sisters, what he did to Hagar; most of all he hates his attitude, his vanity, his absolute disregard for others:

As Milkman watched the children, he began to feel uncomfortable. Hating his parents, his sisters, seemed silly now. And the skim of shame that he had rinsed away in the bathwater after having stolen from Pilate returned. But now it was as thick and as tight as a caul. (300)

His transformation grows together with his interest in finding out more about the names in the song, names Milkman feels are familiar in ways he cannot still explain. However, the more he thinks about the song and the children singing it, the names resonate in his head with new significance. He is able to connect the people and the places into a set of relations that tell the story of his family:

Milkman had four people now that he could recognize in the song: Solomon, Jake, Ryna and Heddy, and a veiled reference to Heddy's Indianness. All of which seemed to put Jake and Sing together in Shalimar, just as Circe had said they were. He couldn't be mistaken. These children were singing a story about his own people! He hummed and chuckled as he did his best to put it all together. (304)

What Milkman does not understand at first is that the line "O Solomon don't leave me here" is not to be understood as death or escape, but as the ability to fly Solomon had, that is, the fact that he literally took off and flew back to Africa. Such interpretation is not possible to Milkman, at first, for he still has not learned the cultural baggage that would allow him to read it mythically.

It is after being told by Susan Byrd that Jake was "one of those flying African children" (321) that Milkman begins to comprehend the meaning of that key line. Susan Byrd reveals to Milkman that "some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa" (322), she adds Solomon flew, "they say they all saw him go... they were all working in the fields ... Jake ... was supposed to be one of Solomon's original twenty-one-all boys..." (322). Susan Byrd accounts Milkman with cultural lore, essential to become connected to his ancestral past. Still disbelieving due to his lack of cultural awareness for his upbringing under his father's view of the world, he asks Susan Byrd, "when you said 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?" (322). And she answers,

No, I mean flew. [...] according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. (322-323)

When Milkman understands the significance of flying, he disentangles the whole puzzle. His happiness is complete, he shouts "my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him [...] He went back to Africa" (328).

Morrison constructed in Song of Solomon a novel that allows for the transmission of one of the canonical tales of her black community. The novel is a dynamic site for contextualizing the legend of the Flying African, which is a part of the cultural memory of her community. As José Limón points out, the "potentially subversive, emancipating character" of folklore possesses a subversiveness, a counter-discursive tendency which "official historians would suppress in histories of slavery... suggesting that Africans were empowered with the ability to fly from their enslavement ... is to suggest a discourse oppositional to official historiography" (qtd. in Walters 15). By weaving together the sounds of black music and the mythical figure of the Flying African, Morrison has successfully achieved her goal of articulating a counter-discourse historiography of the Afro-American past.

IV. C - The healing power of the communal voice in the renegotiation of the past in Beloved

Of all her novels, Beloved can be said to epitomize Morrison's attempt to recover the silenced past of her community and give voice to the voiceless since in the novel Morrison has filled the void that existed in American history as to the consciousness, the inner world of the slaves, especially the condition of the female slave. In this sense, Beloved appears as a crucial example of internal historicizing and as such it exhibits Morrison's intent of making visible a history that white official records ignored. It is precisely this renegotiation of the past that stands as a resistance strategy that allows for a counter-narrative to be heard. This counter-narrative recovers the silenced past and transforms absence into presence. Thus, as Hill Rigney postulates, "the personal history of Sethe and her daughters becomes one with the history of slavery" (33).

Beloved is linked to the silences in slave narratives, silences that Morrison works to fill in for a reconstruction of black history. As a writer, she states her responsibility is to "rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate", a process Morrison claims "is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic (qtd in Woidat, 186). The critical tool for power, or empowerment, becomes then, the possession of the word. Through the monopolization of the right to use the word, that is, the right to define, the discourse of slavery - as the master-narrative - justified and worked to perpetuate oppression. In Beloved, Morrison not only reconstructs this oppressive discourse but simultaneously dismantles it, subverts it by means of Sethe's voice and the other voices that complete her story. As Caroline Woidat puts it, Beloved "depicts a contest for possession of the word at the same time that it engages in one" (196).

On a talk Morrison gave about Beloved at Berkeley in 1987, she clarified that what drove her to write such a story was that slave narrative had focused on the issue of slavery in itself, its condemnation, but had "ignored – repressed- the inner lives of slaves" (qtd. in Christian 29). Barbara Christian points out that

slave narrative, especially that of the XIX century, precluded the exploration of their characters' psyches for they used "a formula based on the biblical story of the Fall and the Resurrection to engage the largely Christian white audience. Slave narrators had to hold back memories which might alienate their own readers" (Christian 29). Thus, Morrison is inscribed in the process of reconstructing a historical past, but not in a conventional sense. As Christian states "whatever we consider reality to be, we do not experience it either individually or communally as a march of years. Rather **there is both inner time and outer time**"¹⁵ (Christian 31). This is what Morrison has captured in Beloved through the inner voices of her characters. Through flashbacks, they move freely in time to pre-Civil War days, then back to the days of Reconstruction revealing the silent world of their oppression.

The official voice of slavery emerges in different forms in the novel, one crucial instance is the newspaper clipping which reports Sethe's killing of her baby girl. The clipping stands as the master narrative and is contested through the voices that the oppressive institution violently worked to keep in silence: Sethe's voice and the voices of other members of the community, even that of the baby killed. These voices retell the story of Sethe in the woodshed from their own perspectives, "emplotting", to use Hayden White's term, the events in different ways. The stories these voices release and the various tellings of the same story they offer are versions of the past that challenge official history and work for a reconstruction of the past that includes them. The communal voice is, as the narrative voice says, a means to renegotiate the past:

Her story [Sethe's story] was bearable because it was his [Paul D's story] as well – to tell to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for – well, it would come in time [...]. (99)

Beloved, then, problematizes historical knowledge by posing questions as to the nature of the historical account. These questions destabilize the official voice and expose the fact that we can only have access to the past through textualized forms that are human constructs. Hayden White postulates "histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles [...] by an operation of emplotment" (83). White highlights the

¹⁵ My emphasis

similarities to be found in the processes of writing history and fictional writing, blurring the dividing line between history and literature and revealing the power of language to define. He states

events are *made* into a story by the suppression and subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and the like – in short – all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (84)

Therefore, historical events are “value neutral” (84) until they are made into a story, and the value they gain “depends upon the historian’s decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another” (84). It is the power of language as employed by the historian what assigns value to the events of the past. This awareness of the past as versions of stories is at play in Beloved.

In contrast to what a totalizing master-narrative seeks to achieve, Morrison’s reconstruction of Afro-American history in Beloved uses multiple stories, multiple narrators. These voices flow, as it were, from different points in time, for the story is told in sort of “waves” from the past that keep reaching the protagonist, Sethe. These waves do not succeed one another in a linear, straightforward manner but rather make progress in circles, circles that fuse voices and silences. Each of the voices in the novel has a story to tell, but at the same time they re-tell the stories other characters have told. The effect of these speaking voices gives the novel a sense of a communal voice that is linked by memories. As Linda Hutcheon posits, echoing Paul Veyne’s reflection, “memory can create only texts. There is no such thing as the reproduction of events by memory” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 154).

As a central aspect to the inner life, memory is constantly playing with the way in which we remember the events of the past. Morrison combines in Beloved the inner lives of her characters with the world they inhabit by means of interior monologues. This is interestingly connected to the kind of story Morrison intended the novel to be. As the story is based on the real case of Margaret Garner, a slave that tried to kill her children rather than allowing them to return to slave life, we know from the start what the story of Sethe will be about. However, Morrison’s point does not aim at presenting as faithfully as possible that case. Rather, her focus is what has been omitted, namely, the feelings,

emotions of those who went through such ordeal. *Beloved* can be read then, as “a **“rememory”**¹⁶ of the discursive powers of community, a metanarrative that critiques the oppressive practices of authority” (Perez-Torres “Knitting and Knotting” 109). That is, in *Beloved* Morrison problematizes historical knowledge and presents the communal voice as a means to renegotiate that past, for as Morrison herself maintains, “the collective sharing of [...] information heals the individual – and the collective” (qtd. in Scarpa 96).

The language of slavery erupts in multiple forms in the novel. It is clearly embodied in the language schoolteacher employs. He, as possessor of the word, holds the power to define, and in this way impose value according to his perspective as white master. His very name “schoolteacher” indicates his role in transmitting his knowledge, passing down notions of superiority and thus justifying and perpetuating oppression. When Sethe overhears one of his lessons, she is shocked and much astonished when hearing him ask “Which one are you doing” .. Sethe” ... no, no that’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (193). His definition of her as animal fits the propriety model of slavery, a model not easily contested. When another slave, Sixo, is caught for having stolen a shoat, he attempts to use the word to contest the power of the master. When asked if he had stolen the animal, he answers no. The interrogation continues, Sixo is accused of having killed, butchered and eaten the shoat, accusations to which Sixo answers affirmatively. When schoolteacher charges him “that’s not stealing?”, he answers back: “No, Sir. It ain’t. [It is] improving your property, sir” (190). Sixo’s attempt to define his action using his own terms ends violently with schoolteacher’s physical punishment “clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined” (190). The contest for the word and the role it plays in the reconstruction of the past is central to the novel. This is precisely what Morrison problematizes in *Beloved*, that is, the silence imposed by the possessors of the word.

In “Narrative Possibilities at Play in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” Giulia Scarpa argues “the one who uses language has the power to change the essence of things by defining them” (94). In the novel, the newspaper clipping

¹⁶ My emphasis

reporting Sethe's action and including her photograph functions as the symbol of official discourse and stands at the centre where other versions of the same event converge. These voices, though painfully, will liberate the so far "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199). When Stamp Paid shows Paul D the newspaper clipping, he is reproducing its message. Without words being uttered, Stamp Paid hands in the scrap of paper and Paul D rejects its content by stating "THAT AIN'T her mouth" (154). His denial to accept the photograph showing Sethe's face involves his rejection to accept the story the clipping reports. It could be said that Paul D's rejection of the story as it was told in the newspapers, mirrors Morrison's challenge to Margaret Garner's story as she first read it in a newspaper. By giving voice to Sethe, Morrison has empowered her through language, "Sethe could recognize only seventy-five printed words (half of which appeared in the newspaper clipping), but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn't any more power than she had to explain" (161).

The scene in which Paul D confronts Sethe with the clipping is emblematic of the whole narrative. Sethe moves constantly in circles, both in the room and in relation to the topic of their conversation. She avoids getting to the point, answering directly, making Paul D "dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction" (161). The information she offers is fragmented, incomplete "He caught only pieces of what she said - which was fine, because she hadn't gotten to the main part - the answer to the question he had not asked outright, but which lay in the clipping he showed her" (161). The impossibility to narrate the horror of her story exhibits the difficulty of speaking about a painful past, but at the same time it is only through this emerging voice that a possibility for healing can be conceived.

The emerging voices offer fragments of information that reveal what the clipping does not and signal the incompleteness of the clipping as the sole account to reconstruct Sethe's story. One by one, the different voices constitute a communal voice that contributes to reconstruct the painful past. Sethe's explanation to Paul D is complemented by Sethe's words to Beloved "I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear happen to her" (200). Morrison at the same time articulates the language of oppression and

disarticulates it empowering the voiceless with the word. Sethe's chance to speak is only surpassed by *Beloved's*, whose voice can be heard as the empowerment not only of the dead child but of all those who perished under slavery, making the "60 million and more" the dedication mentions present as well. According to Abdellatif Khayati in "Representation, Race and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative", these voices are shaped into an "aural/oral and participatory dynamics" (321) that replaces the authorial univocal voice with the voices of the members of the community opening in this way a new space where to renegotiate and come to terms with the past:

Instead of inviting conquest, interpellating readers into an imperial subject-position or the comfort of an epistemologically privileged position of knowing, Morrison undertakes narration as a communal act, deftly manipulating the voices around her subject. (321)

The retelling of the same story and the multiple perspectives on the same story is a critique of the master's authority as presented by official historical accounts. The epigraph,

*I will call them my people,
which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.*

exposes an oxymoron that is resolved once we understand that language has the power to define, and thus change the essence of things by allowing the voiceless to claim their past, their history. As Rafael Perez-Torres highlights, *Beloved* transforms absence into presence by "knit[ting] together a new and more inclusive story. The story of absence and exclusion which *Beloved's* story represents becomes, indeed, not a story to pass on" ("Knitting and Knotting" 109).

To conclude, in the three novels Morrison problematizes historical knowledge and engages the reader in the challenge of understanding "history not as fixed but as the creation of the observer" (Byerman 137). In this sense, she demands the reader to work actively in the reconstruction of the story as well as in the renegotiation of the past. In Morrison's novels, "the paradox of

the past, ... the paradox of presence/absence¹⁷ (25), as Paul Ricoeur states it, involves not only the attempt to make visible something that is absent, but also to transform an imposed voicelessness into a space of contestation. Those who experienced the silence are offered the chance to voice their accounts, emotions, fears, in a joint effort to revisit the already gone past. Denouncing the artificiality and pretense to universality of hegemonic discourse in The Bluest Eye, blending myth and history together and presenting African folklore not as "local color" but as "integral to the fabric of black experience [...] a means by which people who were denied a history and an identity validate themselves" (Byerman 139) in Song of Solomon, and giving voice to "the 60 million and more", "the disremembered and unaccounted for" in Beloved, Morrison transforms the evocation of the past into a communal voice that entails responsibility and has the strength to subvert oppressive forces; for "writing is a means of resistance, a chance to exercise power, and when there is a chance to power, there is a chance to freedom¹⁸" (Paruzzo and Engert 574).

¹⁷ My translation. Ricoeur in ¿Por qué recordar?

¹⁸ My translation

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wish it would do so with me ... when nobody saw me, I opened it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes it would say something to me; but I was sorry... when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.

James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw¹⁹

Toni Morrison's fiction echoes post-colonial defiance of imperial Eurocentric standards focusing particularly on the situation of the black community in the United States, a situation marked by a history of slavery, segregation, and unequal relations. At the same time, her fiction exposes the enslaving effects of patriarchal ideology and patriarchal programming and highlights the need to see gender as an interactive force amid others, a force operating in the context of interlocking systems of oppression. The oppressive forces associated to race and gender combined to impose a silence on the Afro-American community that Toni Morrison works to subvert. Her challenging work has problematized and revitalized the literature of the United States. As Stella Maris Coser sees it, for Morrison "writing is a revolutionary act in its affirmation of a new language against forgetfulness and erasure" (166).

Morrison's project, therefore, entails not only the denunciation of social inequality, but also the claim for recognition. It stands as an attempt to destabilize the silence and absence imposed on the Afro-American community. Her subversive strategies are multiple. One such subversive purpose in Morrison's fiction can be identified in the characterization of women. In the three

¹⁹ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw was the author of the first full-length black autobiography: A Narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince (1770), in The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 1997, xxviii.

novels analyzed, The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and Beloved, female stereotypes of black women are explored and questioned, revising traditional associations and postulating a new kind of black woman, one who possesses the tar quality that transforms oppressive stereotypes into liberating female characters.

The oppressive inscriptions attached to the family, a key tool in the indoctrination process, are also exposed in The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and Beloved to be transformed. The denunciation of the oppressive force of the capitalist, patriarchal world of the Dick-and-Jane family is accompanied by its destabilization and the installment in its place of a model that values the role of women as central to the re-conceptualization of the black family. Morrison's three-woman households offer the characters the possibility of reconstructing their lives in a maternal space that extends to include the living and the dead. The special spiritual nature of the maternal space allows for the possibility of healing and the reclamation of motherhood.

Morrison's subversiveness is also seen in her treatment of history and historical knowledge. The novels studied are all deeply concerned with history, especially with the voids or absences of history. Morrison sets out to fill in such spaces with an Afro-American voice that recovers a silenced past and renegotiates its meaning. The reader is to work in the construction of the story in the same way as we are to work in the reconstruction of the past. This is a salient trait in the understanding of Morrison's novels as problematizing the nature of historical knowledge. The parallel between the novel being not a ready made set of meanings given to the reader with history being not a fixed story to be incorporated without a question exhibits the narrative and fictive nature of their emplotment. As history is a human construct, attention should be paid to the point of view of the ones constructing history. The official voice is, therefore, not a universal dictum but one perspective that needs to be revised; its suppressions exposed and reversed.

In her novels, Morrison has thus rewritten the trope of the talking book, which Henry Louis Gates Jr defines as "the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition" (The Signifying Monkey 131). The paradox of representing, of shaping an absence and voicing a presence reverses the figure of the talking book that fails to speak. The talking book that fails to speak to the slave in Gronniosaw's

autobiography is transformed in Morrison's novels into a kind of fiction that speaks "black" and "back", that is, a distinct Afro-American voice that celebrates difference and by so doing is engaged in a subversive process. Morrison's fiction emerges to fill in the voicelessness imposed by oppressive forces that privilege white and male standards, transforming thus the denial attached to the trope of the talking book into a powerful liberating force, a liberating voice.



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