Chapter 4

The Ancestor as Figure in the novels of

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison claims that her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) took
its birth in a feeling of deficiency:

Things were moving too fast in the early 1960-70s . . . it was exciting but
it left me bereft . . . . There were no books about me, I didn’t exist in all
the literature I had read . . . this person, this female, this black did not
exist center-self.(1)

Reading the novel in the context of the political atmosphere of the 1960s and
70s, Jill Matus comments:

Focusing on the complex formations of subjectivity in a racialised
country, Morrison’s first novel implicitly takes on assertions of racial
pride – black is beautiful – and scrutinizes the historical backlog of self-
devaluation that such assertions cannot magically erase. At a time when
the Black Aesthetic movement was calling for positive representations
and role models, Morrison created troubled and traumatized characters.
(2)

The idea ‘black is beautiful’ was not accepted by the Breedloves, the trouble
and trauma through which the family, and particularly Pecola, had to go
through is projected by Morrison as a consequence of the absence of the
guiding ancestral voice and atmosphere. Her concern was with the futility of
the imaginative formation of any role model devoid of a place in it of the
protective and healing role of an ancestral presence and voice.

Read from another perspective, “*The Bluest Eye* insistently reminds us
that the black body is not intrinsically ugly and grotesque. The ugliness of the
Breedloves, . . . is bestowed on them by white culture.” (3) Examined in line with Black Aesthetic theoretical formulations, the novel attests a rejection of the Western construction of blackness as absence; there also are ample suggestions that an alternative construction is possible with blackness being projected as natural, in line with traditional African vision. This is lacking in *The Bluest Eye*: “The black community in *The Bluest Eye* entirely lacks the resources to counter racial oppression.” (4) Maybe, it is only M’Dear who has the necessary ancestral wisdom and power to face the debilitating situation.

Morrison’s political agenda in *The Bluest Eye* is to highlight the effect of the disaffection and disjointing that results from dispersal, from disconnection with the land that implies continuity. At the core of the novel lies migration, from the South to the North, from the ‘villages’ to the small towns as well as cities. Land, has been for the Africans and the African Americans, a seminal source invoking the ancestral. In this novel, as in the other works of Morrison, the setting, Lorian, Ohio, a small town, is introduced as disjunctured from its natural qualities. It is a land that would allow neither the marigolds nor Pecola to grow. The inhabitants are recent arrivals to the town; their connection to the South had been intense and life sustaining if only because they’d had to forge a tradition of survival against great odds. As new inhabitants, and because they are black, they are looked down upon by the older residents of the town, both black and white. For them it is another challenge; they have to learn another lesson in survival, this time in a space that is sterile and unwelcome for them.

Almost all the characters are affected by their acceptance of the Lorian society’s approval of the inversion of the natural order. For in internalizing the
Western standards of physical beauty, the black community automatically disqualifies itself as the possessor of its own cultural standards. *The Bluest Eye* challenges the unnaturalness of a belief system in which physical beauty is associated with virtue and love is romance. Such a system, anathema to the traditional African, creates a hierarchy in which only a few can be worthy of love and happiness, while the rest are condemned to yearn hopelessly for self-fulfillment. The distance between their lives and the ideal American home or family, depicted in the passage from the grade-school reader that is used as a refrain at the beginning of the novel is also measured by the increasingly distorted passage, parts of which later introduce the subject of each subsequent chapter.

Morrison’s narrative technique reveals the pervasive trauma of physical, psychical and cultural dislocation suffered by Pecola, Claudia, Soaphead Church, and the entire black community.

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. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody’s did. . . . It never occurred to either of us that the earth may have been unyielding.” (*The Bluest Eye, 5*)

The newly matured Claudia realizes in retrospect that the environment was ‘unyielding’ to both marigold seeds and Pecola Breedlove. The familiar grade-school story of Dick and Jane provides an ironic frame for Pecola’s circumstances:

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 very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. . . . See mother. Mother is very nice. . . . Mother laughs. See Father. He is big and strong. Father is smiling . . . See the dog . . . Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. . . .” (*The Bluest Eye, 7*)
Each segment of this idealized picture of secure family life is countered by bleak specifics of Pecola’s existence: shabby home, bitter and hostile parents, and two encounters with animals that are death-giving to her spirit and sanity. Morrison’s narrator speaks of the ugliness of the Breedloves, of their ‘wearing’ this ugliness out of ‘conviction’ (*The Bluest Eye*, 34), a belief confirmed for them by the responses of their world to them. Pecola’s search for the bluest eyes, and an ‘acceptable’ face, that is to say self, as she shrinks beneath this ‘mantle’, ‘mask’, of ugliness is central to the novel’s meaning.

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother, is representative of the loss of a center with which the community of the migrants is infected. Separated from the land in the rural South, which allowed her privacy and freedom of imagination, and cut off from the tradition of her maternal ancestors, she falls prey to the destructive ideas of physical beauty and romantic love as measures of self-worth. Her economic destitution and psychic abjection undermines the very bonds that attach family members to one another and form the basis for community. Pauline is disillusioned by her family life and retreats into a dream world purveyed by cinematic image-makers of white cultural fantasies. She identifies with white movie stars – she even affects a Jean Harlow hairstyle – but then, when she loses a front tooth, she resigns herself “to just being ugly” (*The Bluest Eye*, 123). Pauline’s internalization of the belief that she is ‘ugly’ is reinforced during Pecola’s birth as she overhears the white doctors at the hospital refer to black women like her as animals: “They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (*The Bluest Eye*, 99). Shamed by the doctors, who view her as an object of contempt, Pauline unconsciously equates her child with something “dirty and disgusting”. And the fact that
Pauline describes her newborn as ugly – “Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (The Bluest Eye, 100) – suggests that from the outset Pauline projects her own sense of ugliness onto her daughter: a failure of generational transference of positive values, which prevents the traditional role of the ancestor from coming into play.

Radically disconnected from family or community, Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father, is another of Morrison’s cultural orphans. Even in early youth Cholly mired himself in ugly behaviour and self-hatred when he started to see himself through the eyes of the whites. Born a bastard, he was left to die by a crazy mother; brought up by his great-aunt who rescued him from abandonment and raised him until he was fourteen, when she died. He later locates the man he believes to be his father and is stunned when ‘that man’ refuses to own him. Bereft of all sustaining familial bonds and emotional connections, he becomes a “free” man: “He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die . . . abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him.” (The Bluest Eye, 126) In his world, even God is a “nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eye . . . If the devil did look like that Cholly preferred him. He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him.” (The Bluest Eye, 106-07) Pauline and Cholly Breedlove’s severing of ties with the folk culture in turn severs connections that they could have passed onto Pecola that would have aided her in reconnecting to “that” culture.
The bluest eyes that represent the epitome of desirability to Pecola are possessed by the doll Claudia receives one Christmas. Questioning why people look at little white girls and say “A w w w w w “ but do not look her way, Claudia becomes angry when she observes the “eye slide” of black women as they approach white girls on the street, and the “possessive gentleness of their touch” when they handle them (The Bluest Eye, 22-23). She responds with anger when she is given a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned baby doll as a “special” gift:

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 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. (The Bluest Eye, 20)

Claudia defiantly pokes at the doll’s glass eyes, breaks off its fingers, and removes its head. “I destroyed the white baby dolls”, she recalls:

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. (The Bluest Eye, 22)

Claudia’s actions, while they are, in part, sadistic in nature, are motivated in the main by a need to locate the source of a white physical superiority that is not immediately apparent to her. An adult Claudia recalls one of her childhood experiences where she finds her mother’s droning voice, the scratchy wet towel, the coldness of the air which she “re-fills” with protective “sweet”, “thick and dark” love of a mother who “does not want me to die”:

And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die. (The Bluest Eye, 14)
Such a rereading of her life evidences Claudia’s ultimate achievement of an informed black perspective. Although child Claudia later learns to “worship” Shirley Temple – a popular (white) figure she once responded to with “unsullied hatred” – this change is “adjustment without improvement.” (The Bluest Eye, 19-22). The adult Claudia, however, also insists that the maternal love she experienced was “thick and dark”. For in spite of their obsession with Shirley Temple dolls and other golden symbols of the outer society’s values, Mrs. MacTeer and her circle of friends maintain their strong woman ties as well as an equally strong sense of family. As a result although their daughter (Claudia), comes to internalize white contempt for her blackness, still feels in a deep-rooted way that she is loved and secure.

Pecola, in contrast, feels utterly unlovable and ugly, a feeling of total unworthiness that her family and her community have given her. She suffers from an extreme and destructive sense of separateness and self-contempt. When Pauline works for the Fishers, she meets the goals of her ideal self in the Fisher household, unlike in her “dingy” storefront dwelling. She finds “beauty, order, cleanliness”, -

Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had – a nickname – Polly. Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God . . . Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life. (The Bluest Eye, 101-02)

Polly’s self-division is exhibited in the scene in which Pecola accidentally spills a blueberry pie that her mother had made onto the newly cleaned floor of Polly’s employer’s kitchen. In the process she frightens the young daughter of the employer:
Most of the (pie) juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folded under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola . . . “Crazy fool . . . my floor; mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor. Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries . . . “ (The Bluest Eye, 86-87)

Pauline’s reaction indicates her disinterest in her own child’s welfare, for she is not a bit concerned about the berry burns that caused her daughter to cry out in pain. Instead, she strikes Pecola, and displays her anxiety about the condition of “my floor” rather than about her (my) daughter. Her subsequent gentle soothing of her employer’s crying child and attention to her soiled dress counters painfully her besoiling of Pecola’s dress and refusal to offer her daughter any parental or even human compassion. Most telling of all the occurrences in this scene is the interaction between Mrs. Breedlove and the white girl after Pecola and the Mac Teer girls depart:

“Who were they, Polly?”
“Don’t worry none, baby.”
“You gonna make another pie?”
“Course, I will.”
“Who were they, Polly?”
“Hush, Don’t worry none.” She whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling into the lake.” (The Bluest Eye, 101-102)

Pauline’s words signify a clear contrast between her reaction to the white girl and her daughter – the honey in her words to the employer’s daughter as opposed to the smoking berry heat of the abuse of Pecola. This scene presents the maternal refusal to share with the white girl Pecola’s identity because of her shame at being identified with the clumsy, ugly, disorderly girl who knocks the blue-berry pie onto the floor.
In a similar incident when Geraldine encounters Pecola in her house – the girl who represents for the entire community the literal embodiment of blackness, and sees that the object of her affection, her cat is dead, her reaction is one of a self-protective anger and horror. For Geraldine, Pecola represents the repulsiveness of poverty, the veiled opacity of blackness, the veritable eruption of funk. She equates Pecola with germ-infested pests, with flies that invade and soil carefully disinfected houses and elaborately prepared picnics. Pecola is everything that Geraldine is fighting to suppress – she is, in effect, attempting to rid herself of her fears of her own evil, of her own unworthiness, of her own shadow of blackness. Conscious of her unattractiveness and her colour, Pecola seems to disappear where she stands, unable to join Claudia and Frieda. She senses too strongly rejection at an irredeemable predicament. Children, teachers, neighbours, her parents, and other adults have confirmed what her mother concluded upon her birth: that Pecola will never be an insider in the black community and cannot possibly hope for acceptance beyond it. All combine to reinforce Pecola’s belief that the only escape for her is to become beautiful through obtaining the bluest eyes of all, one’s that will dazzle everyone into loving her.

Cholly’s one effort to make connections to the past and present through love results is his rape of his daughter. He had perceived Pecola’s unconscious and innocent scratching of her leg with the opposite foot as a reminder of the moment he had fallen in love with Pauline, who was leaning against a road fence – “scratching herself with a broken foot” (The Bluest Eye, 126). His one effort to heal displacement ends up in a fatal touch, for the “love of a freeman is never safe” – “Love is never better than the lover . . . There is
no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love” (The Bluest Eye, 159-60) Raped by her father and then severely beaten by her mother, Pecola seeks help from Soaphead Church. Cholly’s deed, at last, offers Pecola ‘a kind of love and recognition’, however perverted. Soaphead offers insanity. The damage done was total. The patterns of caring and incorporation, transformation of “village values” hinted at through the ancestor, healer, M’Dear never reach Pecola strongly enough to reshape her opinion of herself. The emphasis upon caring applies to the cures offered to Aunt Jimmy by the ancestor figure of the community, M’Dear, during her illness. While they do not save her, they illustrate a variety of beliefs and convey the altruistic concern absent from many relationships – as that of the Breedlove family. M’Dear is Morrison’s ancestor, the embodiment of folk wisdom, the local healer, conjurer, hoodoo doctor of the community. M’Dear “was a quiet woman who lived in a shack near the woods” (The Bluest Eye, 108). Her power and the confidence the community has in her are reflected in her physical characteristics. Cholly expects her to be “shriveled and hunched over” because he has heard that ‘she was very, very old’:

But M’Dear loomed taller than the preacher who accompanied her. She must have been over six feet tall. Four big white knots of hair gave power and authority to her soft black face. Standing straight as a poker, she seemed to need her hickory stick not for support but for communication. (The Bluest Eye, 108)

Her ties to the community, despite her seeming outsider status, provide another contrast to Pecola, who, severed from those traditions that could incorporate her, nearly remains outside the bonds of caring. Pecola’s belief in fantasies is derived from outside the black community, hence, she is unable to articulate the pain she feels or channel it. She has no role model, no M’Dear,
no ancestor figure to serve as a way of connecting her to the community rather than cutting her off from it.

Pauline and Cholly Breedlove have both come into contact with forms of African American culture used to by black people to each other in caring, sharing ways. Yet their move to the North parallels a dissolution in their abilities to use the forms to which they have been exposed for any sustaining purposes. Thus, they break the chains of continuity in culture and can only produce children who are outside "that" which had the potential to nurture them. Pecola and Cholly must therefore exist in a world of fragmentation, in a world where Mrs. MacTeer and Poland might show signs of the more sustaining Southern black culture, but which cannot effectively transmit to the Breedlove children. They, like other adults in their isolated existence in the novel, are tied together by cultural forces stronger than all of them, but the strands of that cultural bondage keep breaking away from Pecola. Beyond the statement of cultural mutilation that Pecola’s desire for the bluest eye illustrates, Morrison challenges the thwarting of the natural urge for love, for one’s own value system that distorts the process of growth and rebirth (of the land itself). Thus, the rape of Pecola by her father in the spring, a dramatic instance of inversion, is related to the inability of the marigolds to sprout in the unyielding earth of the land: “The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.” (*The Bluest Eye*, 3) The planting of the seeds in *The Bluest Eye* serves to demonstrate not nature’s harmony with humanity and the possibility of preserving (at least the memory of) life, but, rather, a barren earth’s indifference to humanity’s seeds.
Morrison’s anger is towards the African American adoption of a self-protective mask.

No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and with people) was behaviour, the rest of the family – Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove – wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. . . . It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement.; . . .“Yes”, they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Mrs. Breedlove handled hers as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers – martyrdom. Sammy used his as a weapon to cause others pain....And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed – peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask. (*The Bluest Eye*, 34-35)

This passage vividly suggests the pattern of mask wearing that permeates the African American community. The community’s worship at the altar of white beauty is only gesture, only acts smoothly cultivated to fool the master, to appease the Gods. Pecola finds no answers in a family where love is not bred or in a Northern city where she has little access to nature or to the wisdom of her culture. Because Pecola never learns of the potential benefits of masking and self-division in a white dominated America, she represents a perfect target of scorn for the blacks who are armed with this knowledge. These, African Americans, in fact, use Pecola as ritual object in their ceremonies designed to exhibit to the master their “rejection” of blackness. Morrison’s narrative represents the African American psyche as unhealed; as Pecola, unlike Milkman, is presented as a grotesque, flightless bird: She remains tragically tied to white standards of beauty and is, even in her insanity, striving for “the
blue void . . . (she) could not reach.”. *(The Bluest Eye,* 158) Pecola could not achieve the wished for transformation from being a victim to power because she lacked the very initiating and sustaining base: the ancestor.

II

The concern with the lack of the ancestral presence and acknowledgement of the ancestor’s power and the consequences evident in the process of identity formation are evident in the next novel of Morrison. She says: “In *Sula* I’m interested in what it means to be an outlaw, who an outlaw is, by our definition, not by somebody else’s. And it keeps me fiddling around in my books with the past, because I have to clear that up before I can go forward into anything more contemporary.” (6) The preoccupation with notions resulting from the past of the community, of the race, in determining moral positioning is noteworthy. The action of *Sula* is contextualised in relation to the socio-political reality of African American life since the experiences of the First World War, as represented by Shadrack. It is again a novel dealing with trauma and loss, and with land and erasure at the core:

The narrator registers a note of nostalgia about the passing of a community, a neighbourhood. Listing the places that would be demolished so that the Medallion Golf Course can be built; she bears witness to the life that dwelt in Ireness palace of cosmetology, Reba’s Grill, the Time and a Half Pool Hall. (7)
The passing of the community in Bottom is fictionalized in terms of the link between the individual and all that, across time, the community represents. Matus concludes: “*Sula* is a novel that battles nostalgia while exploring the pain of missing something that did not seem valuable enough to ever be missed at the time when you had it.”(8) It is the painful fate of the African Americans that what deserves to be valued is not; the significant is allowed to be neglected and erased, and that is how the ancestor and the ancestral is made to fade away. In *Sula*, Morrison explores the danger of ignoring the ancestor in the projection of the community of the present and the future as well as the creation of a notion of the self.

The primacy of land in the process of identity formation, that which is central to the African formulation of identity is at the center of negotiations between selves and between the selves and the context in *Sula*:

The Bottom is important because it is an instance of the forgotten, a part of the fabric of an unremembered past, which if not memorialized in its limitations and shortcomings, remains an unassimilated history and an impediment to a historicized narrative of African American experience and therefore to future envisionings of community. (9)

The passing away of Bottom is envisioned as an example of cultural erasure:

The Black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn – and the rich white folks. Maybe it hadn’t been a community, but it had been a place. (10)

The quality of the place is presented in the following poignant words: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom.”(my emphasis) (*Sula*, 3) Morrison’s narrator begins
her story with words of deracination – nightshade and blackberry bushes being
torn away by either glaring light and blurring dissonances of Southern
industrial day and/or Northern urban noon competing with folk harmony
implied in village values and their expression, and in the process what is left is
a landscape with all its haunting nostalgia, merely as a promise:

There will be nothing left of the Bottom (the footbridge that crossed the
river is already gone), but perhaps it is just as well, since it wasn’t a town
anyway: just a neighbourhood where on quiet days people in valley
houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and if a valley
man happened to have business up in those hills – collecting rent or
insurance payments – he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress
doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of “messing around”
to the lively notes of a mouth organ. The black people watching her
would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy for the valley man
to hear the laughter and notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under
the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats,
somewhere in the pump of the hand, somewhere behind the frayed lapels,
somewhere in the sinew’s curve . . . Otherwise the pain would escape him
even though the laughter was part of the pain. (Sula, 4)

Bottom is then born of slavery: the ambiguous psychic space that needs to be
filled by those missing collective, personal, historical, chaotic experiences
supplied by memory, and ordered and interpreted by its subjects and its
readers. As Morrison states her technique: “My writing expects, demands
participatory reading . . . It’s not just about telling the story, its about
involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotion.” (11) The novel in form
and content is thus about how the devices of memory creates presence out of
an absence. It opens with an absence – the whites trick their slaves into asking
for hilly land by insisting that hilly “bottom” land is rich and fertile. It is the
bottom of heaven – best land there is. (Sula, 5) It describes a world where
whites are equated with the uncontrollable and uncontainable evils of life,
where black survival may come at the horrible cost of self-mutilation and
where expressions of black rage at the social and economic injustices of life ultimately prove self-destructive.

_Sula_ is politically invested in re-imagining black cultural identity through its lawless and experimental characters. Shadrack is the first ‘rebel’ whose rage institutes an annual ritual – National Suicide Day, and it focuses attention on the systematic traumatisation of black American men. On a particular war-day, the young Shadrack, a soldier in France during World War I, finds himself running with his fellow soldiers across a field during his first encounter with the enemy when he unexpectedly sees the face of a nearby soldier “fly off”._(Sula, 8)_ Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappears under his helmet, leaving the headless body of the soldier to run on, “with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back.”_(_Sula, 8_)_ Morrison makes a subtle allusion to the horrors of slavery in describing how Shadrack has “no past, no language, no tribe”_(_Sula, 12_)_, and while he struggles to “order” his disorganized experience, he attempts to make “a place for fear as a way to control it”_(_Sula, 14_)_. Shadrack’s Suicide Day ritual, which has grown out of a traumatic war experience announces to the people of Bottom as he walks its narrow paths ringing his cowbell and carrying his hangman’s rope that this is their only opportunity to kill either themselves or each other for he believes that if one day a year is devoted to death, people will be able to “get it out of the way” and consequently the reminder of the years will be “safe and free” _(_Sula, 14_)_. Shadrack through his madness articulates the unvoiced defiance and rage of the Bottom Community and also his behaviour is self-destructive as in the end of the novel he leads a large number of his own community
members to their death which stands as an expression of their collective rage against their white capitalist oppressors.

Robbed of his worth and individuality, the black is told that he is “a brute beast”, that he and his people are “like a walking dung heap”, that he has “no use in the world” (Sula, 98). Like Shadrack, Sula too is a “rebel” and a social outcast. From the opening of the novel, she is presented as a textual puzzle – the readers wonder together with the narrator and the Bottom Community “what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about” (Sula, 6). The narrative is structured around “absent mothers” whose presence proves that their maternal role is directed towards a commitment to prove their value and worth by becoming an “impressive woman” who wins “all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority”, and she also rises “grandly to the occasion of motherhood” (Sula, 18). Helene Wright, Eva Peace, Hannah Peace, as a mother enjoy “manipulating” their daughters’/son’s lives and thus become a repressive force in their child’s life. In an attempt to counter the shaming racist stereotypes of blacks as immoral, over-sexed, passionate, incapable of self-governance and self-control, the mother figures return to repression as special ritual to survival. They are no longer the guardians of the neighbourhood:

My tendency is to focus on neighborhoods and communities. And there was this life giving, very, strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. One lives, really, not so much in your house as you do outside of it, within the “compounds”, within the village or whatever it is. And legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have, were the responsibilities of the neighborhood. So that people were taken care of, or locked up or whatever. If they were sick, other people took care of them; if they were old, other people took care of them; if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them, or related to their madness or tried to find out the limits of their madness. They also meddled in your lives a lot. They felt that you belonged to them. And every woman on the street could raise everybody’s child, and tell you
exactly what to do and you felt that connection with those people and they felt it with you. (12)

This sense of belonging and ancestral care was the “thing” which was missing in Medallion and this triggered their rage and helplessness towards hurting and wounding themselves. That part of black life – the ancestral guardian, who is a sign of the disrupted wholeness of African system of meaning, belief and rituals which he willed to his own subsequent generations, as sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent to counter white versions of black identity was missing in 1919. That trauma can be both overwhelming and disorganizing and can lead to the feeling that one is unsafe in one’s body and that one’s emotions and thoughts are out of control is dramatized in Shadrack response to his war experience; Eva’s burning of Plum; Chicken Little’s drowning; Hannah’s fiery death; Eva’s and Sula’s self-mutilations and the mass drowning deaths of many members of the Bottom Community.

Though Morrison constructs Eva Peace as the self-sacrificing mother who goes to great lengths to ensure the economic survival of her children, yet she is the one who kills her son, plays god, names people, puts her hand on a child; she manipulates – all in the best interest. Eva is very possessive about other people; she decides that her son’s life is not worth living and offers him a warm death – death by fire. Morrison describes Eva as

\[\ldots\] someone god-like; \ldots she decided that her son was living a life that was not worth his time. She meant it was too painful for her; you know, the way you kill a dog when he breaks his leg because he can’t stand the pain. He may very well be able to stand it, but you can’t, so that’s why you get rid of him.\(13\)

Like Plum, Eva’s daughter, Hannah, burns to death and her fiery demise is linked to the contempt of her mother. “Mamma, did you ever love us?” Hannah asks Eva before she dies. Calling Hannah’s question an “evil
wondering” (Sula, 67), a contemptuous Eva insists that her mother love is proven by the fact that she kept Plum and Hannah alive when they were children, a time when “niggers was dying like flies . . . You sittin’ here with your healthy – ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t” (Sula, 68), Eva insists, calling Hannah a “snake-eyed ungrateful hussy.”(Sula, 69) She continues: “I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?” (Sula, 69) When Hannah asks Eva why she killed Plum, Eva speaking with “two voices”, describes her maternal contempt for her helpless adult son who was trying to return to her womb, yet she insists that she loved Plum, that she held him “real close” before killing him (Sula, 71,72). The day after Hannah asks her question, she dies a fiery death and the fact that Hannah’s question precedes her death in turn questions Eva’s sense of responsibility “as a sort of umbrella figure”(14), Esu, the ancestral guardian as a culture-bearer. What a black guardian hands over is endurance and it is Eva only who is able to withstand the losses one after another but is ‘unable’ to cultivate this valuable black quality within her children which ultimately leads to their self-mutilation and self destruction giving birth to rage, death and violence.

Another important area affected by the absence of the ancestral is the family and in Sula troubled family relationship is depicted through fractured connections in the cases of both Sula and Nel, both girls with “distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers” (Sula, 52). Although Nel’s mother Helene Wright is a pillar of middle class respectability in the Bottom Community, under whose care Nel becomes “obedient and polite”, the trip to the South in
1920 leads to Nel’s discovery of her racial and sexual shame, which is a part of her maternal and cultural inheritance. When Nel meets her prostitute grandmother, Rochelle, in New Orleans, for the first time, she confronts the side of her black identity that her mother Helene had suppressed and guarded all the while, the side associated with passion and sexuality which is her racial shame – as bell hooks, commenting on the humiliations endured by black women in the American society, points to the still common tendency of whites to view black women as sexually promiscuous and thus not worth respect. This shaming stereotype of African American women is rooted in slavery during which the whites “justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men.” (15) Such stereotyping is not conducive to the formation of any positive sense of identity and any resistance to it requires an alternative cultural space in which the resistance may be rooted. Morrison’s text suggests that through her “tight, tight, hug”, Rochelle communicates some of her wildness to Nel, as the action dramatizes the ten-year old Nel’s sudden rebellious assertion of her own identity after this trip:

“I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.”

Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she started out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut. (Sula, 28)

Nel’s discovery of her own oppositional “me-ness” leads her friendship with Sula and this friendship signifies the connection between Nel’s suppressed “wild blood” and the “wildness” of Sula.

Though adult Sula has been described as a ‘dangerously free woman’, amoral and rebel, the root of any deviant behaviour lies in the child Sula who
splits under her mother’s words: “Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference.” (Sula, 57) Sula overhears Hannah talking to another woman and this prompts the negative construction of a self-identity. Later the same day, Chicken Little drowns when she slips from her hands while they were at play. Morrison’s narrative locates the origin of Sula’s ‘crippled self’ in these two apparently related episodes: her mother’s remark and Chicken Little’s death. Hannah’s words bewilder and mortify the child Sula, who becomes emotionally paralyzed and numbed. Rather than openly crying, she is aware of a “sting in her eye” and only Nel’s voice pulls her away from the “dark thoughts” that suddenly take hold of her (Sula, 57). The death of Chicken Little can be read as a displaced enactment of Sula’s dark thoughts and feelings that represent the painful and confusing experience around which she grows up – it also represents Sula as a mother-damaged figure, one who has “no center, no speck around which to grow.” (Sula, 119)

Years later Sula admits to herself that she watched her mother’s fiery death for enjoyment: “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing.” (Sula, 147) Sula’s secret pleasure in watching her mother burn to death reveals her emotional disconnection from the suffering of others as she leads her dangerously free life:

her’s was an experimental life – ever since her mother’s remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. (Sula, 118-19)

The awareness of disorientation continues to determine her actions: she betrays the conventional Nel by having an affair with her husband Jude.
Subsequently, Jude abandons Nel as she suffers from feelings of intense loss; but for Sula:

She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of that. Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways.” (Sula, 119-120)

Sula is unable to understand the feeling of pain and loss in Nel for she cannot emotionally connect herself to the cause of Jude’s abandonment of Nel.

To members of the Bottom Community, Sula is an object of shame and contempt. When the community learns that Sula has put Eva in an old folk home, they call her a “roach”; when they see that she has taken Nel’s husband, Jude, and then ditched him for other men, they brand her a “bitch”; when they hear that she has slept with white men – which is “unforgivable”, old women purse their lips in disgust, children look away from Sula “in shame”, and young men “fantasize elaborate torture for her” (Sula, 112-113). After Sula’s death, the same community “misses” her – “a falling away, a dislocation was taking place” (Sula, 153) Teapot’s mother beat him up in fury for rejecting her food which she had not for long since Sula knocked him down the steps –

She was not alone. Other mothers who had defended their children from Sula’s malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula’s scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. Daughters who had complained bitterly about the responsibilities of taking care of their aged mothers-in-law had altered when Sula locked Eva away, and then began cleaning those old women’s spittoons without a murmur. Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. (Sula, 153-54)

Against Sula’s rebellious wildness the Bottom Community measured itself as the good and conventional wife, mother, or daughter, bound by comfortable
middle class values; but her death bitterly points to the truth that she took on for them the evil they had done to each other. They considered themselves righteous by defining themselves as different from her. The death of Sula, at first taken to be a sign of better times brings trouble for the community as the people fall back to their selfish antagonistic ways. Sula is Morrison’s sign of warning: what can and to what extent can go wrong.

When Nel, out of Christian charity visits the dying Sula in 1940, what she learns at the bedside disturbs again the center around which she organized her life. Sula’s parting words to Nel “How you know . . . About who was good . . . I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me” (Sula, 146), provokes the question of who is ‘good’ – the conventional Nel or the unconventional Sula. It also raises questions about the inconclusiveness and uncertainty of moral judgments, of the fallibility of community assessments in the absence of any definite yardstick. Morrison, as a reader of her own works also seems to be preoccupied with the issue. She remarks that in Sula she “tried to posit a situation where there was a so-called good and a so-called evil people. Nel and Sula are symbolic of this condition. And of course you can’t always tell which is which.” (16) Nel has rejected the intimacy that involves confronting what Sula has confronted: the unknown part of oneself. Eva says of Nel and Sula some twenty-four years later, as we find at the end of the novel: “Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you.” (Sula, 169) Accused by Eva of watching Chicken Little drown, Nel recalls – just as Sula was thrilled when she watched her mother burn to death, so Nel felt a “joyful stimulation” when she watched the little boy fall into the water. (Sula, 170) The closure of the novel offers the troubling insight that what links Sula and Nel is their
emotional disconnection in watching the harming of others – the mother
damaged figures born of discontinuity, disorder and absence.

It is Eva the ancestor who outlives her children and grandchildren
though she ‘fails’ to pass on her ancestral information and ideas, as formulated
by Morrison in her interviews:

there is a part of yourself that you keep from white people – always;
the black people in general don’t annihilate evil; . . . evil has a natural
place in the universe; they try to avoid it or defend themselves against it
but they are not surprised by its existence or horrified or outraged; (17)

They are sorry that the man is gone at the moment and may sit around on
porches and cry but there is no bitterness and there is no whining, either. .
. . (you) don’t have to make choices about whether to be a mother or
whether to work. I do them both because they both exist and I don’t feel
put out about it. (18)

Kill your ancestors, you kill all. There’s no future, there’s no past, there’s
just an intolerable present. And it is intolerable under the circumstances,
it’s not even life. (19)

The absence of the ancestral guiding spirit dislocates the sense of moral
assessment and in turn privileges wanton destruction, something which is not
natural:

There was no creature so ungodly as to make them destroy it. They could
kill easily if provoked to anger, but not by design, which explained why
they could not “mob kill” anyone. To do so was not only unnatural, it was
undignified. The presence of evil was something to be first recognized,
then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over. (Sula, 118)

Like Esu, Eva is a triumphant figure for she can exist in opposition – between
evil and good; loss and gain; black and white; humiliation and achievement.
She is the only one who survives till the end even though put outside the
community in an old folk’s home, unafraid of change. Though she suffers self-
mutilation, unlike others it is constructive rather than destructive for it ensures
her children’s survival. Eva, the ancestor, cannot be destroyed – endurance is
her strength for she can reorganize from discontinuity, disorder and absence but her only failure was that she could not pass it on.

III

With *Song of Solomon* Morrison moves into the formulation of the ancestor and the ancestral as a positive factor sustaining, protecting and guiding the African America individual and community lives. To some extent, as she herself says, the autobiographical seeps into the narrative texture, but the presence of the autobiographical in shaping the ancestral is not direct:

I can’t tell you how I felt when my father died. But I was able to write *Song of Solomon* and imagine, not him, and not his specific interior life, but the world that he inhabited and the private or interior life of the people in it. And I can’t tell you how I felt reading to my grandmother while she was turning over and over in her bed (because she was dying and she was not comfortable), but I could try to reconstruct the world that she lived in.(20)

The connection across the generational gap, tracing the link between the present with the past, two generations away, might have inspired the exploration of the nature and value of the link and the definitive quest motif that holds the narrative together, but the concern with African cultural consciousness and cultural history is stronger in comparison to the two earlier novels. *Song of Solomon* chronicles Milkman’s inadvertent and increasingly captivating quest to literally piece together, to re-member, the story of his ancestors that facilitates the reinscription of his own cultural and historical consciousness. Calling attention to the personal–familial and social–historical forces that shape the formation of African-American identities and also focusing on the social, class and political tensions within the black
community, the novel addressed partially to the middle class Africans-Americans, specially males, who have a kind of amnesia about their cultural history – about the shame and trauma of family history rooted in slavery – and who, in donning the mask of bourgeois ‘pride’, come to see poor black as stigmatized objects of contempt.

The representation of the importance of the ancestor in *Song of Solomon* is constructed around three bases: nature, land and naming. Around these revolve the opposition between the old and the new. Barbara Christian states: “The newly arrived blacks retain some of their old traditions and transform the land through the process of naming, a process that keeps alive their own memories, their history as it develops.”(21) The process of naming again operates, as in *Sula*, as a ‘nigger joke’ as is evident in their naming of the Dead family. There is also a central conflict between the North and the South: between the two communities of the blacks. As Barbara Christian puts it:

Just as Macon represents the ideology of a rising Northern Middle class, whose experience of racism in the South breeds in them an insatiable need for security, so Pilate, his sister, represents the tradition that identifies with Nature; it has no desire for material things. Pilate is presented in the novel as the healer of the spirit, the guide to essences beyond outward appearance or material things. . . . The contrast in values between the Dead brother and sister is the axis of this third novel of Morrison. The conflict between the Deads will attempt to resolve itself in the character Milkman Dead, Macon’s son and Pilate’s nephew. In a most significant way, Milkman is even more Pilate’s child than he is Macon’s, for without her conjuring, he would not have been conceived or born. Milkman must travel through the territory of his father’s, the deadening effects of Macon’s drive for money and security on his mother, his sisters and himself, as well as the geography of Pilate’s, its magic and its limitations. Milkman’s quest for gold is propelled by his father’s belief that Pilate’s inheritance is gold rather than a bag of bones. And in the son’s pursuit of the father’s goal, he finds his grandfather’s bones, the essence of the truth of his ancestors. (22)
The structure of representation is, however, complex, and demands careful analysis. Only such an analysis reveals the intricacies of Morrison's narrative art as it negotiates between the absence and the presence of the ancestor as the ultimately binding and sustaining cultural force. Morrison's narrative deliberately avoids chronological development and linear structure; it drifts from one story to the next. Each story recreates a particular patch of the past, but also reveals a new mystery and then calls for another story. In different places, by different characters, the same story is picked up, retold, expanded with further complexity and mystery. It is as though there is a crucial deficiency in each telling. So each generates the other, as though the assertion each makes raises new questions. The accumulation of stories, the call and response pattern, their gradual merging into the single story of the hero's ancestry, create a unique structure. Each story becomes a part of Milkman's own history and must be put together as in a quilt, or be stored like the mysterious stones his aunt, Pilate, has collected throughout her life. By entrusting her narrative to many voices and basing its structure in many stories, Morrison acknowledges the debt that any African American writer has to the oral tradition, the true narrative legacy of the black people. She reminds her readers and the community that the story telling tradition, so strong in black culture, is still alive. In homes, in street corners, in barbershops, stories are devised and told as statements, familiar historical realities, or as forms of entertainment, a thing to be created and enjoyed. Stories bear witness to the past, to the struggle of the black people to survive in their triumphs and their failures, reality and fantasy; creating both history and myth.
Macon and Pilate, though members of the same family, represent two different social classes. Macon and Pilate are siblings, brother and sister, separated after their father’s murder; each inherits something different from him. Macon turns his father’s love of the land and talent for farming into an obsessive ownership of property, reducing land and people to mere commodities. He advises his son, Milkman: “Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too”. (23) Pilate, just the opposite, already owns herself – the physical evidence of her self-possession and self-creation is her stomach without a navel. Macon recalls how Pilate came “struggling out of the womb” after their mother died, how she inched “headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her.” (Song of Solomon, 27-28). On recognizing “what her situation in the world was and probably always be” Pilate discards “every assumption she had learned” and begins “at Zero”. By focusing on the problem of how she wants to live and what she finds important in life, Pilate reinvents herself, becoming a woman who remains “just barely within boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people”. Pilate gives up “all interest in table manners or hygiene”, yet she acquires “a deep concern for and about human relationships” (Song of Solomon, 149)

To Macon, who has internalized white construction of black racial inferiority, Pilate is the stigmatized, racially degenerate, other: marked by the stain of racial and class shame, she is inferior, defective (without a navel), dirty and smelling foul. Macon, who dons the mask of self-importance and pride, teaches his son to fear and respect him. Milkman, who works for his
father as a rent-collector, has adopted his father’s bourgeois values and ethic of materialism. Morrison's narrative deliberately contrasts the false pride of Macon Dead with the natural dignity of Macon’s sister, Pilate, who belongs to the black underclass. Yet she is the ‘natural healer’ and a person who values human – and family – connections above all else; Pilate is the ancestor with her redemptive folk values. Macon remains dead to the past, which is ‘celebrated’ and ‘possessed’ unselfconsciously by Pilate. She interprets the one word uttered by her father’s ghost, a regular visitor, the ancestral guide, as an admonition for performance: “Sing”. Instead of acquiring property, Pilate creates song, transmitting the family lore unconsciously. Her song first attracts and then encourages full surrender, even from Macon, who listens surreptitiously:

They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba’s piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico.” (Song of Solomon, 29)

As Macon peers unseen into the lives of these women, he secretly yearns to come out and accept fully the family he had denied in his “drive for wealth” (Song of Solomon, 28) –

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished by the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight... As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way.” (Song of Solomon, 29-30)

Macon, defeated by his father’s murder remains grounded in his lust for gold and in his accumulation of property. He has misread the lesson his father had
learned from the land. Pilate, on the other hand, a restless wanderer, owns only those objects that implicitly direct her search for ancestral place: rocks, a sack of human bones, and a geography book — her only legacy until she nurtures Milkman.

In the conflict between Macon and Pilate over the land, over history and over Milkman, Pilate wins because she has shown Milkman a way to recollect and reconstruct forgotten lives, if necessary ‘bone by bone’, to retrieve them from oblivion and neglect. With her reverence for the legacy, her secrecy and defiance, she becomes Milkman’s ‘ancestral healer’, the guiding force who introduces him to the mysteries of life and death, and of blackness, “you think dark is just one colour, but it ain’t . . . There are five or six kinds of blacks. Some silky, some wooly . . .” (Song of Solomon, 40-41) She spells for him the secrets of the world. Her many gifts as natural healer, skilled wine maker, singer, conjure woman and soothsayer, truth giver, bear witness to the extent of the legacy of black womankind. She initiates Milkman into the wisdom and beliefs and souls of his people, and challenges his indifference and ignorance. His first visit to Pilate’s house initiates his journey into the legacy: in the wine house of this lady who had one earring, no navel and looked like a tall tree, amid the pervading odor of fermenting fruit and pine, Milkman is reborn. Pilate and her house, in sharp contrast to his father’s house of death, bring a promise suggest the possibility of flight. Wide-spirited, Pilate lays no burden on Milkman, never telling him about her role in his birth never insinuating any debt he owed her, nor does she hold him responsible for her granddaughter Hagar’s death. When Milkman sends Hagar a letter ending their relationship, she is deeply hurt and envisions his arms around the
shoulders of a light-skinned woman – a woman with silky hair and gray eyes. The lovelorn Hagar becomes linked to “restless ghosts finding peace nowhere and in nothing” as she ruminates on her loss: “the mouth Milkman was not kissing, the feet that were not running towards him, the eye that no longer beheld him, the hands that were not touching him.” (*Song of Solomon*, 127) Milkman tells her that she has “no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own” (*Song of Solomon*, 137) Having internalized hegemonic beauty standards, which link skin colour and hair texture to class status and construct dark-skinned women as the racially inferior and stigmatized other, Hagar feels unworthy, dirty, spoiled, undesirable. Pilate refuses to meddle in her granddaughter’s life, despite the consequences, for she tries to teach others her values by showing how she lives, and what it is that she values. Hagar like Macon Dead fails to gather or understand this ‘knowledge’ – she is without any sense of community that could have guided her. Pilate’s love for Hagar is reflected in the funeral rites when she sings “the very same reassurances she had promised her when she was a little girl”, speaks to each person at the funeral, calling Hagar “My baby girl”, and then, suddenly, like an elephant who has just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength, Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, “And she was loved!” (*Song of Solomon*, 232)

Milkman’s principal guide in his journey to ancestral land are Pilate and Guitar. Guitar the initiator, who first brought Milkman to Pilate’s house is the interpreter of his fears and wishes, is also the experienced trickster, Esu, cunning and violent: the ‘avenger’. He plays a double role in Milkman’s life as
both friend and adversary. “Could you save my life or would you take it?” Morrison tells her readers that all human relationships boil down to these two fundamental questions. In her story, Guitar the master of ambiguity is the only exceptional person, Esu, who would answer yes to both. Guitar is an ambivalent figure who first through comradeship, then through violent opposition, pushes him to maturity.

Looking into the mirror before his journey, Milkman is aware that his father lacks “coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self.” *(Song of Solomon, 69)* Though initially he goes to Danville and Shalimar in search of Pilate’s buried gold, he discovers, instead, the real golden treasure of his family roots. As he progresses in his journey he finds himself immersed in a heritage he can no longer deny. Moving further South, he learns the joy of meeting those who knew his people. He feels pride in what he learns of his grandfather’s agricultural skills and personal integrity:

The good times, the hard times, things that changed, things that stayed the same – and head and shoulders above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death, it seemed to him, was the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at the time. Macon Dead was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower, the hog slaughter, the wild turkey roaster, the man who could plow forty in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it... Looking at Milkman in those nighttime talks, they yearned for something. Some word from him that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying. *(Song of Solomon, 236)*

Milkman travels in space and time to the wood life of Pennsylvania and the wilder backwoods of Virginia to the days of slavery when blacks moved in wagons towards the promised land. He learns to relate to nature and to sustain himself in the woods without the trinkets of modern society. In this wilderness, Milkman earns friendship and connection with the men of
Shalimar, with himself, and with the earth. Milkman discovers that he can be his own man, based on his proven skills of survival. Walking on the earth like he belonged to it, Milkman no longer needs the artificial device to distinguish himself from his father. Nor does he need material possessions to differentiate himself from the kinsmen of Shalimar. Sharing at last a good-hearted laugh with them, Milkman becomes –

... exhilarated by simply walking it like he belonged on it, like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (Song of Solomon, 281)

Here Milkman becomes rooted. “Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to any place or any body.” (Song of Solomon, 293) This belonging enables him to decode the children’s rhyme that gives meaning to the landscape, to nature and to his ancestry. He learns ‘to read’ meaning into Pilate’s song – the song which announced Robert Smith’s attempts to fly from the roof of Mercy Hospital; the same song that drew Macon to her part of town and partially out of his denial of having a family – “If you ever have a doubt we from Africa look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all of them pictures you ever see of Africans.” (Song of Solomon, 54)

By identifying the invisible ancestor in Pilate’s song – ‘reading and re-reading’ Pilate’s oral poetry – Milkman lifts the burden of the bones from Pilate’s shoulder and allows her to experience a surrender to the air that prefigures his more complete flight. Like the Negro spiritual encoding messages for escape or resistance, it contains the riddle and the answer to the question of survival; it is a mystery to be unraveled, like the enigmatic advice of the grandfather in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. This is the song Milkman
hears again and again until he recites it by heart: his performance in the land
of his ancestors reveals the hidden family name:

O Sugarman done fly way
O Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home . . . . (Song of Solomon, 6)

When Milkman learns the meaning of the song and the history transmitted
through it – “Jake the only son of Solomon” – he recognizes the ancestor and
the homeland Pilate perhaps had been reading about in the frayed geography
book. Deciphering the song that the children sing, thus keeping the story alive,
Milkman finds meanings for old words. Sounds, words, upon which Milkman
stumbles, will be his guides: a moan like a woman's voice, a children's song,
names of people, his people, names of places named after his people, offer him
the final clues he needs to reconstruct the whole message, to resurrect dead
lives and fading memories. He is empowered with the knowledge of his name
and the power of flight. He can now decode the children's song that tells his
paternal family story. He is one of the descendants of Solomon, the flying
African, who went 'home' on his own power. Morrison draws here on the
many African American folktales about escaping slaves. Their flight was
e empowered not by artificial wings such as those that the doomed Robert Smith
tried early in the novel, but rather by the knowledge of secret. "Black women
can fly" – Pilate is the embodiment of that image. But the flying is in
Morrison’s text not just a metaphorical expression of black women’s
spirituality; it is rooted in ancient belief and folklore. Pilate has inherited the
gift to fly – which, according to certain legends, was only given to those who
knew the secret word. The absence of a navel isolates her, ensuring both fear
and respect, but it also brings her close to the flying ancestor. It sets her free
from the conventional relationships, free to define the values according to which she will live, to design a life of her own, and to interpret on her own terms and unequivocally, the particular legacy of her people.

Milkman becomes the true descendants of Jake, the only son of Solomon, as he learns the myth of the Flying Africans – the reach and promise of the air, if he can ride it. When he actually sings the Song of Solomon, he acquires the name that had been denied, without which he would be colourless and the land of his culture invisible to all. Milkman can now nurture others: Pilate, Ruth, Sweet, Jake, himself. Milkman returns home a changed person, persuades Pilate to return with him to Shalimar to bury her father’s bones. The Byrd’s house with its appropriate name delivers the last clue to the riddle, and this revelation must be shared with Pilate to whom it had initially been entrusted. She must be told of her mother’s name, her father’s wish to be buried where he belongs: at Solomon’s leap where his own father sailed off into the sky. Pilate can now let go off the burden of the bones. She and Milkman walk up to Solomon’s leap where they bury the bones and with it Pilate’s earrings with her name inside, the one word that her father wrote. Pilate is hit by a bullet intended for Milkman and in her moment of death we hear the ritual singing that occurred at Hagar’s funeral. Milkman sings, “Sugar girl don’t leave me hear” a song that holds the promise of flight to another world. Pilate’s final words are healing: “I wish I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (Song of Solomon, 336).

Constructed as an ancestor figure, as an embodiment of folk wisdom and natural pride, Pilate can fly without leaving the ground. As a bird, attracted by the glittering earrings near her crumpled body, swoops down and
soars away with the locket, Pilate achieves symbolic flight. She experiences the full meaning of her ancestry among the Flying Africans, and of her name. In addition to wholeness of identity, Pilate achieves at last her rightful, celestial place. She is an affirmation of life and love. Her philosophy is directly opposite to that of Guitar, who would kill the innocent out of a perverted sense of love for an abstract concept:

“You want my life?” . . . “You need it? Here.” Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees – he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Song of Solomon, 337)

In the concluding section, each gesture and act are the re-enactment of familiar rites and rituals, and Milkman’s leap, the fulfillment of a dream, is an act of faith in the legacy, an act of communion with Pilate, and with his flying ancestor. Milkman’s and Pilate’s deeds will generate new songs as songs generate deeds in an uninterrupted act of creation. The long voyage in the land of ancestors, exploring their dreams and frustrations, their failures and triumphs, is also the story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and to keep it alive. Song of Solomon is a touching statement on the survival of the legacy and on the legacy of survival; on the power of memory, collective memories kept alive through names, stories, words and songs; on the power of music that accompanies all the rituals of life, from birth to death, and through which feelings and the totality of experience are expressed. Transmitted orally from mouth to mouth and ear-to-ear, the legacy endures; the secret is revealed; yet the secret remains.
The representation of the ancestor is comparatively complex in *Tar Baby*. First the setting:

The choice of a French colonial island setting . . . . allows her to move beyond the boundaries of the United States to explore ‘the cultural divisions that exist within the Diaspora’, and to suggest the parallel pasts which have shaped African American and Caribbean peoples and the shared characteristics of different national colorizations. (24)

Secondly, the Biblical context: the novel’s epigraph is from 1, Corinthians, a plea for unity in strife, and which along with the dedication creates “a sense that the house preserving its true and ancient properties is in apposition to asses and report on the community contentions”. (25) The concern with the individual and the collective, which we notice since *The Bluest Eye*, continues, may be with greater intensity, in projecting the location of the ancestor in the midst of cultural contestation.

*Tar Baby* chronicles the tale of a beautiful black American girl caught in the complex struggle of defining her African self in Western letters. Jadine Childs –sophisticated, modern, educated – works as a fashion model in New York city. Her euro-centric education has all the while guarded her against any cultural differentiations, which might crop from her African American self. Her comfortable existence in a self-created Euro-centric world is suddenly challenged when she steps into a Caribbean island. The island as a designated cultural space seems to mock at the beautiful Jadine whose beauty is not naturally born but has been acquired and defined by that which is alien or which is ‘other’ and whose achievement witnesses the rejection of her own
past, her own African self, her own African culture. Although Jadine is educated in art history, she fails to recognize the beauty and the utility of the traditional African masks as art objects with cultural significance, and, rather appreciates Picasso. Her inability to recognize the significance of her own culture proves her ignorance about the African self resulting from her immersion in the Euro-centric, which has taught her all about that which prompts derecognition of her roots. Jadine fails to understand Michael, her industrialist master’s son, when he presents his point of view regarding matters of cultural affiliation and he fails in his effort to convince her of the importance of knowing one’s own history. She pursues a course in art history that acquaints her with something in which the place of her own historical and cultural self remains ever missing:

... we quarreled. About why I was studying art history at the snotty school instead of – I don’t know what. Organizing or something. He said I was abandoning my history. My people”. “Typical”, said Valerian. “His idea of racial progress is. All Voodoo to the people.” “I think he wanted me to string cowrie beads or sell Afro combs. The system was all fucked up he said and only a return to handicraft and barter could change it. That welfare mothers could do crafts, pottery, clothing in their homes, like the lace makers of Belgium and Viola! Dignity and no more welfare”. Jadine smiled. (26)

Jadine’s inability to appreciate her own culture grows from an uncompromising need to establish her self as a Euro American that makes her laugh at Michael’s appreciation of the African art of pottery making.

When Valerian mockingly calls African pottery, ‘calabashes of the Dark Ages’, Jadine joins the fun, unable to understand the significance of calabashes as cultural objects within the African world view. Valerian’s association of calabashes to the Dark Ages does more than undermine African art, as he intended; it rather uplifts the ancient value of African art. The art of
making calabashes is an old African art; the Yoruba mythology believes that the universe was created by Olodumare, the supreme deity, with the very ‘ase’ which is kept in a calabash. This calabash belongs to Esu Elegbara, the divine ancestor or trickster figure or the messenger of Gods who figures prominently in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba and Haiti, among others. In *The Signifying Monkey* Henry Louis Gates, Jr., translates ‘ase’ in various ways:

\[\ldots\text{the ase used to create the universe I translate as “logos”, as the word as understanding, the word as the audible, and later the visible, sign of reason. \ldots It is the word with irrevocability, reinforced with double assuredness and undaunted authenticity.” (27)\]

According to Gates, Jr., “ase is power” which propagates itself. (28) Esu carries this ‘ase’ that contains power in his calabash. Various Yoruba sculptural representations of Esu almost always include a calabash in his hands. Esu’s mastery of ‘ase’ gives him an immense amount of power.

Jadine’s failure to recognize the calabashes as a signifier of her ancestral roots emphasizes her affiliation with Euro-American ‘urban and high’ culture. Her diasporic existence has led her to adopt a way of life similar to that of Valerian Street and Margaret that she assumes to be the only route to a life of progress in terms of social, financial and cultural advancement. When Jadine laughs at Valerian’s comments on the Calabashes, she is also ashamed of the present day black artists in Europe: “Little matches of embarrassment burned even now in her face as she thought of all those black art shows mounted two or three times a year in the states.” (*Tar Baby*, 72) What most pained her is the pretension of these black Euro artists rather than their lack of talent. In her efforts to describe herself in Euro American terms, what she resists most is the African self within, which is ashamed at the comment of a
white American, Valerian, on black art. – a self which is able to accept the black artist’s lack of talent but is unable to withstand their “mimicry”. (Tar Baby, 72) Her existence gets trapped between a present that she artfully directs and a past that though she resists yet pulls her towards her roots.

As Jadine’s identity is white constructed, she must become aware of her black roots and identity, and one of the primary functions of the ancestor figure – “the woman in yellow” is to serve as Jadine’s mental guide in her search for her ‘authentic’ cultural identity. Jadine meets this woman in yellow in one of her dream like visions and this woman is the ancestor figure who can be associated with Esu Elegbara, the timeless, genderless, mythic figure. The woman in yellow is a dark skinned African woman who has “too much hip, too much bust”. (Tar Baby, 42) The suggestion in the description is of an indeterminate and insatiable sexuality, which according to Gates, Jr. are the qualities of Esu. (29) Ogundipe, an Yuroba scholar, writes that Esu

Certainly is not restricted to human distinctions of gender or sex; he is at once both male and female. Although his masculinity is depicted as visually and graphically overwhelming, his equally expressive femininity renders his enormous sexuality ambiguous, contrary, and genderless. (30)

The description of the woman carrying aloft three white eggs in the tar-black fingers of her hand invites a symbolic reading; number three being masculine and held by a female body of ‘overwhelming sexuality’ signifies Esu’s role as the perpetually copulating copula who serves to reinforce the linkage, or mediation. In the Ifa myths of origins of writing and speaking, Esu mediates the distance between speaking and writing, i.e., Esu mediates the distance between oral and written narrative. The African woman in yellow serves a similar linkage for Jadine, who felt that Michael had forced her to apologize for “liking Ave Maria better than gospel music” (Tar Baby, 72) Jadine recalls,
how, when she was a college student pursuing a course in art history, she was questioned by Michael, who felt as well as claimed that Jadine was abandoning her African American history and people. But she knew, as she tells Valerian, that the life she was living was not “all grits and natural grace” as Michael thought. *(Tar Baby, 72)* She in turn openly asserts her belief in the superiority of European art by telling Valerian “The fact that he (Picasso) was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers.” *(Tar Baby, 72)*

Part of Morrison’s narrative strategy is to undermine Jadine’s elitist attitudes and put her in vital contact with her African American roots; and Morrison’s narrative does this on one of the most significant days in Jadine’s life – the day she learns her photograph has been selected for the cover of Elle magazine and that she has passed her oral examinations in art history. In order to arrange a celebration dinner on her success, Jadine goes for shopping in a Paris grocery store where she envisions a tall, dark-skinned African woman, whose skin is ‘tar like’ against her long canary yellow dress. The woman in yellow conveys the power and pride of the African woman, as she walks down the aisle “as though her many-coloured sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor.” *(Tar Baby, 42)* She moved about the market with flair, catching everyone’s attention with her manner, stature and bearing. She glanced back in disdain in the direction of Jadine and spat. Her brazen gesture may be taken to mean a deliberate insulting of the American black woman whose heart and traits contradicted her hue. Jadine felt disturbed as she wishes for a bonding with what she regarded was her African sister. The black woman in the Paris market represented ethnic pride in the diaspora. This confrontation with ethnic pride at a moment of her ‘success’ jolts Jadine and what she confronts in the
African woman carrying aloft three white eggs in tar black fingers of her right hand, are fertility, power, vitality and maternity, all that she has eschewed in her pursuit of Euro American values. The awe-struck Jadine stares at the African woman’s ‘transcendent beauty’ - “that woman’s woman – that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty” *(Tar Baby, 43)* that made her feel ordinary, “lonely and inauthentic” *(Tar Baby, 45)*

Jadine’s confrontation with the vision of her ancestor, that makes her feel inauthentic, puts her in vital contact with her ‘authentic’ black cultural roots. The African woman in yellow is again the ancestor Esu one of whose vital functions is to mediate or establish a linkage between oral and written narrative for the endangered Jadine who is trapped in the ‘other’ and for whom recovery or reconstruction of historical experience and cultural memory can take place only through such a linkage. What Jadine’s African American ancestors have brought to the New World from the African past, across the Middle Passage, are certain cultural aspects that are meaningful, that would not be obliterated, and that they chose by acts of will not to forget: their music, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order. Among these, the one ‘thing’ that recurs in black mythology and folk-tales in the African diaspora, is the trickster figure, or the trickster perspective of the ancestor figure, Esu. This ancestor figure protects and guides as Morrison states: “ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.”*(31)*

Reconstruction of historical experience and cultural memory is possible for Jadine if only she encounters her ancestor – “mother/sister/she” – Esu
Elegbara, the 'authentic' African woman who can recover, (re)construct and (re)member her historical and cultural memory by establishing a linkage between oral and written narrative. As mentioned earlier, Esu serves as the mediator for Jadine who is to be unorphaned through (re)membering her ancestral historical experience and cultural memory. The 'light-skinned' Jadine's cultural memory has lost its “tar (black) colour” as she has lost touch with “those aspects” of her African culture that have survived the dreaded Middle Passage along with her (African) ancestral fathers/mothers. The African woman in yellow signifies the chief value of African World view – power, vital energy, or dynamism; “the most fruitful life has the most power and harmony”.(32) On her day of ‘success’ Jadine has been judged by Esu and found unworthy and this undermines her pride. Esu insults Jadine by spitting at her for the ancestor demands that Jadine retracts from the path of following the Euro centric, stop performing an identity, and recognize her real black self and associate with ‘that’ which is African – imbibe within the ‘power’ to survive in ‘harmony’ in the New World as a trickster figure. ‘Power’ and ‘harmony’ are the two characteristics of Esu and Jadine has to understand and educate herself in her own history to know about Esu, the trickster figure, who has survived the Middle Passage and now resides in the cultural memory of the African Americans without repressing his black African identity. Jadine, through imbibing in herself the characteristics of Esu, has to reconstitute the connection with the culturally ‘authentic’.

The Tar woman in African mythology symbolizes the womanly power of holding things together. Morrison reclaims this ancient property in her ancestor figure in this novel. Jadine’s identity is self-constructed but in terms
of the Euro American worldview. Jadine has to recover and re-constitute her authentic black cultural self; in the process she has to bridge wide gaps in terms of both time and space. She has to re-negotiate the historical passage and understand the importance of the culturally abiding and the significance of place as it always has been traditionally for the Africans. In the search for true cultural identity Jadine is propelled by Son who is to serve as her guide. The relationship between Son and Jadine, especially their all consuming love evolves from a complex conflicting, opposing and contesting existence. The contestation of dark / light; primitive / modern; nature / culture; animality / sophistication; Eloe / New York City operates as the structural principle in pulling Jadine towards Son. Though Jadine at first regards Son as an animal because he has smelled her (Tar Baby, 122) and believes that Valerian had made the mistake of regarding Son as civilized as himself, and that the reason of this mistake was “because he didn’t smell” him (Tar Baby, 121), the hatred gradually dissipates when Son washes away his dirt and becomes stunningly attractive (Tar Baby, 106). The Jadine-Son relationship focuses on the challenge that the twentieth century African American faced: “the challenge to retrieve a distinct black cosmology and historical perspective that too often have been ignored or forgotten.” Morrison continues:

There is a new, capitalistic, modern American Black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. To produce Jadine, that what it was for. I think there is some danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past.”(33)

Jadine is an orphan in that she does not enter into relationships unless it serves her in some way: she speaks about Valerian for he has put her through school but she is disinterested in his welfare; Ondine and Sydney are people whom she uses a little bit. Dislocation and cross-cultural relationships have turned
Jadine into one whose sense of self is based upon a denial of her own cultural heritage and an identification with one that is alien, not her own. The sudden presence of Son in the Street household serves as a cautionary warning for Jadine who tries to define herself against her real self and her cultural past in the interest of self-fulfillment, as his presence throws the proud model in total disarray. It is Son who smells Jadine and makes her aware that there is something in her “to be smelled”, something he has ‘discovered’ and ‘smelled’ and that cannot be disguised by her sealskin coat or expensive jewelry. (Tar Baby, 122) Jadine recognizes in herself a quality similar to Son – namely, his smell – her animalistic sexuality, which cannot be disguised by her Euro American urban and high-culture symbolized by the coat. Though Jadine and Son are sexually attracted to each other, though they love each other and spend some moments of exclusive joy and togetherness in New York City, yet each confronts the inability to live in the other’s world. Jadine says that while he has been on the run hiding from law, she has been “learning how to make it in this world.” (Tar Baby, 266) Son envisions New York City as a place where “black girls cry” – a place which distances one from her own culture:

Now all he needed to know was where were the old people. Where were the Thireses and Gideons of New York? . . . It depressed him, all their crying, for it was silent and veiled by plum lipstick and the thin gay lines over their eyes. Who did this to you? Who has done this thing to you? (Tar Baby, 217)

Jadine, for her part, thought New York as her home with an orphan’s delight:

“This is home. The city had gone on to something more interesting to it than the black people who had fascinated it a decade ago, but if ever there was a black woman’s town, New York was it.” (Tar Baby, 223) Son is from Eloe, “an black town in Florida”, and Jadine is from Baltimore, Philadelphia, and
Paris. While he values the nurturing aspects of home, she is rootless and places greater value on what she can own. Yet as the tar baby, Jadine initially lures Son to herself: “Staring at a heart-red tree desperately in love with a woman he could not risk loving because he could not afford to lose her.” (Tar Baby, 221-22)

Son’s insistence that they go to Eloé, his ‘home’, is what brings their relationship to a complete disarray. It is in Eloé that the strangest cautionary warning is served to Jadine by Esu via Son: the small room in Eloé in which she spends her nights appears to her as “a cave, a grave or the dark womb of the earth.” While Jadine attempts to come closer to Son in that room she is stopped by the night women of Eloé –

Cheyenne (Son’s dead wife) got in, and then the rest: Rosa and Thirese and Son’s dead mother. . . . Ondine and Soldier’s Wife Ellen and . . . . her own dead mother and even the woman in yellow. All there crowding into the room. Some of them she did not know, recognize, but they were all there . . . . They each pulled out a breast and showed her. ‘I have breasts too,’ she said or thought or willed . . . .(Tar Baby, 260)

These night women are a group of Esu devotes or they can be read as the ancestral figures who subsume into Esu as “Esu is figured as paired male and female statues, which his / her devotes carry while dancing, or as one bisexual figure. Often she holds her breasts in the female figures.” (34) These women or representatives of Esu signify Jadine’s familial past, her historical tradition and cultural heritage that she either rejects or fails to recognize. In rejecting Esu, she rejects her ancestral mother, the very source that could teach and nourish her. Jadine is unable to bridge the cultural gap between what the ancestral women represent and who she is; she fails to recognize ‘that’ which
can heal and affirm her sense of self; ‘that’ which can make her ‘authentic’ as the African woman in yellow whose beauty is all transcendent.

Jadine also refuses to recognize her ‘ancestral mother’ Therese with her ‘magic’ breasts, who can be read as the “wise Woman guardian” who directs and guides the path of the younger generation. Therese represents that which the Euro American Jadine lacks – the ancestral power of being able to “hold things together”, to be able to nurture and to build at the same time. While Son appears to Jadine as unclean and the self-degrading black, Thirese imagines him as one of the legendary horsemen from the island hills who have come to rescue the cultural orphan Jadine who distanced herself from her African culture and past. As Son gets entrapped by the “yalla” beauty, awestruck by the fashion photographs of Jadine, which show her with her mink-coloured eyes and open, wet lips, - “he had not wanted to love her because he could not survive losing her. But it was done. Already done and he was in it; stuck in it and revolted by the possibility of being freed” (Tar Baby, 303), Therese urges him to free himself from Jadine for “there is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties.” (Tar Baby, 308)

The geographical and cultural difference between Jadine and Son has caused the inability of each to live in the others world. Son attempts to reestablish Jadine in African terms when he states, “you didn’t know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. You find out about me, you educated nitwit!” (Tar Baby, 267) Now that the African Americans can chose whether or not they wish to be ‘black’, Morrison feels it necessary that they be cautioned about the danger of ‘killing their ancestors’. The necessity that the black woman understands the role of
not just a mother but also a parent, as a sort of an umbrella figure, a culture bearer, is reflected in Son’s cautionary words:

. . . why don’t you ask me to help you buy a house and put your aunt and uncle in it and take that woman off her feet. Her feet is killing her, killing her, and let them live like people for a change, like the people you never studied, like the people you can’t photograph. . . They are the ones who put you through school, woman, they are the ones . . . They worked for him (Valerian) all their lives. And you left them down there with him not knowing if they had a job or not. You should cook for them. What the hell kind of education is it that didn’t teach you about Gideon and Old Man and me. Nothing about me! (Tar Baby, 267)

Jadine’s refusal to take care of her surrogate parents, Sydney and Ondine articulates the dangerous side of a diasporic existence. Morrison’s concern for the black people who deny taking care of their elders, which she calls “killing of the ancestors”, is foregrounded through Jadine’s success in defining herself in almost opposite terms, as that of an American woman. Her success is articulating and holding on to a new definition of black female identity is made to depend heavily on an unfeeling attitude toward her “parents” who have raised her:

The truth is that while you were driving your car into your wife’s bed I was being educated. While you were hiding from a small-town Sheriff or some insurance company, hiding from a rap, a two-bit lawyer could have gotten you out of, I was being educated, I was working, I was making something out of my life. I was learning how to make it in this world. The one we live in, not the one in your head. Not that dump Eloie; this world. And the truth is I could not have done that without the help and care of some poor old white dude who thought I had brains enough to learn something! Stop loving your ignorance – it isn’t lovable.” (Tar Baby, 267)

Jadine’s viewpoint is that it is Valerian who has put her through school instead of Sydney and Ondine. It signifies that she is cut off from the truth; her vision and understanding are distorted. Jadine’s renunciation of Sydney and Ondine and her rejection of Son are part of her future-looking quest. She will not allow any cultural contestation to spoil her path; these night women cannot
rule out her future, to direct her to love, desire and preserve the ancient properties for "it isn't loveable".

Morrison's narrative provides Son an opportunity to choose 'whether or not he wishes to be black' – a choice either to 'join the twentieth century as a kind of half-person like Jadine' or to 'abandon it'. But Son is culturally aware enough to respect his ancient properties and hence it is he alone on the island who is concerned to know Therese's real name; who senses the magical quality of her breasts; who is capable of envisioning her as Esu, the ancestral guide, who will rescue him from the clutches of 'making it'. It is Therese who ultimately helps him to abandon the path of making it and adopt the path "to be" what he wants "to be": "Make it in New York. That's not life. I don't want to make it: I want to be it... I've lived all over the world, Jadine, I can live anywhere." (Tar Baby, 268) Prompted by her, the ancestral guide, Son acknowledges in the end his primary bond with Theresa and she guides him through the water to the Island, away from the made up life of Jadine.

Morrison's narrative is unable to resolve the cultural contestation that is raised in Tar Baby. The unresolved issue as to what distinguishes the African American from the Euro American, what defines the role of an African American is left open ended for the readers to choose from between the many options – whether to acknowledge a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery, and the body; a functional as well as aesthetic quality; an obligation to bear witness; and a journey through the pain of a historical experience that has all the while haunted them to a healing zone. According to Morrison, the defining role may be that of a "witness bearer" – for an essential part of her belief is that "the future is inextricably tied to the
past”. (35) Past experiences can help frame the future and not exist in a structure of opposition and it is again an awareness of the past as historical experience that binds the people together for they are the tar and it is only that tar which will help them to be both “ship and harbour” (36) in the voyage of life.

V

The concern with the ancestor, as it develops in the early novels, particularly in Song of Solomon and Tar Baby, assumes greater centrality and complexity in Beloved. This novel is immersed in history and memory – individual and collective. Afro America, Africa, the Middle Passage and slavery, with all the paralyzing experiences and stories of horror, come together to weave the tapestry. Use of African spirituality, myth and ancestral stories – handed down by the grandfather and the father constitute the base on which the story of Margaret Garner is fictionalized (37).

The American slave past is ‘that ghost which we have not entirely faced’ and the memory of that institution is ‘a haunted house’ we fear to inhabit.” This is how Ashraf H.S.Rushdy refers to what he feels to be the hesitation of the American intellectuals to deal with the issue of slavery. He goes on to say: “A domestic space haunted by a liminal apparition beyond the grave indicates the ways the past is not dead, but likewise not seen or acknowledged by all.”(38) The twin metaphors of the ghost and the haunted house are at the core of Beloved and to Morrison’s attempt in the novel to
represent that which has remained silent for far too long. Spread over the experiences of generations, *Beloved* depicts a central imaginary “presence” which holds the various events together in its attempt to give voice to that which resists voicing. The multivoiced narrative presents disparate perspectives which are, however, anchored by a presence shaped by rememory and articulated in remembrance, gaining presence in absence, and centered among decenteredness. The memory creates a center within the disordered experiences in its attempt to (re)member that which cannot be voiced in words, that which remains under the veil of shame, trauma and guilt, and yet cannot be erased if one has to redefine identity at both levels, the individual and the national. Defined by history, the self feels a compulsive urge to refocus itself in the present, which is possible only when the past and the present coalesce and illuminate each other. Morrison describes *Beloved* as a novel “about something the characters don’t want to remember; I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, White people don’t want to remember.”(39)

The novel opens with Sethe’s and Denver’s resistance to the power of history, to rememory the past. But ironically it is their very resistance that creates the unrepresentable horror of slavery in the baby ghost. To this is joined the discourse of Paul D, and the three discourses of the three inhabitants of 124 on Bluestone Road, flowing simultaneously and severally, constitute Morrison’s narrative of slavery. It begins with Sethe, originates from 124, retracing the absent presence of Baby Suggs, her children, Halle, the tombstone with the sole word Beloved on it and a town full of disgust. Sethe and Denver try to communicate with the phantom baby but it refuses, and yet
returns with vengeance with the arrival of Paul D, who brings the unspeakable past to the site of the present, 124, and thus provokes the power of the unnamable or the unnamed, challenging the very power of language and narrative to reconstruct and rememory history.

The baby ghost appears to Paul D as a red light and with what appears to him to be an anguished cry of pain. He feels the pain at 124, yet is unable to transform it into anything tangible, because he is yet unaware of the act of shame committed eighteen years earlier at this same spot. The moment Paul D gets to know that it is Sethe’s daughter, who was murdered in this house; the apparition resurfaces with renewed power and strength to reclaim the space it had vacated. The ghost reappears resisting Paul D’s intimacy with Sethe just after the carnival, which can be read as signifying the initiatory step toward building a new world within a new home, implying the much desired togetherness for Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, reversing the impact of slavery tearing apart the idea and the fact of a family. Paul D’s inability to articulate his shame and the trauma of slavery makes him feel unmanly, as he recounts his many failures, more so when compared with Sethe’s success in escaping alone. He, however, gathers the fortitude to face history, the horror of slavery, share Sethe’s, shame and guilt (of the murdered baby), to find a purpose in life, find a meaning for the traumatic experience and an answer to his question: “How much is a nigger supposed to take?”(40) He tells Sethe: “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (Beloved, 273). The ghost of the past, if not articulated, can be disremembered. Paul D’s inability to articulate his shame creates the “presence”, a phantom which is all powerful as it is fed by the powerful
unforgettable past of his own and of the thousands of black slaves whose voices mingle with his own. Fighting for a place within the society and community, Sethe and the daughter’s ghost scare him because he cannot confront the strong hold of love – love as defined by Sethe in her attempt to send her children to the other side. Slave life has deformed him to such an extent that the feeling of family bonding, love, security and home scare Paul D, makes him leave Sethe, her daughter, and the house. But once he opens the lid of the ‘tobacco tin, and lets the contents flow into his narrative:

It was sometime before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry open. (Beloved, 113)

Only then he is capable of facing the self, Sethe and the phantom, which springs from the contents of his concealed tin. At the end of the novel Paul D’s narrative reverses its route: from Sweet Home retreating to the cold house and then to 124: “His coming is the reverse route of his going” (Beloved, 265).

Denver’s discourse gives voice to a young girl’s need for ties, which are sustaining, comforting and consequently creative. She grows up carrying the burden of guilt imposed on 124 and its inhabitants by a community that stigmatizes Sethe’s love for Beloved as her crime. Even as a child she had witnessed the alienation of Baby Suggs from the community for Sethe’s act. Grandma Baby used to be her only company; the two women creating an almost closed world of their own, in pain and stigmatized. Isolated, frustrated and deeply wanting for some kind of bond, Denver envisions the baby ghost as someone who can be at once a sister and a friend. The sudden arrival of the Sweet Home man in 124, makes Denver feel lonelier as she can sense a strong
and strange bond between her mother and the man. She reveals her suffering caused by isolation and rejection and longs for the haunting presence of her mother’s shame, which only can, paradoxically, stop Paul D from loving Sethe. She describes the presence to Paul D as “lonely and rebuked” (*Beloved*, 13), - projecting her own self on to the specter. The sister – girl phantom resurfaces after the carnival which provides her with a sense of belonging: “Nothing was out there that this sister – girl did not provide in abundance: a racing heart, dreaminess, society, danger, beauty.”(*Beloved*, 76) She enjoys the attention, longs to hold on to it, not letting it just pass away; feeding, washing, and watching over it as it slowly recovers from illness. Denver requires the absent sister to satisfy her libidinal needs as well as reach out beyond the individual to the societal, to the historical. A victim of the silenced and unspeakable past, she reconstructs the tale of shame and trauma to arrive at a sense of belonging, integrity, resisting disintegration. A process of telling and re-telling minimizes the trauma and heals the wound because the unspeakable is finally spoken:

Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it: there is this 19-year-old slave girl – a year older than herself – walking through the dark wood to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. Most of all she is by herself and inside her is another baby she has to think about too. Behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably; and certainly mossy teeth. She is not afraid at night because she is the colour of it, but in the day every sound is a shot or a tracker’s quiet step. Denver was seeing it now and feeling it –through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother (*Beloved*, 78).

Morrison’s political agenda has all along been to retreat how it felt to be a slave. Remembering, re-memory, and re-constitution have been the essential part of the dynamics of her fictional art.
As Denver eases herself through the agency of voicing, Sethe gets entangled in a web of complication with her construction of Beloved. The baby becomes all-powerful and Sethe, caught in its spell, is thinning, narrowing, and retreating into a self-created cocoon. Communicating with Sethe becomes more and more difficult and the living daughter is in the danger of being replaced by the dead one. In contrast to Denver’s and Paul D’s, Sethe’s narrative opens the tale, joins the other voices and retreats to silence, serving Morrison’s major purpose: the re-writing of slave history. But Sethe’s narrative paradoxically resists and at the same time reclaims the past as it negotiates the inability to represent the unrepresentable horror; the past is unforgettable though unutterable: a powerful existence, which is undeniable in the construction of the present. Sethe’s present is marked by the wounds of her slave past, and these she re-lives as Paul D arrives at 124. He brings with him ‘that’ which is unspeakable: the trauma of slave life never spoken of; especially to Denver, which is her best thing. After the carnival Sethe envisions her future with Paul D the man from Sweet Home whose strong hands can at last, take the responsibility of protecting her milk, which belonged to her children; to trust and remember things because the hands were there to catch her if she sank. And yet what disturbs her psychic integrity is the shameful secrets which neither knew about the other; to speak what, at present was to both of them unspeakable. It is their shared traumatic past and the inability to transform it into speech that brings them both towards and away from each other. As Sethe attempts to tell Paul D about the killing of her baby girl, to speak, what is, to her, unspeakable, she cannot convey and explain her powerful motherly love. Sethe’s inadequacy dissolves all distinctions violating
the presence with absence, the present with the past, reality from fantasy, evoking the baby ghost, which is identifiable with her powerful love. Rather than attempting to tell Paul D about the murder of the baby girl, Sethe envisions the presence, which is recognizable with her shame and trauma, trying to define that which is indefinable and unrecognizable for Paul D. The baby yields power fed by the powerful love of its mother: “For a baby she throws a powerful spell, said Denver. No more powerful than the way I loved her” (*Beloved*, 4), and for Sethe the baby ghost cannot be appeased as it is a ‘dark and angry’ response to a history of atrocity. Wrapped in black it rises from water, for the sea is the silent witness to the Middle Passage; in black she mourns the thousands dead, names the unnamed and gives shape to the absences in received history. Farther, the horror of slavery reflected in the physical deformity of Sethe, the chokecherry tree on her back is refigured in the cut mark under the chin of the baby ghost. Paul D’s appearance in 124 has added more to her past – “new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart” (*Beloved*, 95): the empty spaces in her memory of not knowing what happened to Halle was willfully filled by that which she could conveniently bear for long eighteen years. But he now brings definite information, which dreadfully proves Halle’s cowardice in his inability to protect her while schoolteacher’s nephews stole her milk (*Beloved*, 97). His attempt to count Sethe’s feet lead her to retreat to her best thing, and as the baby grows in power nourished more and more by the mother’s love, she retreats to a withdrawn existence trading the living for the dead.

The repression of the historical past is as psychologically damaging as the repression of personal trauma. Sethe is the embodiment of this repression
to its fullest. Through her, the novel remembers the victimization of the ex-
slaves and asserts the need for healing and wholeness that can be achieved by
living communal lives. For Morrison, the act of writing a novel is an act of
discovering deep within herself some relationship to a ‘collective memory’.
Memory itself is for the African Americans an instrument of survival. It is an
instrument, according to Morrison, that can be traced back to an African
heritage: its true what Africans say the ancestor lives as long as there are those
who remember. The arrival of the Sweet Home man (Paul D) and Beloved
forces Sethe to confront her past in her incompatible roles as a slave and as a
mother. Beloved is not only her repressed past, but also the ghost of every
mother lost in the Middle Passage who return as remembered. The whole idea
is based on the traditional African belief that the dead do return:

The dead come back, they come back when people die in a way that is not
understandable to them, or in a terrible or brutal manner, they come back
as babies. . . . If an individual has a traumatic – a really traumatic – death,
the dead do return. (41)

This truth is expressed by Sethe’s mother-in-law. Baby Suggs knows that the
reconstruction of the past makes possible a reconceptualisation of the future,
which is the power of history making. Though dead, Baby Suggs is from the
beginning to the end a felt and ‘seen’ presence in the narrative. Her image is
that of an old crippled woman, lying in bed, hovering between the memories
of an uneasy life and the certainty of a restless death. Baby Suggs does not
need to create a separate domain for community and spirituality; it is located
in her kitchen where there is no pretence of life lived without the ‘real work of
living’. Under Baby Sugg’s philosophy 124 came to be known as “a way
station”, a communal center:
... 124 Had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon. Talk was low and to the point – for Baby Suggs, holy, didn’t approve of extra. “Everything depends on knowing how much”, she said, and “Good is knowing when to stop.” *(Beloved, 86-87)*

Rather than shutting itself off in the privacy consistent with the ideal, 124 became a lively house with a life-giving kitchen at its heart with its communal domain. Before the ‘misery’, this center gave Baby Suggs the kind of power that allows her to lay down the rules: her home functions both for herself and the community – a place of shelter from the larger society as well as an expression of their communal power.

Moreover, the religion that binds this community upholds the philosophy that “human life is holy”. It centers not on a benevolent patriarchal God but on an ex-slave, a grandmother / mother who does not tell others that they are “the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure”. *(Beloved, 88)*. Baby Suggs knows that they need to be commanded to a bit of selfishness: to love their “flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass”, because “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.” *(Beloved, 88)* According to Baby Suggs, it is this hatred of black flesh that allows white people to claim it. They are able to take the self it encloses for their domain, as Sethe realizes:

> Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that come to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself any more. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. *(Beloved, 251)*

Baby Suggs knows that before being fit for any more self-sacrifice, an ex-slave community living in alien territory needs this love of their own flesh. For
that alone will allow her people to claim ownership of themselves, as Sethe
does in her twenty-eight days of freedom: “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the
clearing, along with the others, she claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one
thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” *(Beloved, 95)* But
the community was unwilling to accept Baby Sugg’s love freely. When “they”
– the white men – came into the yard of 124, her belief in the amazing grace
that seemed to make her home overflow in a feast of five thousand disappears
suddenly. As Baby Suggs stands in the field, sensing the town’s disapproval,
she feels she has broken her own rule of “knowing when to stop”. Subsequently she also knows: “Her friends and neighbors were angry at her
because she has overstepped, given too much, offended by excess.” *(Beloved, 138)* This refusal of her love marks Ella and the community as being unable to
claim the freedom of love. What Baby Suggs sees is that “the heart that
pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the word”, all these things that she had
been working to get the community to love in themselves seemingly “didn’t
count. They came in her yard anyway . . . The white folk had tired her out at
last.” *(Beloved, 180)* Thus, when Sethe argues against her on the side of the
white man, saying, “They gave you this house”, Baby Suggs answers,
“Nobody gave me anything” *(Beloved, 244)*. The white man’s coming into her
yard has made Baby Suggs aware that her communal domain never mattered:
the spiritual unity of the town which once seemed to have rested on Baby
Sugg’s shoulders, but now the community refused to go where she was
leading them. Hence, they remain the missing descendants of the missing
ancestor in an absent homeland.
After Baby Sugg’s death, the family within 124 struggles to create a self-sufficient unity devoid of outside community and entrapped by the memory and the haunting pain of slavery in the form of Beloved. Denver realizes that her mother is wasting away. Sethe’s loss of psychic integrity forces Denver to reach out to the community and reclaim her space in it. She remembers the final words of Grandma baby: “Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle, it’s a rout”. As she stands on the steps, Denver is visited by Baby Sugg’s ghost:

. . . then Baby Suggs laughed. . . . “you mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can’t walk down the steps? My Jesus my.”

But you said there was no defense.

“There ain’t.”

Then what do I do?

Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on. (Beloved, 224)

“Know it”: implies historical knowledge, if it isn’t the defense, is at least the only way to integrity. It is a knowledge of the larger collective – of her father, her mother, her grandmother, Carolina, Sweet Home, slavery. It is understanding the forces of slavery that compelled her mother / all the slave mothers to do what she / they did. She follows her grandmother’s advice and leaves the yard. The community, in turn, finds in Denver’s expression of need the ties forged by Baby Suggs. It is Ella, who initiates the exorcism of Beloved; for Ella like the matured Denver, has outgrown the need to dwell on the past:

Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe’s crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even thought; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind.
And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out. (Beloved, 256)

The women led by Ella do what they refused to do at Sethe’s arrest; they form a “cape of sound” to wrap around her “like arms to hold and steady her on her way” (Beloved, 152). Upon making this effort they see the ghosts of their young selves on the lawn, with Baby Suggs “laughing and skipping among them, urging more” (Beloved, 258). Baby Suggs’s ghost, once again teaches the wideness of love, and they are now ready to carry her love on.

In the penultimate scene of the novel, Paul D’s desire to perform an act of ritual cleansing when he plans to bathe Sethe, as if in an act of exorcism, to silence the ghost of history. He wants to clean her of her messy past as Sethe’s response is complete withdrawal: “Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water? And count my feet? She asks him.” (Beloved, 272) Exhausted by the efforts of telling and knowing that “There’s nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe” – she has done the painful telling all by herself just as she did eighteen years back running away all by herself. Sethe is the mother and daughter – the embodiment of abandonment – her sense of loss for both her mother and her child, both of whom are captured in her last words – “She left me” – “She was my best thing.” (Beloved, 273) Sethe’s narrative retreats to silence. Her discourse is now absorbed in silence: memory can be disremembered but not erased, like the footprints at the back of 124, “they always come and go” and anyone who happens to place his feet on them, will fit; and as one retreats they disappear again as though “nobody ever walked there”. Along with the silence comes the prospect of reconciliation at the level of the personal: both have negotiated a painful history and Paul D now hopes to place his story next to hers. (Beloved, 273) The reunion implies
reconciliation, imposed by silence and speech, on their shameful past in order to survive both the past and the present – “she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast.” (Beloved, 273) Paul D finally realizes that Sethe’s shame is bearable because it is his as well.

“The dead do return” – believe the Africans. Beloved, the ghost is memory: for Sethe, she resurfaces from the water as it connects her with Sethe’s mother and all the suffering of the Middle Passage, with all that was lost in it and all that survived; for Denver, she is a lonely wandering girl sitting on the porch in the quest for body, meaning and communion; for Paul D, Beloved recreates herself subsuming in her the contents of the tobacco tin, the opening of which makes possible his reunion with Sethe and the placing of his story next to hers. For the community, Beloved’s meaning and presence is defined by the three discourses joining its own, in an attempt to complete the quilt, tracing in its totality the experience of a nation, its shame, trauma and strength.

Sethe’s process of healing in Beloved, her process of learning to live with her past, becomes a model for the readers who must confront Sethe’s past as part of their own past, a collective past that lives right “there”, the present where they live. In Beloved, Morrison negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well. This work challenges the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of segregation. Morrison uses memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing. In this process of healing the central role is played by the
ancestor figure, Baby Suggs. Just as Esu, the African ancestor, is a liberator of
the slaves and an enemy of the enslavers, so is Baby Suggs whose chief
purpose after being liberated is to conduct rituals outside in the Clearing, a
place that signifies the necessity for a psychological cleansing from the past
and to heal former slaves and enable them to seek a reconciliation with their
memories of slavery even after the experience of slavery has ended. According
to the principles of Yoruba, there exist, simultaneously, “three stages of
existence: the past, the present, and the unborn. Esu represents these stages,
and makes their simultaneous existence possible, ‘without any contradiction’”.
(42) Baby Suggs plays a similar role as Esu in her efforts to heal Sethe of her
past, to help Sethe live in the present when she is unable to confront the ‘spite’
of 124 Bluestone Road – “we could move, she suggested once to her mother-
in-law. What’d be the point? Asks Baby Suggs, Not a house in the country
ain’t packed with rafters with some dead Negro’s grief”(Beloved, 5), to help
Denver step out of the porch in order to build her future. The African ancestor
Esu is both timeless and spaceless. Baby Suggs, though long dead, before the
narrative begins, her strong presence throughout the narrative can be felt; she
operates from the world of the dead as well as when she is alive as a ritual
guide. Thus, Baby Suggs is the Esu, ancestor figure, who is timeless as well as
spaceless.
VI

In *Jazz* Toni Morrison dramatizes the experience of that generation of African Americans, who were born after Emancipation, and for whom a defining experience of dislocation has been the migration from the South to the North, from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North, to seek both refuge and a new way of life. The familial past of Joe and Violet is set against the bleak conditions in the South: segregation, exploitation of black labour by the white landowner, miserable wages, brutal evictions from land and house, the injustices and deceptions practiced on people deliberately kept illiterate. One of the ways to escape the horror and the suffering in the South was to go North. The emancipated African Americans ‘train-danced’ their way, like Joe and Violet Trace, to the exuberant, but also dangerous, world of the northern city. In line with the cultural and artistic labour of her earlier novels, Morrison here shows what the city “meant” to the second and third generation ex-slaves and what ‘defined’ freedom. Her notions of ‘becoming’ African American, as told in this novel, seem almost to emanate from an altogether different expressive tradition. In *Jazz* her focus is on the black migrants’ rediscovered feeling of pride, self-ownership and freedom. In the process of representation the novel also expresses the shame and rage as well as the impact of internalized racism on the construction of identity.

The central protagonists in *Jazz* are driven and determined, in large part, by their troubled pasts and while Morrison depicts the unexpected violence of black city life, the narrative keeps shuttling between alternative spaces, the city and the country, the ‘neighbourhood’. The depiction of city pride derives in part from Morrison’s attempt to convey how the black
migrants felt about the city and the desires of the ex-slaves and the generations

That kind of fascination, permanent and out of control, seizes children, young girls, men of every description, mothers, brides, and barfly women, and if they have their way and get to the city, they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were. Nothing can pry them away from that; the city is what they want it to be. (43)

Like million others, Joe and Violet migrate from the South on their way to the

City of refuge –

They weren’t even there yet and already the city was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for the first sight of the city that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back. (Jazz, 32)

This sets up the novel’s major theme: the impact of their recent move on the psyche of a people. The ‘earlier’ move, since the early seventeenth century, had taken place on black slave ships from a land beyond the sea. Now it is a journey from the rural South – which for many of the uprooted had begun to feel like home (Jazz, 11) - to a new unknown location in the industrial North; though not as traumatic as the Middle Passage, it yet is a profound experience of displacement. It changed them and the way they looked at the world around them.

Morrison’s narrative keeps shifting constantly along the axes of time and place. It alternates between the Violet and the Joe that was, in the country, and the Violet and Joe that is, the selves whose psyche has been formed by her / his twenty years in the city, so that people call her / him “Violent”; Violet for she had tried to cut the dead; Joe for he had killed his eighteen year old love because he was both happy and sad. The characters in Jazz are cross-connected in their troubled pasts. Dorcas is a city version and a repeat of the
deer-eyed Wild, the mother who orphaned her newly born baby, Joe, never looked at it or held it in her arms (*Jazz*, 170). Young Joe pines for a mother he can never find, and then discovers her in Dorcas in the city in 1926. Violet helps Joe escape the emptiness within himself in the post-Reconstruction South, in Vesper County, Virginia in 1893, as he fell out of a walnut tree into her life. (*Jazz*, 32). By marrying Violet, Joe rescues her from the dark memory of her mother Rose Dear, who had flung herself into a well in 1892. Orphan Joe’s story is interconnected with that of Hunter’s Hunter, who was present when Wild gave birth to Joe, and, as a father figure, taught him hunting skills and shaped his sensibility. The story of Hunter’s Hunter and Vera Louise Gray, the daughter of a rich, white landowner is again connected to the story of Violet and Joe, as Violet’s grandmother, True Belle assists Vera Louise to raise her baby Golden Gray, born of a slave father; and in turn, Golden Gray assists Wild at the birth of Joe. A brief involvement of Hunter’s Hunter with Vera Louise results in the birth of a boy with golden skin and gray eyes who at eighteen learns that his father was “a black skinned nigger”. (*Jazz*, 145) Inspired by True Belle, a servant of Vera Louise, Golden Gray journeys to Vienna to discover, and, kill his father. Violet’s is a tragic story of poverty and dispossession with an absent father and a mother who commits suicide. In *Jazz* Morrison’s narrative technique goes beyond maternal abandonment and rejection to include issues of inter- and intra-racial shaming and violence.

Bit by bit the narrative exposes family secrets as it reveals the familial and cultural origins of Violet’s troubled selfhood and dislocation. Like Violet, Joe also remains troubled by his past, and he too is a mother-haunted person. When told as a child that his real parents ‘disappeared without a trace’, Joe
thinks that he is the ‘trace’ his parents disappeared without, and thus when he discovers in school that he needs a surname, he calls himself Joseph Trace \((Jazz, 124)\). While Joe never solves the mystery of his parentage, one can surmise Joe’s family roots:

Then he looked right at Joe (not Victory). The low fire galvanized his stare. “You know, that woman is somebody’s mother and somebody ought to take care.”

Victory and Joe exchanged looks, but it was Joe’s flesh that cooled and his throat that tried and failed to swallow.

From then on he wrestled with the notion of a wildwoman for a mother. Sometimes it shamed him to tears. Other times his anger messed up his aim and he shot wild or hit game in messy inefficient places. A lot of his time was spent in denying it, convincing himself he misread Hunter’s words and most of all his look. Nevertheless, Wild was always on his mind, and he wasn’t going to leave for Palestine without trying to find her one more time. \((Jazz, 175-76)\)

Joe’s quest for Wild represents the search for family roots and the slave legacy leads to a painful confrontation with racial shame. Wild is depicted as primitive and uncivilized, a dirty, degenerate and animalistic creature:

Too brain-blasted to do what the meanest sow managed: nursed what she birthed. The small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn’t the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere.

There are boys who have whores for mothers and don’t get over it. There are boys whose mothers stagger through town roads when the juke joint slams its door. Mothers who throw their children away or trade them for folding money. He would have chosen any one of them over this indecent speechless lurking insanity. \((Jazz, 179)\)

And yet Joe desperately wants some sign of recognition from his mother, some acknowledgement that he is her son. Adult Joe lacks a secure foundation, “maybe he missed the sign that would have been some combination of shame and pleasure, at least, and not the inside nothing he traveled with from then on . . . “ \((Jazz, 37)\). He remains a mother-and-shame-haunted person who re-creates himself – once by self-naming – calling himself Trace, second by his relationship with Hunters Hunter who trains him to be
independent, third when his hometown Vienna, Virginia, is burned, “the fire
doing fast what white sheets took too long to finish; emptying us out of our
places so fast we went running from one part of the country to another – or
nowhere.” (Jazz, 126) For the fourth time, when Joe buys some land for his
bride, foolishly believing that the whites will allow him to keep it. “They ran
us off”, he recalls “with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed.” (Jazz, 126)

Like Joe, Violet remains haunted by her past. “Mama. Mama? Is this
where you got to and couldn’t do it no more?” (Jazz, 106) wonders the fifty –
year old Violet. Determined never to be like her mother, Violet recalls Rose
Dear’s paralyzed response to the legacy of slavery and racist oppression as she
commits suicide by jumping down a well, four years after True Bell’s arrival.
The speculations on the cause of Rose Dear’s suicide – the “final thing” that
she was unable to “endure or respect” – points to the daily humiliations and
catastrophic traumas suffered by African Americans in the post bellum South.

Had the last washing split the shirt waist so bad it could not take another
mend and changed its name to rag? Perhaps word had reached her about
the four-day hangings in Rocky Mount. . . . Or had it been the news of the
young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to a log, his grandmother
refusing to give up his waste-filled trousers, washing them over and over
although the stain had disappeared at the third rinse . . . . Or was it that
chair they tipped her out of? Did she fall on the floor and lie there
deciding right then that she would do it. Someday? (Jazz, 101)

Both Joe and Violet have spent most of their lives forgetting their past. By
1926, when the novel opens, Harlem seems to be the site of a new historical
epoch, “Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad
stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and
there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything’s ahead at last.”
(Jazz, 7) Despite the promise of Harlem to be post historical, Joe and Violet
find that the past comes along to haunt them, that they have to reckon with
“the sad stuff”, “the bad stuff”. Both yearn for some kind of connection with their previous selves, the country selves, in order to deal with the trauma brought on by migration and urban life. The middle aged Joe reviews his life, misses Hunters Hunter, the “savior figure’ who taught him hunting skills and shaped his sensibility, especially his protective regard for women; he was the one who connected his rootless life to Wild. For Violet, it is the grandmother, True Bell, a former slave, who rescues the family from despair and teaches them the lessons of laughter and survival. She is what Morrison has termed the “advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black Ancestor”(44), the tribal mother in whom rests the wisdom of the race. Having left Vesper County, Virginia, Joe and Violet hoped to leave behind past disappointments and dispossession and begin a new life. Cut off from childhood friends and other connection to his past life in the south, Joe urgently needs someone to listen to all of his unspoken dreams and memories. Violet, who suffers from her own psychological amputations, cannot fulfill this role, and so Joe places his awesome neediness on an eighteen-year-old self-absorbed young woman who reminds him of Wild, who perhaps is his mother. Joe shoots Dorcas in a moment of blind jealously and shame – rage, his act a response not only to Dorcas’ shaming rejection of him but also to his life long feelings of maternal rejection. Joe’s bizarre behaviour is shaped by his circumstances, and he does not ‘intentionally or with deliberation hurt Dorcas’; instead, when Dorcas rejects Joe, her rejection is a repetition of the maternal rejection he experienced in the past, and thus perhaps in shooting Dorcas, he discharges the pent-up misery and humiliation of his past.
Similarly when Violet walks off with a baby that she has agreed to watch; feels proud of the fact that she tried to kill a dead girl, her acts are described as “public craziness” which exhibits “her private cracks . . . .Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day” (Jazz, 22). Despite Violet’s denials, the memory of “the light . . . . that had skipped through her veins” when she held the light-skinned child occasionally comes back to her, and she sometimes imagines “a brightness that could be carried in her arms” and “distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well” (Jazz, 22). Violet’s mother-hunger drives her to buy a doll, which she hides under the bed and takes out in secret or sleeps with in her arms. As Violet sorts her conflicted feelings about Dorcas, she wonders,

Who lay there asleep in that coffin? . . . . . The scheming bitch who had not considered Violet’s feelings one tiniest bit, who came into a life, took what she wanted and damn the consequences? Or mama’s dumping girl? Was she the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled her womb? (Jazz, 109)

To Violet, who places a photograph of the dead Dorcas on the fireplace mantle in her parlor, the memory of the dead girl “is a sickness in the house – everywhere and nowhere” (Jazz, 28). It is significant that Violet’s healing, her ability to articulate herself occurs as a result of the bond she and Alice form after Dorcas’ death. Initially, Violet comes to Alice’s apartment to find out what Dorcas was like in an attempt to understand Joe’s betrayal, but instead finds herself growing attached to the dead girl and to Alice. Likewise, as Alice stitches up Violet’s frayed and torn dress, then her coat, she listens to her closely and repairs her own tattered sense of self. Together they figure out that “sisterhoods” are necessary between black women if they are to avoid becoming wild, armed, and dangerous. As Morrison observed in an interview
with Ntozake Shange, “What (black) women say to each other and what they say to their daughters is vital information” (45). Without this passing down of wisdom, the daughters/sons 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. Morrison’s novel dramatizes this predicament by presenting numerous instances of orphaned or abandoned children: Dorcas is raised by her aunt, Alice, after being orphaned; Sweet is raised by his aunt, Malvonne, but despite her best efforts, he joins a gang, robs postal boxes, and disappears from Harlem; Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, jumps in a well and drowns herself to escape her pain, and so Violet vows never to have children of her own; Joe’s mother is perhaps Wild – he never knows for sure – and his father is totally unknown, so Joe too does not want children of his own.

Dorcas too is driven by forces the city unleashes in her. Lacking the sustenance provided by nature and by the country, cut off suddenly from her mother’s nurturing love, strictly disciplined by her terrified aunt, Dorcas is a rebel, a wild creature of the city who takes in the intoxicating words of that “knowing” woman: “you got to get it bring it and put it right here or else” (Jazz, 60). The story of Dorcas reveals the tremendous impact the city makes on the young and the defenseless. It deludes them into believing that they are free to do what they want and get away with it. They do not realize the insidious “plans” of the well laid-out streets of the city that makes people do what it wants. The intoxicating rhythms of its music with its jazz beat never stop, they urge everyone everyday to “come and do wrong” (Jazz, 67). In “City Limits, Village values”, Morrison suggests that black writers always retain
respect for “community values”, for “village values”. And chief among these values, in her view, is the “advising, benevolent, protective, wise black ancestor . . . imagined as surviving in the village but not in the city” (46). Thus, lacking a wise ancestor, some turn for support to “leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods” (Jazz, 78). Others turn wild; for there’s no helping hand to rely on. They arm themselves with “folded blades, packets of lye shards of glass taped to their hands” (Jazz, 78) in order to attack, and to defend themselves from attack. Violet at fifty, aware that the place of shade without trees awaits her (Jazz, 110), sighs out her disappointment with life. It is Alice Manfred who tells her what to do: “don’t just accept life, but make it, make it in this world (Jazz, 113). Through what happened to Dorcas, Alice was taught, “just how small and quick this little bitty life is” (Jazz, 113) and that it doesn’t help to live in fear. Alice turns into the city version of True Bell, who taught Violet and her family how to survive with the truth that laughter is more serious than tears (Jazz, 113). Unlike Dorcas who allowed the City to shape her, Felice, urged on by the changed Violet, will not allow the world to change her self, but will make up her own world as the spring time suggests.

VII

With Paradise Morrison’s engagement with the ancestor seems to have come a full circle. Her concern in this novel is with the dangers of exclusivity, with living too much in the past, and in history. In Jazz she had explored the
theme of the necessity of making the past and the present exist simultaneously, intermeshing to achieve the necessary balance, for a future worth its name. In *Paradise* she retraces the role that the ancestor and the ancestral have played in her fiction in the representation of cultural memory. The emphasis is on achieving the necessary balance, as the positioning of the protagonist is problematised. As Jill Matus says: “The community of the all black town, once called Haven, later Ruby, has memorialized its history in a way that threatens its capacity to adapt and respond to the present.” (47)

*Paradise* is the tale of two communities existing as neighbours yet in mutual exclusion: Ruby and the Convent. It is set in the 1970s yet takes the narrative back to the 1890s in tracing the history of the town and its people. At the core of the history and its retelling are the figure of Zechariah Morgan as the link with the ancestor and the oven as a symbol of the ancestral ideas and stories. It is also a story of migration. Morrison states:

> During Reconstruction, which occurred after 1865 . . . there was a lot of migration of black people. They built towns, and in some places – particularly the West – they were very well organized and prosperous. There were over 100 black towns in Oklahoma, with their own banks, schools and churches – beautiful buildings. (48)

*Paradise* is the story of one such migration and relocation of the community and the role of the spirit of the ancestor in charting the course.

The narrative operates at two levels: the confrontation between the men of Ruby and the women of the convent, and the many recollections which retrace the link between the present and the past, between the various stages of the migrations, going as far back as to include Africa as an ultimate point in the process of recollection, as is evident in the conversation between Reverend Misner and Patricia:
“Africa is our home, Pat, whether you like it or not.”
“I’m really not interested, Richard. You want some foreign Negroes to identify with, why not South America? Or Germany, for that matter. . . . Or is it some kind of past with no slavery in it you’re looking for?”
“Why not? There was a whole lot of life before slavery. And we ought to know what it is. If we’re going to get rid of the slave mentality, that is.”
“You’re wrong, and if that’s your field you’re plowing wet. Slavery is our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa.”
“We live in the world, Pat. The whole world. Separating us, isolating us—that’s always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future.” (49)

Isolation from any source of community and kinship has been the primary consequence of slavery; the first thing that the slave owners did was to break connections. Misner argues for a reconnection at various levels for sustenance, and for him going beyond the experience of slavery is imperative and the idea of “home” has to be reconstituted, and home imagined in terms of an ancestral construct across time. Misner pleads:

“. . . can’t you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don’t mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and their, the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good! – there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that, Pat. That place. Who was God talking to if not my people living in my home?”
(Paradise, 213)

The place, the home, was Africa in all its traditional glory and pristine cultural entity, that from which the blacks were uprooted. This is where the sense of culture originated for Misner and for Morrison, and any wished for reconstitution of the sense of identity, of the self, for a contemporary African American, has to trace itself from this distant time and place, as has been Morrison’s political agenda for her people.
In *Paradise* Morrison encapsulates cultural history, across slavery, Reconstruction and the experience of the assertion of cultural identity that constitutes the thematic canvas of her fictional world. Morrison meditates on the idea of "where Paradise is, who belongs in it?" As Morrison explains:

Because only African-Americans were not immigrants in this rush to find a heaven. They had left a home. So they're seeking for another home, while other people are doing the same thing, except the other people were leaving a home that they didn't want to be in any longer, or couldn't be in any longer. Native Americans were being moved around in their home. Africans-Americans were looking for a second one and hopefully one that would be simply up to them, their own people, their own habits, their own culture, and to contain themselves in that. So it makes the motive for paradise a little bit different. (50)

As Morrison meditates on the idea of paradise – an African-American utopia that offers a safe haven from white contempt and persecution, the narrative depicts the founding in 1890, of the all-black Oklahoma town, Haven and the accounts of the struggles of the original founders of Haven – the Old Fathers. The story of the Old Fathers is, at once, a proud tale of group survival and an account of the trauma and humiliations suffered by Ruby's ancestors. "Extraordinary" people whose names were legendary – Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood, Du Pres – they had "served, picked, plowed and traded" in Louisiana beginning in 1755, when Louisiana included Mississippi, and then helped to govern in Mississippi and Louisiana during Reconstruction, from 1868 to 1875, only to be subsequently reduced to working as field laborers (*Paradise* 99). The twin Morgan brothers – Deacon and Steward – Ruby's bankers and the wealthiest citizens recall without failing every bit of the account of the hardships and struggles told by their grandfather, Zechariah Morgan. Zechariah's official and "controlling" (*Paradise*, 13) account of community history tells of the difficult and
humiliating journey on foot from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma by one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen: seventy-nine ex-slaves from nine large families plus those who join them. During their journey, they are again faced with rejection:

unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built. The headline of a feature in the Herald, “Come Prepared or Not at all,” could not mean them, could it? Smart, strong, and eager to work their own land, they believed they were more than prepared – they were destined. It stung them into confusion to learn they did not have enough money to satisfy the restrictions the “self-supporting” Negroes required. In short, they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders (Paradise, 13,14).

The founders of Haven responded to their “contemptuous dismissal by the lucky” with reactive pride, becoming “stiffer, prouder with each misfortune, the details of which were engraved into the twin’s powerful memories”(Paradise, 14). The narrative represents the “Disallowing” of the original wayfarers as the light-skinned blacks of Fairly, Oklahoma insult the dark-skinned travelers “in ways too confounding for language” (Paradise, 189). The root cause of this “contemptuous dismissal by the lucky”, is the colour prejudice of the people of the all-black town of Fairly. Ruby’s ancestors, the Old Fathers, have dark “8-rock” skin: they are “Blue-Black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them”. Ruby ancestors were the descendants of a people whose “worthiness was so endemic” that three of their children held elected seats in state legislatures and country offices during Reconstruction, they are a proud people who, after five “glorious years remaking a country”, were reduced to poverty because of their 8-rock skin
colour, and thus, they spent fifteen years – from 1875 to 1890 – “begging for sweat work in cotton, lumber or rice” (Paradise, 193).

Countering the “disallowing” by the light-skinned people of Fairly, Zechariah, the ancestral guardian of the 8-rock community, guides the original wayfarers in their search for the promised land. Moving with the helpless rejected, and lost wayfarers, Zechariah meets the “walking man with the satchel” – the ancestral spirit whose arrival is declared in the thundering footsteps, and, who is summoned by the humming prayers of Zechariah. The ancestral spirit guides him for twenty-nine days, leading the way to Haven.

“My father,” he said, “Zechariah here.” Then, after a few seconds of total silence, he began to hum the sweetest, saddest sounds Rector ever heard. (Paradise, 96)

“He is with us”, said Zechariah. “He is leading the way”. (Paradise, 97)

Nobody saw the walking man but Zechariah and sometimes a child. . . . When he was completely dissolved, they heard the footsteps again, pounding in a direction they could not determine: in back, to the left, now to the right. Or was it overhead? Then, suddenly, it was quiet. Rector crept forward; Big Papa was crawling too, to see what the walker had left behind. Before they had gone three yards, they heard a thrashing in the grass. There in the trap, bait and pull string undisturbed, was a guinea fowl. Male, with plumage to beat the band. Exchanging looks, they left it there and moved to the spot where they believed that walker had spread the items from his satchel. Not a thing in sight. Only a depression in the grass. Big Papa leaned down to touch it. Pressing his hand into the flattened grass, he closed his eyes.

“Here,” he said. “This is our place”. (Paradise, 98)

The place for the resettlement, for a reconstitution of the community, has been divined and marked out by the ancestor, almost a Moses figure in search of the Promised Land. It may be pointed out that since the early oral expressions, politics and religion were intertwined for the African Americans, as we notice particularly in the religious songs of the black slaves. To the 8-rock people who “coming from lush vegetation to extravagant space” might have felt
“small when they saw more sky than earth, grass to their hips”, Zechariah, Big Papa, the ancestral guide, Esu, mediates the message of the Ancestral guiding spirit:

an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders and without deep menacing woods where enemies could hide. Here freedom was not entertainment, like a carnival or a hoedown that you can count on once a year. Nor was it the table droppings from the entitled. Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king. (Paradise, 99)

After the location of the site for reconstruction, Zechariah and his people build a brick oven which functions as a community kitchen and becomes a symbol of communal nurturing and group solidarity. The oven, a witness of the slavery past of the Old Fathers, also serves as a visible reminder of their pride in the fact that none of their 8-rock women had worked in white kitchens as slaves, work that carried with it the likelihood of shaming of the slave kitchen workers and thus the tainting of pure African 8-rock blood. The words that Big Papa puts in the oven’s mouth memorializes the deep and enduring “scar” of being blue black for the inscription meant a “threat to those who had disallowed” the 8-rock people of Haven: “it must have taken him months to think up those words – just so – to have multiple meanings: to appear stern, urging obedience to God”. (Paradise, 195)

By 1949, Haven, “a dream town in Oklahoma territory”, becomes “Haven, a ghost town in Oklahoma State” (Paradise, 5) as the inhabitants are forced to move once again for survival. Determined to “repeat what the Old Fathers had done”, fifteen families move out of Haven and found Ruby in 1950 (Paradise, 16). In the process they face the same ‘disallowing’ that was meted out to their ancestors. What the Old Fathers pass down to their Ruby
descendants is their old system of inclusion and exclusion as the New (8-rock) Fathers decide to construct those who are non-8-rock as the inferior, degraded, impure other; they establish a blood rule to maintain a racial purity of their group and to solidify 8-rock identity. They choose to name the new found homeland after Ruby, the sister of the 8-rock Morgan twins, and in doing so, they memorialize the potentially lethal consequences of being viewed as an object of contempt – indeed as a racial “stain” a sign of impure racial identity (Paradise, 194) in a white dominated society, for Ruby dies in a nearby town on a waiting room bench in a hospital where the white doctors refuse to attend her. Except for Ruby, Delia and her infant, no one dies in Ruby, and the townspeople are “real proud about that believing they are blessed” (Paradise, 199) Like the original Haven founded by the Old Fathers, Ruby provides protection from the dangers lurking Out There:

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose – behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. (Paradise, 16)

Ruby was a protected town, where any woman could safely walk down the road at night since “nothing for ninety miles around”, yet Ruby views her as “prey” (Paradise, 8). But the Ruby men did not realize that the “dangers” were not exactly until they killed the five harmless women in a convent which becomes a reenactment of their oppressor’s victimization of the Other – that represents the very thing they were running from: the dismissive and inherently dangerous othering and demonizing of people considered different.
As the narrative unfolds in *Paradise* it makes an attempt to explain the present in terms of the past by glancing at the past lives of the characters. In an attempt to explain the othering and the massacre of the Convent women, the narrative recounts the stories of the five marginalized women who make up the all female society of the Convent. These stories interrelate with the stories of a wide cast of interrelated characters from Ruby's fifteen families. Ruby, with its complicated history, haunted by incidents of prejudice among ex-slaves themselves, is once more faced with the danger; this time from a group of women who gather in a convent to heal their broken lives and in the process seem to threaten the very existence of the town. The Convent women bear witness not only to the shameful secrets that haunt the proud and respectable 8-rock people, but also the secrets of their women who, had traversed the path between the convent and Ruby in times of trouble. The pregnant and deeply shamed Arnette is one of the women of Ruby, who came to the Convent in 1970 and after giving birth, abandoned her baby. When four years later, K.D. and Arnette get married, she once again walks to the Convent to claim back her baby, which she did not touch, look at, or enquire after birth, and which died within a few days of its birth. As she returns to the Convent on her wedding night, she accuses the Convent women of killing her child, and transfers unto them her own disavowed guilt and shame. Like Arnette, Sweetie Fleetwood refuses to acknowledge her desire to abandon her children and projects her own sinful desire also on the Convent women, who actually all the while care for her. Taken in at the Convent in distress, she ungratefully regards these women who care for her as demons and prays for deliverance from them. When reunited with her husband she tells him that the Convent
women had “snatched” her (*Paradise*, 130) and in doing so refuses to take the responsibility of her own wish to walk away from her children. Though some of the Ruby women, like Arnette and Sweetie have walked the road between Ruby and the Convent, they nevertheless hold on to their sense of 8-rock purity and respectability by depositing their shame at the door of the Convent. Like their women some 8-rock men have also walked the road to the Convent. Menus, the town drunk, had spent a few days at the Convent, where the women had cleaned his shit and vomit and listened to his sobs and curses; ironically, the convent women become the painful reminder of his own dirtiness. K.D. lured to the Convent by his love for Gigi, when kicked out by her, lays the blame on the Convent women, depositing his sense of shame at their door. Most significantly, Deacon Morgan, one of the New Fathers, who views the Convent as the entrance to Hell, once had a passionate affair with a Convent women: the green-eyed, golden-skinned Consolata.

While Ruby, the town, is patriarchal, the Convent is ruled by women profoundly hurt by men and running away from all sorts of trauma and not seeking the company of men. Mavis Albright, the first Convent women introduced in the novel – is at once a battered wife and the neglectful abandoning mother. Like Mavis, Gigi, demoralized by the experiences of Black Power movement, in which she witnesses the shooting of a well-dressed boy who spits blood into his hand to keep from ruining his glossy shoes, holds on to the story of a black man and woman “fucking forever” (*Paradise*, 63). What attracts Gigi to the town is a story she hears about a magical place near Ruby, beside a lake, where two fig trees grow together, entwined like lovers, a liminal space where the sacred-ecstatic and physical-sexual are conjoined.
The twenty-year-old Seneca, abandoned by her mother Jean, when she was just five years old believes her to be her sister. She finds her way to the Convent in 1973. Raised in foster homes, she is sexually abused by a foster brother and discovers the secret and shameful habit of self-cutting through the accident of being scratched by her abuser with a safety pin. A sweet girl who takes on the role of peacemaker between the warring Mavis and Gigi, Seneca secretly continues her act of self-cutting. Pallas Truelove is sixteen year old when she arrives at the Convent in 1974, and she too is a victim of sexual abuse and is a mother-abandoned child. Raised by her father, Pallas falls in love with Carlos and the two travel to New Mexico, where they stay with Pallas’s mother, Dee Dee. When Pallas discovers her mother and Carlos in the act of having sex, she drives off, is chased in a truck, forced off the road, and then raped. The green-eyed Consolata, with ‘tea-coloured hair’, was brought to the Convent by Mary Magna when she was nine years old. Though Consolata is endowed with magical powers, she feels orphaned after Mary Magna dies. Consolata’s encounter with the ancestral spiritual guide, the walking stranger is revealing. The stranger approaches her and as she asks him who he is, he replies, “Come on, girl. You know me.” Suddenly beside her without having moved, looking at her “full of secret full”, he removes his hat:

Fresh, tea-colored hair came tumbling down, cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He took off his glasses then and winked, a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes, she saw, were as round and green as new apples. (Paradise, 252)

Consolata is revitalized as she pays heed to her inner guardian, the ancestral guide, the young and seductive man, who like Consolata has green eyes and tea-coloured hair. This encounter initiates the Convent women into the occult knowledge of the ancestor and under the leadership of Consolata who
performs the role of the spiritual guide, they are helped to discover their "authentic self" – the divine part of the self hidden behind the socially constructed layers of personality. Under the ancestral guidance, the victimized Convent women, with a shameful past, are able to transcend easy social formulations. Under Consolata’s guidance, the Convent women come to meet the “unbridled, authentic self" \textit{(Paradise, 177)} presaged in their names: Albright, Grace, Seneca, and Divine Truelove.

In contrast to the Convent women, the Ruby men are unable to counter the colour prejudice of the people of Fairly. It becomes a ‘rejection’ that the founders of Haven “carried . . . like a bullet in the brain”. \textit{(Paradise, 109)} The Ruby men’s exclusion and isolation represents how the deep-seated shame-rage and reactive pride of the Old Fathers of Haven become a lethal inheritance passed down to following generations of 8-rock people who in turn reject and shame those who are ‘strange and different however harmless’. They humiliate the humiliators of their forefathers. Under the guidance of Zechariah, the 8-rock politics of separatism creates a strong sense of group identity, cultural belonging; and maintaining a sense of communal togetherness, the people of Haven share everything and are vigilant to each other’s need. While living in a safe but also circumscribed community suspicious of outsiders, Ruby’s younger generation want to clarify the meaning of Zechariah’s inscription on the oven’s iron plaque. According to Deacon Morgan, the oven, which was once a vital community meeting place where the baptized entered ‘sanctified life’ has been reduced to a gathering place for Ruby’s lazy young people. \textit{(Paradise, 111)} It becomes in the absence of a guiding presence a space signifying community dissension and the loss of
group consensus about what to respect and value. When Roger Best breaks the 8-rock blood rule by marrying Delia, she is viewed as “a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (Paradise, 197) – an object of contempt for the 8-rock community. Steward Morgan regards Roger Best’s plan to bring Delia’s light-skinned daughter Pat to the new town Ruby, as an act of dirt and defilement and he cruelly comments “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (Paradise, 201) Pat comes to wonder: “Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the blood lines, the who fucks who?” (Paradise, 217) In Ruby, where skin colour determines how people are chosen and ranked, women hold the key to the racial purity of the 8-rocks:

The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too. “God bless the pure and holy” indeed. That was their purity. That was their holiness. That was the deal Zechariah had made during his humming prayer. It wasn’t God’s brow to be feared. It was his own, their own. (Paradise, 217)

Given the desire of Ruby men for “unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood”, everything that troubles the New Fathers “must come from women” (Paradise, 217). Hence the Ruby men view the non 8-rock convent women as the other – impure, uncivilized, degenerate. Even though the 8-rock people once saw their convent neighbours as strange but harmless – indeed, even as helpful on occasion, since the women took in people who were lost or needed a rest; over time, as the Convent becomes the repository of the secrets of the respectable 8-rocks, the people of Ruby come to perceive the Convent women as potentially dangerous. To the Ruby men, the Convent women represent a danger to the community: each Ruby man looks for someone else to blame for personal or family troubles or for problems in the town: Sergeant for the backtalk of Ruby’s youth; Wisdom Poole, for the shooting between his
brothers; Brood and Apollo, over Billie Delia; Arnold and Jefferson Fleetwood, for Sweetie’s defective children; Menus, for his loss of the redbone woman; Harper, for his failed first marriage; K.D., for his lasting grudge against Gigi; and Steward and Deacon, for the threat Consolata’s affair with Deacon represents to their family pride and Ruby dream.

To Pious, the massacre of the Convent women would get ‘white law as well as damnation’ on them (Paradise, 290). Banging his fist on the wall, he questions: “You have already dishonoured us. Now you going to destroy us? What manner of evil is in you?” (Paradise, 291) Reverend Misner is equally critical:

Whether they be the first or the last, representing the oldest black families or the newest, the best of the tradition or the most pathetic, they have ended up betraying all. They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. . . . Soon Ruby will be like any other country town: the young thinking of elsewhere; the old full of regret. The sermons will be eloquent but fewer and fewer will pay attention or connect them to everyday life. How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? (Paradise, 305-6)

In the concluding scenes Paradise presents two competing visions: a despairing vision of the intergenerational perpetuation of shame and violence in the horrible othering and scapegoating of the Convent women and a hopeful vision of the healing power of the ancestral imagination to solve the issue of difference. As Billie Delia wonders:

When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a
town? A town that had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded in swallowing her mother and almost broken her own self. A backward no place ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them. . . . She knew, as they did, that she never could and that the threesome would end only when they did. The Convent women would roar that. She could see their pointy teeth. (Paradise, 308)

Morrison is unable to realistically resolve the conflict between the contradictory value systems embodied in the opposing worlds of Ruby and the Convent: both are paradise – a place, safe, full of bounty, avoiding harm and protecting – but based on the notion of exclusivity. Each can be viewed as “a place that was very beautiful in some ways but very dangerous in others.” Both paradise – one exclusively ruled by men, the pure 8-rock descendants; the other, exclusively ruled by women who refuse the company of men because they were ‘hurt’ by them and transcend the social formulations of themselves. Both deny community life and change, as they cling to isolation and separateness. But as Morrison explains “isolation . . . carries the seeds of its own destruction.” (51) Ruby refused to deal with any form of change, “they refused to deal with the changing times, and simply threw up their gates, like any gated community, to keep everything away. And, in fact, that was the necessary requirement for the destruction of their paradise.” (52) The Convent women maintaining their separateness from the mainstream community, however, build their own, within the convent, become calmly themselves and are “no longer haunted” (Paradise, 266) under the ancestral guidance. They listen to Consolata’s soothing stories about the mystical, poetical Piedade, “a singing woman who never spoke”(Paradise, 285) but begrudging the townspeople never “passes it on”. Here the Convent women equal the Ruby
men who also had nothing to say, pass on – as each based their life on the necessity of isolation.

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40. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 1987, 235 (All subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition with the page number mentioned in parenthesis.)
42. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 37
43. Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, 1992, 35 (All subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition with the page number mentioned in parenthesis).
44. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, 227
45. Ibid, 50
47. Jill Matus, 154
49. Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, 1997, 210 (All subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition with the page number mentioned in parenthesis).
51. Ibid
52. Ibid