Chapter IV

African-American Men, Whites and Other Subalterns: *Paradise*, *Love* and *A Mercy*

While moving to the last three novels of Toni Morrison, we find the matter becoming more complex so far as her depiction of subalternity is concerned. Her later fiction seems to outdo her earlier fiction and calls into question the African American community’s struggle against racism in a serene and sober way. Her later fiction exhibits, in the opinion of Lucille P. Fultz, its “ability to recognize and resolve the conflicts within that community; and its willingness to challenge class and gender formations within the black community.”

Morrison seems to have developed, we may argue, a clear and insistent authorial voice that speaks through a variety of narrators. She, with her inimitable power, shows her ability to seamlessly interweave form, content, and meaning in a deceptively facile manner. Raymond Hedin has noted that the “coherence of Morrison’s vision” is inherent in the structure that “parses out its logic into repeating patterns that offer the reader no solace or refuge from [her] anger.” However Morrison’s ordered, organically structured anger is thematized in form and character in her later novels in a more vivid form.

What we also note is the fact that Morrison engages her art in writing to and for the African Americans being maltreated in America in one form or the other. She has no problem stating this fact:

When I view the world, perceive it and write it, it is the world of black people. It is not that I won't write about white people. I just know that
when I'm trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest these for me are the black people whom I invent. It is not deliberate or calculated or self-consciously black, because I recognize and despise the artificial black writing some writers do.\textsuperscript{3}

As Morrison told Walter Clemons, however, this does not mean that the whites cannot adequately respond to her work. “When I write, I don't try to translate for white readers ... Dostoevski wrote for a Russian audience, but we're able to read him. If I'm specific, and I don't overexplain, then anybody can overhear me.”\textsuperscript{4} It is clear, then, that Morrison sees her work as speaking to a specific audience but as reaching beyond the bounds of that audience to the rest of humankind. This persuades Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems to maintain that Morrison “uses the black slave experience in America as a metaphor for the human condition, which is necessarily all-inclusive.”\textsuperscript{5}

In a \textit{Washington Post} interview with David Streitfeld only days before the release of her seventh novel, \textit{Paradise} (1998), Morrison contends that what she wanted to do with Paradise was not to erase race but to force "readers either to care about it or see if it disturbs them" that race can be so blurred that, without specific linguistic utterance, race can go unidentified.\textsuperscript{6} That the relationship between literature and race is of especial significance to Morrison is evidenced not only in this interview with Streitfeld but in countless other interviews, through her fiction, and, perhaps, most aggressively, in her collection of essays and lectures \textit{Playing in the Dark}. Lodged in the context of her investigation of how an Africanist presence shapes classic American texts is Morrison's commentary on the role of the writer in articulating crucial
moments in American history and in offering ‘truth’ about society even when the literary critic will not. She writes:

National literatures, like writers, get along the best way they can, and with what they can. Yet they do seem to end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind. For the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a new white man. If I am disenchanted by the indifference of literary criticism toward examining the range of that concern, I do have a lasting resort: the writers themselves.  

By obscuring race in *Paradise*, Morrison is able to critique American identity construction and to show that both blackness and whiteness are produced social constructions, not fixed biological categories.

Like *Jazz*, Morrison’s seventh novel *Paradise* also received both enthusiastic praise and harsh criticism. Again, even the enthusiastic reviews mentioned some of the novel’s shortcomings. The two reviews that the *New York Times* printed five days apart are representative of the mixed reception that the novel received. In the first review, Michiko Kakutani called *Paradise* “a clunky, leaden novel” because “it’s a heavy-handed, schematic piece of writing, thoroughly lacking in the novelistic magic Ms. Morrison has wielded so effortlessly in the past.”  

According to Kakutani, “nearly every one of the characters is a two dimensional cliché,” and to make matters worse, “Ms. Morrison is constantly having her characters spell out the meaning of her story.” In the second *New York Times* review, Brooke Allen called Morrison’s
Paradise “possibly her best work to date” because “with Paradise, Morrison has put it all together, the poetry, the emotion, the broad symbolic plan.”10 But Allen admitted that the novel “is not an easy read—dense, repetitive and obscure, it requires close scrutiny and concentration.”11

Rendered as the multi-vocal stories of women who flee their broken lives only to have their restructured ones destroyed again and as the tale of the “one all-black town worth the pain,” Paradise is layered with complexity.12 It rejects a linear narrative and has many characters. As careful readers, however, we are still reasonably able to follow the logic of the narrative because of the forthright manner with which Morrison offers the characters' stories. Just as we are left to piece these women's stories together as they are rendered in sections of their own name, we gather information about the town of Ruby piecemeal.

We are given the town's history, and we learn that the Disallowing—the single most important event in the lives of Ruby's citizens, in which the Old Fathers, as they were called, were rejected by the citizens of Fairly, Oklahoma—is passed down from generation to generation. In Fairly, they are rejected because of their deep, abiding blackness. Their racial purity, which they had always taken great pride in, becomes the source of their rejection and, subsequently, the single most important factor in the construction of their new identities. Eventually, they become so obsessed with racial purity that they displace one act of discrimination with another. Even so, Paradise is not a book about racist black people, instead, it is an attempt to answer the question that started Paradise: “How do fierce, revolutionary, moral people lose it and
become destructive, static, preformed—exactly what they were running from?"13

At least one answer to this question has to do with Ruby's citizens' haphazard belief in racial purity and, subsequently, in their recourse to binarisms to construct their identity. In their quest to believe in the goodness of their blackness, they ultimately reject all things non-black. But they also reject anything black that threatens their sacred purity. Patricia Best Cato, who is never fully accepted in the community because her mother was a fair-skinned outsider, eventually, realizes this; she questions the authenticity of their purity and, ultimately, reveals its instability:

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.... Unadulterated and unadulteried Rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal....In that case... everything that worries them must come from women. (P: 217)

As Patricia recognizes, the only way for them to guarantee their “pure” bloodlines is to intramarry and, more importantly, to control women—both black and white. And their need to control people to ensure false categories and constructed hierarchies turns them into the very people they claim to hate. Creating false categories and constructing hierarchies is similarly central to blackface minstrelsy.
In its attempt to work out crucial issues regarding national and personal identity, minstrelsy adopted a system of binarisms whereby the only way white men could define themselves was by establishing a category of people who they were not. Such systematic racism had long-term consequences. As Holt notes,

The marking of racial otherness so indelibly into the American material and spiritual culture, into its everyday, meant that what blacks confronted was never simply insult and psychic injury, never some transient epiphenomenon, but a kind of national ambivalence about racial matters that still complicates our efforts to understand and combat it. (P: 14)

This is certainly true of the citizens of Ruby, who suffer from the aftereffects of racist institutions such as slavery and minstrelsy. In parallel to the logic of the separatist principle of othering that structured and sustained minstrelsy, “Ruby depends upon isolation and insulation in order to maintain its black utopia, and it is its obsession with exclusion and 'purity' that offers not liberation from colorism but complete submission to it.” (P: 15)

In essence, Ruby becomes the new Fairly, "Disallowing" any and all who are unlike its inhabitants. Interestingly, it is a variation of minstrelsy that sets the formative diegesis of Paradise into motion. Through retrospective narration near the end of the novel, we learn that the Old Fathers' most respected elder and statesman, Zechariah Blackhorse, had a twin brother Ethan, whose name has been erased from the Blackhorse Bible. After Deacon and the other men have killed the Convent women, he tells Reverend Misner that few
remembered that Zechariah had a twin brother and that they were first known as Coffee and Tea.

When Coffee got the statehouse job, Tea seemed as pleased as everybody else. And when his brother was thrown out of office, he was equally affronted and humiliated. One day, years later, when he and his twin were walking near a saloon, some white men, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment they weren't brothers anymore. (P: 302)

Shortly thereafter, Zechariah, along with other former legislators whose dignity had been challenged by white men who knew their worth only in relation to denigrating others, abandoned the life that denied him his human freedom and sought to create a new life for himself. In short, he refused to participate in the minstrel tradition. Yet, throughout *Paradise*, Ruby's citizens mimic almost to perfection certain aspects of the very tradition Zechariah hated so much.

The novel mimics and then deconstructs some of minstrelsy's strategies, thereby highlighting the ways in which minstrelsy (fictionally and historically) as a tradition fails to sustain itself and thus collapses within itself. The men of the town do not perform as Convent women (except that they pretend to be pious) in the same way that white men performed as black men. Rather, Ruby's men perform as white men — America's founding fathers and their descendants to be exact—first and foremost by declaring themselves exceptional.
According to the Ruby legend, the journey to Haven was God-ordained since God had given the Old Fathers signs and dreams, directing their journey much as He had done for the wandering Israelites of biblical times.

To the Old Fathers [the land that became Haven] signaled luxury—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....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. (P: 99)

But this freedom has limits because the community of Haven, like the minstrel tradition, was rooted in an ahistorical myth and in a belief that a utopia could actually be sustained. One of the manifestations of this belief is the conflict over the motto on the Oven. The older men insist that it is to read "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." The younger generation contends that even if it did read "Beware," it should now read "Be," which would reflect the need to construct meaning when it is ambiguous or unknown, a change in times, and a desire to be like God rather than simply fearing Him. Ultimately, Steward Morgan puts an end to the conversation and to any new, possible reconstructed meanings.

In their generational dispute, the staid wins out over the dynamic, with Steward warning them that if anyone of them dares to "ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven," he will blow their heads off just like he would "a hood-eye snake" (P: 87). As the town's banker and one of its richest men (his twin brother, Deacon, is the other), Steward asserts his
power and authority in order to ensure that history has a singular meaning, one which is static and which appears the way that he wants it to appear. This exchange furthers Morrison's critique of belief in monolithic meaning and illuminates the class issues that inform the novel. Power and voice are linked to wealth and masculinity, which Steward asserts, in this instance, through the threat of killing. He acts out this threat and, correspondingly, further asserts his status and his masculinity in the end by participating in the massacre of these women.

The men of Haven and then of Ruby duplicate myths they create about themselves with their performances and actions and ignore certain experiences as a real part of their history whenever doing so is convenient. In terms of its mockery of class differences, minstrelsy varied from performance to performance. But minstrel acts consistently focused on the interaction between an interlocutor (frequently referred to as Mr. Interlocutor) and two end men (frequently referred to as Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo). Mocking European aristocracy and their desire for utopia, Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo (shabbily dressed comedians whose physical appearance represented the common man and whose physical positioning as end men symbolized their marginality) incessantly outwitted Mr. Interlocutor (the elegantly attired man of supposed intelligence whose physical appearance represented aristocracy and whose physical positioning in the center symbolized his dominance). In Morrison's novel, the men of the town become Mr. Interlocutor—the center of power. And the end men, Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo, in this case, are women, women
whose presence is tolerated until their newly created identities position them as much in the center as the townspeople and threaten their self-defined utopia.

Power is the issue; and the men know it. This is why they ultimately attack the women because their established power is threatened. The only way to maintain it is to prove that theirs is stronger. At no point do they consider sharing it. To do so would leave them with no other to subject or to oppress or to use as a source of consolation about who they are not. The narrator explains:

Wisdom Poole would be looking for a reason to explain why he had no control anymore over his brothers and sisters. To explain how it happened that those who used to worship him, listen to him, were now strays trying to be on their own.... As for the Fleetwoods ... they'd been wanting to blame somebody for Sweetie's children for a long time ... and although Lone had delivered some of Jeff's sick children long before the first women arrived, they wouldn't let a little thing like that keep them from finding fault anywhere but in their own blood. (P: 277)

Instead of examining themselves, the Ruby men seek freedom from personal blame and responsibility by identifying the women as the cause of their suffering and their disrupted lives. The women's choice near the end of the novel to create an existence of their own that does not acknowledge the presence or the power of the men, thereby negating the men's role as the center of power, upsets the power structure. Ultimately, othering (and minstrelsy as its vehicle) fails as a performance strategy, and the only recourse for the now collapsing center of power is violence. In this regard, too, the novel's
commentary mimics history, with the men's attack on the Convent women serving as the functional equivalent of the ritualistic lynching that occurred in great numbers in the decades following minstrelsy's historical decline. Both acts—minstrelsy and lynching—are playgrounds for the reinscription of ideologies of exceptionalism and manhood alike.

In both cases, the ideologies are appropriated rather than "authentic" and exist as "real" categories only in terms of binarisms. Significantly, Morrison within the novel avoids making the same mistake of reinscribing an ideology of other. When David Streitfeld notes that it is possible to read *Paradise* as exploring several sharp conflicts: the religious town vs. the 'pagan' convent, those who worship money vs. those who don't, the Ruby men vs. the Convent women, Morrison tells him that she does not have an agenda that pits male against female, good against bad:

All I have are questions. Everything is very complicated. Yes, it could be that I could be understood as saying that patriarchy is bad and matriarchy is good. In fact, I don't believe any of those things. I don't deal in these binaries.  

This helps to teach the reader, who is encouraged if not compelled to participate in the text, to see the limitations of replacing one system of domination with another. While Peter Widdowson arguably misreads the novel's unwillingness to do this—he contends that "Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America ... and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honor."  

Katrine Dalsgard makes the more accurate observation:
Paradise represents a new take on both the tradition of American exceptionalism and the African American cultural tradition. In relation to the former, [Morrison's] deconstruction of the self-conscious perfection underpinning the exceptionalist tradition implies that, unlike other writers of the tradition, she doesn't reinscribe the national American dream theoretically. In relation to the latter, her deconstruction of Ruby's exceptionalism figures as a warning that the mechanisms of violence and marginalization are also at work in counter-discursive national historical narratives.\(^{16}\)

Because the novel does not privilege a new way over an old way or a "good" way over a "bad" way, *Paradise* avoids binarisms. This avoidance is especially important for at least two reasons: because the dualism of binary oppositions inevitably oversimplifies race and because the novel makes aggressive attempts to interrogate the complexity of race and to identify it as a cultural construct. By blurring racial categories and by having her black characters act in a manner that reflects dominant white ideology and behaviour, Morrison avoids reifying the racial categories the novel subversively seeks to undercut. At the same time, she mocks notions of racial purity.

The novel treats the origins of separatism sympathetically, but depicts it as ultimately destructive of the community that it is designed to protect. The novel locates the impetus for separatism in the experience of social exclusion, and not simply the exclusion of blacks by whites: Fairly, Oklahoma, an all
black town, will not accept Ruby's forefathers and mothers because their skin is too dark. Missy Dehn Kubitschek states in this connection:

In self-protection, this excluded group defines its own nature, goals, and values. But its processes of definition inevitably involve the creation of an "other"—“them” as opposed to "us." Naturally, good qualities appear in us; evil qualities in them. The world is defined in absolute terms, with no middle ground, only binary opposites.  

Ruby's most powerful men, Steward and Deacon Morgan, see the world through these oppositions: good versus bad, themselves versus the young hooligans, good young girls like Arnette versus bad ones like Billie Delia, Ruby versus the Convent. The problem here lies not just in the occasional misidentification—Arnette rather than Billie Delia, neither is sexually active nor even in the value itself. Instead, *Paradise* shows that opposed, mutually exclusive categories can never be maintained because they deny social complexity.

The separatism of Ruby as an isolated black community helps Morrison articulate how they move from object to subject and claim a sense of self and not ‘others.’ No doubt it reveals the social stratification in American society — stratification based on race, gender and class; *Paradise* also highlights divisions within all the ethnicities. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber asserts this when she says:
[T]he black reenactment of white patriarchal structures and patterns of projection suggests the need for an eroticized other. The men in Ruby control power and attempt to silence women and children. As a result, the characters illustrate the ongoing struggle to avoid the objectifying gaze of the dominant culture and establish subject status in an altered social structure.

Ruby's separatism sets up the most important oppositions: Ruby versus the evil of the outside world, and Ruby versus the Convent. But in fact, Ruby participates in the structures of the larger world, both for good and for ill. While in South America, Mary Magna adopts an abandoned child, Consolata; on the trek to found Haven, Fairy DuPres insists that her group absorb the orphaned Lone. In New Jersey, Mavis 's husband Frank beats her; in Ruby, K. D. beats his wife Arnette. Mavis loses her brothers and Soane loses two sons to the Vietnam War. Though the character -actors may not be aware of these similarities, the reader sees that the commonalities contradict separatist ideas.

We should not forget the novel's first sentence —“They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time." (P: 3) This immediately draws the reader into shocking action. In this opening scene, nine armed men are storming an unlocked building "the Convent" and attacking the group of five women who live there. The men, we come to know later, come from the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the women have drifted one at a time to the Convent. The attack occurs in 1976, and the present of Paradise remains the 1970s. Before returning to the opening scene, Morrison develops a dizzying
variety of subplots. The novel explores the histories and memories of numerous characters to show how these men and women came to battle. In an interview with Paul Gray, Morrison admits that she purposefully left the race of "the white girl" unrevealed:

I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until these readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature that way....Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing.\(^\text{19}\)

Similarly, in *Playing in the Dark*, she notes that the kind of work she always wanted to do required her "to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains."\(^\text{20}\)

Morrison revisits this technique in *Paradise* and reinforces notions that conflate "whiteness" with invisibility. And even though the white norm is invisible more often than not, it still "seems to encompass an authoritative, hierarchical, restrictive mode of thought."\(^\text{21}\) But with notions of normalcy that privilege whiteness disturbed, a feat the novel achieves by announcing the presence of a "white girl," whiteness becomes relatively visible (we never really see which girl is the white girl) only in the sense that it is announced. "By specifying the white girl," Linda Krumholz notes:
Morrison has reversed the accepted racial logic in which blackness is the exception and whiteness the norm. By calling her 'the white girl'
Morrison makes whiteness the exception, and thus she constructs the invisible and 'universal' point of view as not-white."

When this is done, race becomes little more than a social construct, less clear than ever. Connie, for instance, with her green eyes and tea-colored hair, could be mistaken for the white girl until the narration refers to her as one of three "non-white urchins" (P 223). We assume that Mavis is black since no one reacts strangely to her presence and since she muses that she had not seen a single white person other than the gas station attendant.

Gigi enters the town and is immediately the focus of male attention because of her body. She even has an affair, which aligns her with the Jezebel and the loose-black woman stereotypes. Yet we have to be astute enough to realize that the text does not deal in stereotypes. Seneca, who at one point is a sex toy for a white woman, has a large butt (again, typically associated with black women). But this is her only physical characterization. And Pallas, the daughter of a wealthy father and an artiste mother (potentially suggestive of white culture), has cinnamon-colored legs. Purposefully, each cultural indicator is juxtaposed with a contrary marker. And the only way to come close to identifying who is white is to eliminate the characters that, through linguistic utterance, are identifiably black.

Although the novel clearly speaks to race, the novel is not about race at all. And the blurred distinctions of black and white, the displacement of
characteristically white fears and anxieties onto black bodies, and the display of whiteness as a learned and identifiable social practice that can be replicated by any and all (and, hence, its obvious inauthenticity) prove that while race cannot be erased, it has no place in humanness. It is no coincidence then that Morrison focalizes the crux of the novel and its commentary on the fear that characterized Americans through the town teacher, Patricia Best Cato, an outsider who is not black or white enough to use racial discourse to fashion her identity and who, subsequently, seeks to fashion it through truth instead of through othering. What she learns after having the children compose autobiographical sketches is that the Old Fathers rewrote their own past by forgetting that which to them was unattractive and created their new identity after being relegated as an other in Fairly.

In much the same manner that America, as the New World, claimed to free itself from the Old World by denying the freedom of an underclass, the citizens of Ruby violently rather than humorously impose their minstrel-like fears of failing, of powerlessness, of "Nature unbridled," of the absence of "so-called civilization," and of external and internal aggression onto the Convent women. In the moments following the attack on the women, the narration muses:

Bewildered, angry, sad, frightened people pile into cars, making their way back to children, livestock fields, household chores and uncertainty. How hard they had worked for this place; how far they once were from the terribleness they ... witnessed. How could so clean and
blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they escaped? (P 292)

The novel's commentary about the citizens' belief in socially constructed categories as stable and authentic and their subsequent attempts to reinforce these categories suggests that they believe, at least in part, because of their failure to create an identity for themselves that would resist binary constructions and accept the truth of their past, that the town has, indeed, become the world they sought to escape. Interestingly, the Convent women, like Ruby's citizens, also struggle with the past and with identity construction in the light of the past. But the women's response to this challenge is quite different from that of Ruby's inhabitants. They form their identities solely on the basis of their own existence and, more importantly, without othering and without appropriating the past.

*Paradise*, according to Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, is Morrison’s “most class-conscious novel” for she depicts in the novel the truth that people who look just like you may not act in your best interest. The Africans in the novel have broken free from an exploitative and oppressive reality and have a unique opportunity of fashioning a fair, egalitarian society. The novel indirectly states that the black Americans have the values of humanism, collectivism, and brotherhood that sustained them through slavery. Morrison has written of this spirit of collectivism that was still manifested in 1932. It is a spirit that has been solidified even more due to the rejection which the characters have experienced on the hands of both Europeans and those Africans who have already been corrupted by money and status. It is this corruption of mind and
soul that has turned the people of the same race to exploit one another and turn the disadvantaged into a subaltern class.

The reign of the women at the end of the novel thus fictionally speaks to the same truth Morrison proposes in *Playing in the Dark* — the achievement of freedom at the expense of the non-flee or the oppressed is not freedom at all. It is, instead, an inhumane activity, offering only a temporary solution to a problem that will inevitably resurface when the oppressed acquires a sense of power and of himself. By deconstructing the traditions of whiteness that the citizens of Ruby have adopted and made their own (particularly as they relate to human freedom and the construction of identity), *Paradise* suggests that the crisis of power indicative of Ruby (and white America) can be negotiated only when its citizens use their human and not their racial imagination to disconnect their difficulty from fear and past rejection(s) and reconnect it to the larger sociopolitical issues that created the crisis initially.

This is what Connie teaches the women and this is why they each return to some aspect of their past before they disappear: they must define themselves with the past in mind but without fear and, consequently, without othering. Their healing demands transcendent group interaction where they pass beyond the boundaries of individual and other. As they do so, they heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony. They gain self and community. Otherwise, the temporary power advantage they might gain exclusively as individuals would eventually transform itself into long-range instability since the problem that makes othering necessary is seldom resolved but, rather, displaced.
Elizabeth Bartelme hails Morrison for the novel’s narrative drive, its poetic resonance, and its unique approach to the black experience having a certain degree of subalternity in the community. She finds similarity in the three novels — *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise* for their faithful description and presentation of black subaltern life and its various dimensions.

She maintains:

Her books resonate with her passion and commitment to racial dignity and equality, but also with her immersion in a fictional world unlike any other. She gives vivid expression to black bitterness, while at the same time subjecting certain middle-class aspirations based on white achievements to a subtle critique. Morrison understands the suffering, the mythology and religion of the black community in a way that few writers do and allows her great gifts to illuminate them.24

We also witness how Morrison has highlighted the patriarchal power to indirectly oppress the other members of the families. The novel’s critique of patriarchy, nonetheless, is not simply about the Old Fathers' (both the fictional and the actual white founding fathers') failure to offer women, especially those who openly reject patriarchy, the same individual freedom they craved and fought for but also about the erroneous notion that someone else's freedom is theirs to give. But the men of Ruby believe in offering and taking away freedom as wholeheartedly as they believe in their own freedom to decide who is exceptional and who is not. That they consider themselves "chosen" is evidenced not only in the myth of their journey to Haven, where God led them
to "their place," but also in their yearly Christmas pageant where they integrate the Disallowing into the story of the birth of Christ.

Thus, in *Paradise*, Morrison creates a microcosm of America in the utopian all-black community of Ruby, Oklahoma. As in her critical monograph *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison is keenly attuned to the contested conceptual territory of America in *Paradise* and uses African American history to critique it. Thus, the black skin of Ruby's citizens, termed "8-rock" for "a deep deep level in the coal mines," inverts the historical landmark of Plymouth Rock; Ruby's Old Fathers are avatars of none other than the founding fathers of the United States. These terms function as only two in a series of inverted echoes of the traditional history of America that *Paradise* dramatizes. Karen Omry opines that "central to the aesthetics of [Paradise] is a subversion of the very process of historical or generic categorization that reduces the complexity of human experience to a simplified, linear catalogue of events or trends."25

Like the early English immigrants, the 8-rocks create a harbor from persecution that is maintained by geographic and cultural isolation, and, when needed, violence against violence, committed by men who "bowed to no one [and] knelt only to their Maker." "Unique and isolated," "free and protected," Ruby is "justifiably pleased with itself" (P 99, 8). While the 8-rocks seek to build a haven that will allow them to pursue their ideals in freedom, it is a freedom maintained by enforcing their own disallowings. In an inversion of the US's one-drop rule, the town obeys an unspoken "blood rule" that forbids its members to marry light-skinned people, and an even more insidious practice of
maintaining an ideal of female purity that both reproduces the hegemonic 19th-century US "Cult of True Womanhood" and critiques it through the violent annihilation of a community of dispossessed women who inhabit "the Convent," a neighboring dilapidated mansion.

That the mansion was formerly a Catholic school for Indian girls explains the nomenclature, but more importantly functions as another echo of the nation's suppressed history: the removals and forced assimilations of American Indians. Previously in residence at the Convent were Indian girls who "whisper[ed] to each other in a language the sisters had forbidden them to use," and who "softly s[ang] forbidden Algonquian lullabies" (P 229, 237). The founding fathers of Ruby reproduce the logic of discrimination endemic to the nation's history by intercalating their own repressed fears and inability to live up to the austere moral code of their haven into their perception of occurrences in town and at the Convent. Marni Gauthier comments:

Armed with invented disparaging myths about the Convent women, they effectively execute a lynching in which the perpetrators, not the victims, are all black men. Turning traditional accounts of US history on their head, the novel introduces its larger interrogation of national history-making and its broader exploration of the possibilities for telling historical truth.²⁶

*Paradise* offers a critique of essentialism and Manicheism which are unrelentingly disrupted by difference and hybridity. As Morrison delves into
the origins both of the African American community of Ruby and of the female community of the Convent, the reader becomes aware of several key issues including the subalternity and its representation. Morrison uses the novel genre to point out the power that stories have for community building. The women at the Convent learn to heal themselves through confronting and sharing stories of their traumatic pasts, using narration as the means of reconnecting to others and the natural world. Unlike the women in the Convent, however, the people of Ruby continue to be haunted by stories of their past traumas, particularly the story they relentlessly repeat and have symbolically named The Disallowing.

That the women at the Convent become a convenient scapegoat because of their acceptance of different ideas, behaviours, races, and ethnicities while retaining economic autonomy calls into question the necessity of Ruby's rigid code of behaviour and politics of exclusion. The women's ability to come to terms with their pasts exposes the failure of the citizens of Ruby to confront their own traumatic histories. Silencing these women provides an outlet for the anger that the townspeople have for their own static lifestyle as they deny and cover over Ruby's limitations. These women have seen the people of Ruby at their weakest: as adulterers, drunks, liars, would-be murderers of unborn children, and men expressing emotional needs and sexual desires not fulfilled or endorsed by their belief system and rigid code of behavior. Mostly, however, the town's leaders are fearful because these women "don't need men and they don't need God," at least not the patriarchal Christian Cod that these men follow (P: 276). Channette Romero points out:
The Convent women learn to empower themselves without needing to adhere strictly to male patriarchal control or a rigid belief system predicated on division and hierarchy. They offer an alternative to the way history, community, and individual identities are constructed in Ruby, an alternative that allows for individual and group differences and change. The very existence of this alternative exposes the sterile and isolationist view of life and community in Ruby and within normative Christian traditions.27

While the people of Ruby were turned into subalterns by Disallowing, men of Ruby would retain their patriarchal power and would subjugate the females of their community. These men, feeling threatened by the women at the Convent, killed them regardless of their race or origin. In this novel, Morrison has shown how the whites could also be treated as subaltern by the black Americans when they have power to oppress others. When we move to her next novel Love, nevertheless, we find this treatment of subalternity to have taken a somewhat different shape.

Morrison’s Love, in critiquing the American Civil Rights Movement, problematizes both American and African-American history and also uncovers the vexatious interrelationship of history and black identity, a concern that has been in the novelist's foreground since the publication of her historical trilogy comprising Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise. If, like the trilogy, Love reexamines critically the traumatic history of African-Americans, it also is stridently political in articulating certain harsh truths about the Civil Rights movement.
Love not only reformulates some of the crucial issues that impinge on African-American interests within American politics, but also departs significantly from the normative triumphalist discourses of the Civil Rights movement.

Morrison, through analyzing the complex family history of the protagonist Cosey, seeks to be a critique of the American Civil Rights movement that had a devastating impact on the successful pre-World War II black community. Adam Langer states:

Taut and uncompromising, Love is a compact meditation on the aftermath of the civil rights movement, a chilling ghost story about a friendship destroyed by the whims of a wealthy and respected patriarch, an epic saga about the generation gap, a concise reflection on the African-American experience in the twentieth century. Dreamy, nonlinear, vigorous and vital, it explores enough Big Issues to keep Morrison scholars busy for decades to come while keeping Morrison readers second-guessing their own presumptions.28

Set in the American Civil Rights era that corresponds with the period 1930-1990, Morrison's Love is about the complex legacy of Bill Cosey, a successful Jim Crow-era black entrepreneur, and the loss of his personal paradise in the wake of integration. As the novel opens, the reader learns that their competing claims for Cosey's property and legacy turn Christine, the protagonist's granddaughter, and Heed, his second wife and childhood friend of Christine, into mortal enemies. Then, there is May, Cosey's daughter-in-law
and Christine's mother, who seizes every opportunity to drive a wedge between her daughter and Heed to sustain her supremacy. To some extent, this turbulent and warring world is redeemed by the stable presence of L, Cosey's cook and mediator, who, functioning as the narrator, ably illuminates the historical and social terrain of the novel.

As the story unravels through the contrapuntal memory sequences and kaleidoscopic viewpoints of these characters, the novelist weaves and reweaves through the historical fabric, creating arresting vignettes of the intriguing legacies of slavery, racism, and the Civil Rights movement that attest to the temporality of history. Morrison's observations on the Civil Rights era of the sixties, which form the backdrop of *Love*, are worth considering:

In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it. And when Civil Rights became Black Power, we frequently chose exoticism over reality. The old verities that made being black and alive in this country the most dynamic existence imaginable—so much of what was satisfying, challenging and simply more interesting—were being driven underground—by blacks.... In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed.  

By invoking the Civil Rights era as a backdrop to *Love*, Morrison not only shares its legacies with the present generation but also seeks to reexamine
it in “a new way” so that her readers “would not be left with the simple notion that there was some agitation, some pain, and then, pow, everybody moved into whatever neighborhoods they wanted to and there was more access into the corridors of power, there was more money, you know, better jobs, etc.” 30 This revisionist exercise meant neither to convey Morrison's nostalgia for the era of segregation nor her cavalier attitude toward the accomplishments of the Civil Rights ideology. Instead, it testifies to the novelist's uncompromising engagement with the often unacknowledged ills of the movement. The novelist herself, in an interview with Adam Langer, clarifies her fictional vision thus:

“It's not about the Civil Rights movement not being a good idea" but "just that there was a price.” 31 Undoubtedly, Morrison compellingly engages the loss or reduction of the Civil Rights project in the prevailing black nationalist discourses of Black Power that emerged in the mid-1960s. In addition, Morrison's critique of Civil Rights exposes not only the economic and social implications for African-Americans but also the impact of the changing landscape of race relations in that era.

Emerging out of the Black Codes (1865-1866), the Jim Crow protocols legalized segregation and thus denied Civil Rights for the blacks for well over eighty years (1866-1953, the period encompassing Reconstruction, Post-Reconstruction, Harlem and Post-Harlem). To counter this de jure segregation, the blacks developed independent structures for sustaining their socio-cultural life such as restaurants, hotels, movie houses, banks, and the aters. Cosey's hotel and resort is one such entrepreneurial venture that benefited from segregation.
In the 1930s, when the “whole country began to live on Relief” Cosey acquired a “broke -down 'whites only' club” and transformed it into the “best -known vacation spot for colored folk at the East Coast” (L: 6). Brandishing the motto “the best good time this side of the law” (L: 33), Cosey's resort was a haven where affluent black vacationers “swayed under the stars” (L: 34), played whist and reveled in the vintage music of the age.

Love opens with a Morrison overture, weaving strains of the novel's poetry into a mysterious beckoning into the story and the company of the ever - present ghost. This prologue is titled "Love" —one of the rare occasions in the book when the word is actually used. The narrator, slyly named only L., grabs her victims by the eyeballs with one of the author's startling first sentences: “The women's legs are spread wide open, so I hum.” (L: 3)

L is herself a ghost, who explains that she is an old woman embarrassed by the world, and romances us into the 1940s, when Cosey's Hotel and Resort was the best and best -known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast. The hotel, where L. was the well -loved cook, bragged of names from a glamorous past —Lil Green, Fatha Hines, Jimmy Lunceford —and the perfection of places long gone; it had more handsome single men per square foot than anyplace outside of Atlanta or even Chicago. Despite the hyperbole, the easy living 1940s milieu at the heart of the book feels lived down to the lemon cake, and the good times feel like familiar kitchen-table stories.

If Cosey is the enticing face of black success in George Raft suits, then L. is the black woman downstairs stirring the pots, raising the children, keeping
the secrets, who leaves his funeral walking the beach in three-inch heels. L., whose name no one can remember, knows love as mercy. She is a perfect rendering of those shadowy African-Americans-surrogates and enablers — Morrison describes in a collection of lectures, *Playing in the Dark*, as lurking, ignored, yet defining all others in so much American fiction. She is an invention of the later Morrison, a compassionate mediator between warring extremes.

Love's setting evokes places in Florida or the Carolinas where black beach towns once flourished, but does not attempt any particular regional flavor or history. This resort was a cosmopolitan enclave where folks came from all over —sought out in part because it was for the select few and excluded the nearby African-Americans who might have brought in the local flavor. The fault lines of class difference and class pretension are carefully delineated. The regular folk lived in Up Beach, which of course was not by the beach, and worked in a cannery that sent the occasional bad odor toward the luxury hotel.

Morrison painstakingly describes the privilege of those with diamond stickpins, fine cigars and monogrammed silver, pointedly contrasting it with a world in which a child's bedroom is a luxury. Up Beach folk, she tells us, were viewed by the elite as beach rats who bathed in a barrel and slept in their clothes, who never used two pieces of flatware to eat. While less artful writers often produce caricatured upper-class blacks, Morrison creates a believable crew of upper-crust Negroes who send their kids to boarding schools, know how to "dress a bed," set a table and be discreet with their indiscretions.
Less successful is the attempt to limn Heed's struggle to elevate her Up Beach speech to leave an educated impression when she hasn't been to school. While the laughter over her mistakes is apt for those characters who hold themselves superior, some of the errors—saying 'professionate' for professional or calling a man 'very marriage ing'—strain belief. The looming police-head ghosts that threaten reckless women and unruly children don't seem to fit or to be needed; the humans in a Morrison novel are much scarier.

Each chapter title names an archetypal male role, such as Friend, Benefactor, Lover, Husband, Guardian, Father. Fortunately, Morrison takes an oblique angle on these terms. Besides, her character Cosey rarely fulfilled any of those roles for anyone. Instead, one finds love confused with infatuation, lust, possession, masochism, delusion. There is love as substitution, love as mourning. Love as expecting abandonment and getting it. Love as habit, hate, charity and, just once, love as the real thing.

Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, L. says. All over the world, traitors help progress by strengthening the survivors. Morrison's traitors often liberate those around them, but seldom without high cost. If Cosey is Love's monster, then Love shows the many uses people make of such a person.

Vida, a grateful former employee of Cosey's hotel, says that her pleasure was in pleasing. Her husband, Sandler, who took the man fishing and liked him, remembers a calculating Cosey saying, "If you kill the predators, the weak will eat you alive." (L: 74) The couple was liberated by Cosey from a destiny of struggle, maybe impoverishment. The cost, though, was to live with lies.
Romen, the grandson they are raising, is liberated, in a manner of speaking, from teenage-macho posturing and fear of his own sweet nature by working in the Cosey house. Junior, Heed's assistant, seduces him into kinky sexual trysts. Junior is momentarily liberated from not belonging, from shutting out memories of a dead father, and thinks of Cosey as her Good Man, with kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples from the highest branch. The cost of their fling could be someone's death.

May, Cosey's devoted daughter-in-law, was saved by marriage from one stifling life only to end up a servant in another. As Cosey saw it, she fit into his world well because she showed signs of understanding what superior men require. But when he dispossessed her, it cost her sanity. Last, Celestial, a familiar Morrison spirit, grew up in a household of sporting women. She may also have been a child rescued by Cosey's son. Her love for Cosey cost her dignity.

Each had been displaced by another; each had a unique claim on Cosey's affection, Morrison seems to suggest of the women in Love. Her target, however, seems to be patriarchy and the ways women have accommodated it by mistaking entrapment for love. All in all, the women of this novel are helpless in Cosey's world and have no ability to make change inside marriages, low-wage employment, prostitution and, especially, girlhood. They fight petty domestic wars. More than loving Bill Cosey, they obeyed him.

Morrison’s thematic preoccupation in Love, as in her earlier novels, is not only relevant to her community but also becomes the critical issue that requires its attention. Looking from the contemporary critical angle, her female
characters are more oppressed than the male characters. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia writes in this connection:

Since they suffer from a triple oppression, African females are the most exploited and oppressed, abused and used human beings on earth whose friendship is what saves them, cushions the blows of oppression. And of that sector, the African girl is the most vulnerable.  

There are curious echoes of *Sula* in *Love*, such as crazy May turning to the cooler side of the bed as she dies, just as Sula does. Yet in this novel, Morrison rejects some of the solutions of her earlier characters. She is suggesting that there's not much sense in wasting time and life trying to put a woman in the asylum just to end up chipping ice for her to suck on, a prominent choice made in the earlier novel. Where's the gain in setting fire to the nest you live in if you have to live in the ashes for fifty years? L. asks, again recalling a vivid central image in *Sula*. In *Love*, she pointedly revisits the deadly poisonous weeds in Sula's first sentence. Is this recurrence accidental or the insistence of a repeated theme?

The love almost defeated in this novel is the same love as in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, and shown in other forms in *Jazz* and *Paradise*—a love with roots in girlhood, like that of Pecola and Claudia, Sula and Nel. Theirs is a love that unfolds hearts that have been closed by the discovery that mothers can turn away from a child's loving gaze or that, to quote *Jazz*, no one loves them because they are not really here. While *Love* may not have the disturbing beauty of *Sula* or Morrison's other great novels, its mercies may bring a wider audience into her contentious, rewarding universe. The novel seems to be a
family melodrama where it becomes difficult to connect people to one another. Darry Lorenzo Wellington comments:

*Love* has a syncopated sense of story structure and a plethora of characters of whom to keep track. The characters are introduced incrementally; their miniature stories blur in and out of focus. Love is a family drama: but who is related to who? The reader eventually finds that the principal characters, whether by marriage, birth, or friendship, led lives that revolved around the expectations of a Howard Hughes-like motel and resort magnate, Bill Cosey. 

No surprise that when the narrative opens, Bill Cosey is already dead. No surprise that his survivors pathologically hate each other, and hate as well as adore the patriarch's memory. No surprise that Cosey was an incarnate Zeus, difficult to like much less love, a manipulator, possibly a sex abuser. Love's scenario is archetypal, mythic. The real story is in the beauty of the telling.

Her cause or the story she articulates is about the restoration of the language that black people spoke to its original power. She states that her cause is the result of the loss of black oral traditions and appropriation of black music by the dominant culture. An interview with LeClair and McCaffery (1983) presents her opinion about why she writes what she writes.

I am not explaining anything to anybody. My work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it. All that is in the fabric of the story in order to do what the music used to do. My people are being devoured. Whenever I feel
uneasy about my writing, I think: what would be the response of the people in the book if they read my book? That's my way of staying on track. Those are the people for whom I write.\textsuperscript{37}

The bizarre turn of events that brings down Cosey's fortunes leaves May, the dutiful daughter-in-law and daughter of a preacher, "crack-brained" (L: 8). Paradoxically, May conceived her life as dependent "on colored people who rocked boats only at sea" (L” 96). In trying to console herself, May "forced agreement with the like-minded" and took issue "with those who began to wonder about dancing by the sea while children blew apart in Sunday school; about holding up property laws while neighborhoods fell in flames" (L: 80). True to expectations, as the Civil Rights movement "swelled and funerals, marches, and riots were all the news" (L: 80), May's world also steadily crumbles. Thus, in showing May, a female character, register the loss of political focus the Civil Rights movement had suffered, Morrison testifies to how it is the women who always pay the price for the excesses of men.

May also serves to objectify the fear of violence and racial unrest that characteristically incites both the blacks and the whites into seeking "an excuse to hang somebody" (L: 104). Refusing to "adjust ... to whatever gear the driver chose" (L: 100), like her daughter Christine, May declares war on the world and fights it alone (L: 99-100). Forever frantic and furious, May imagines "rebellion in the waiters" and "weapons in the hands of the yard help" (L: 81). Anticipating a possible invasion of Cosey's hotel, May desperately hides "emergency underwear, photographs, keepsakes, mementos" (L: 81).
"[F]loating through the rooms, flapping over the grounds, [and] hiding behind doors," May, like a "minstrel show spook" (L: 82), begins "to stutter" and "contradict" (L: 80), confronted with the social turbulence of the 1960s. In the end, "assigning herself the part of the resort's sole protector," May pitches herself "beyond discussion" (L: 80). Even the hotel's clientele who were initially sympathetic to May "treated her with the courtesy" given to "a stump" or "just got up and left when she entered their company" (L: 81). In depicting the fortunes of May, Morrison interrogates the traditional triumphalist rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement and highlights the ways in which the movement could be experienced as a threat —not just by white people, but by black people, too.

Strangely enough, May's intimate knowledge of the radical shifts within the African-American society in the wake of the sixties' revolution undermines her will and passion to live leading to her demise. Morrison unmistakably enmeshes the personal life of May into the political turmoil of the sixties, as it were, to map the vexatious ideological restructuring in the African-American community. May's life not only exemplifies the traumatic impact of desegregation and the lapses of the Civil Rights movement on blacks, but also the polarization of their everyday life. Significantly, in portraying the emotional insecurity of May, Morrison dramatizes the conflict between "the 60's and 70's mentality, and an older mentality. Viewed in this light, May's personal transition from normalcy to "outright brilliance" (L: 97) is
symptomatic of the ideological transition and the crisis of values among African-Americans in the late 1960s.

A few of Morrison's characters are men, and she gives the 14-year-old boy Romen some moral qualities. But for the most part, men remain in the background. Cosey, the object of the women's obsessive love and hatred, remains an undeveloped character. One man describes him as wasting hours between the elbows of women whose names he couldn't remember and whose eyes he avoided. L concludes that he was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love. About the novel, Gordon Houser opines:

Morrison's observations of [her] characters are perceptive and sung in lovely language. By the end the reader is engaged by the narrative. But the obsession of these women for one man doesn't seem enough of a subject around which to build a novel.³⁸

*Love* emphasizes, even in its title, the bankruptcy of the term. Morrison, recognizing that we are anaesthetized to the word, simultaneously foregrounds and withholds love, seeking to illustrate both the failure of language and the power of love's embodiment. As readers struggle to find love in a novel replete with pain, suffering, child abuse, pedophilia, gang rape, arson, paranoia, murder, betrayal, and hatred, we realize that love is not an identifiable emotion, not a hallmark sentiment or an absent-minded wish. Anissa Janine Wardi asserts:
Moving away from word and theory, Morrison leaves readers with hands, as damaged, dying people reach out to minister and to heal. They grasp, reach, and hold on to one another in desperate acts of connection, practicing the art of love.\textsuperscript{39}

Moving out of the emotional sphere and retreating to the material, love as action rather than feeling, it is apt that the novel ends with foxglove, a beautiful plant that is as medicinal as it is deadly. L, the cook, confesses by the novel's end to killing Cosey with foxglove, an herb that simultaneously heals the heart and, in high dosages, stops it. Foxglove is perhaps Morrison's perfect metaphor for love, as the plant both restores and destroys, its beauty belying its poison. Rather than seek love's perfection, Morrison examines love's work, work that renews, recovers, and heals. Substituting hand for word, deed for speech, Morrison's \textit{Love} answers the call of \textit{Jazz}, as we look. Look where the hands are to find love's expression.

In her latest novel, \textit{A Mercy} (2008), Toni Morrison returns to the past, exploring slavery, exploitation, persecution, ambition, and loss in the 1680s and 1690s, well before the earliest days of her Pulitzer Prize-winning \textit{Beloved}. Rooted in the days before slavery became synonymous primarily with Africa, the pre-Revolutionary New World is already torn by religious, national, and class differences. The particular strength of \textit{A Mercy} lies in its scope. Instead of focusing solely on the black experience of slavery as in \textit{Beloved}, or the strangely strident feminism of \textit{Paradise}, or even the more modern African-American experience and struggle for place and meaning in \textit{Tar Baby} and \textit{Song
of Solomon, Morrison’s slim yet tightly condensed new novel encompasses a variety of voices from different backgrounds, colours, and nationalities, united mainly by the common experience of repression, exploitation, and enslavement at the hands of the early New World settlers. In an anonymous review in Ebony, the reviewer comments:

*A Mercy* takes on slavery in its infancy and reveals what lies beneath the surface. It's an ambivalent and disturbing story, sparingly written, including rejection, abandonment and acts of mercy with unforeseen consequences.40

David H. Schleicher asserts that *A Mercy* is less a piece of historical fiction than it is a psychological case study of the personality types that violently came together in the New World. But instead of applying a cold, omniscient voice to the plight, Morrison allows us to intimately glimpse the pain and the sorrow through the impassioned, enraged and bereft voices of those she seeks to study. The critic adds:

Whether exploring the quest for identity in *Song of Solomon*, the aftershocks of slavery in *Beloved*, the roots of American culture in *Jazz* or the pre-birth of a nation in *A Mercy*, when it comes to exorcising the dreams and nightmares of our shared past, nobody does it better than Morrison. In her latest dirge, no mercy comes from the heavens above or the land below, but only from the connections made between the sad souls wishing to leave the latter for the former. Perhaps it was in that
little bit of mercy where our nation was born, which would make
Morrison’s novel not an elegy but a promise.\textsuperscript{41}

In \textit{A Mercy}, we find the usual devices of multiple narrators and viewpoints, frequent changes in time and place, and characters and a plot slowly revealed by tantalizing piecemeal and circular storytelling. Ellen Heltzel argues that the novel “folds together human frailty and endurance while exploring the roots of sexism and racism in a fable-like novel about one mid-Atlantic household that existed a century before the Revolutionary War.”\textsuperscript{42} Eithne Farry states that the setting of the novel is an America where “religious persecution is rife, oppression is commonplace, the landscape is hostile and slavery is in its infancy. Into this abrasive atmosphere the novel's characters attempt to conjure up the means to live and love.”\textsuperscript{43}

Jacob Vaark, a Dutch farmer and trader who enjoys the challenges of the New World but prefers to avoid the slave trade when possible, unwillingly agrees to take a slave in lieu of payment. The slave woman begs him to take her daughter instead, eight-year-old Florens, a girl with pretty ways who baffles her mother by insisting on wearing shoes. She requested him to show mercy, “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter.”\textsuperscript{44} The little girl, “swimming in horrible shoes,” appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, his dead girl. (AM: 24)

Florens is taken to Vaark’s farm to live with his wife Rebekka, purchased as a mail order bride, and two other women. Lina, a native American
whose tribe had been wiped out by disease, had been raised by kindly
Presbyterians until they abandoned her—the reason for which we don’t find out
till much later—and Vaark purchased her. Vaark has also taken in Sorrow, a
simple-minded girl found as the sole survivor living on a foundered ship, after
her questionable morals cause discomfort in the nearby community. Together
these women form a fragile involuntary community. All these women are
indentured servants in one way or the other, and the limitations that shape their
lives make the expansive new world feel rather small. They're orphans forced
to function as a family.

Rather than a single coherent story, *A Mercy* is a collage of
prerevolutionary America, where far more people are conscripts or orphans
than are heroes, pilgrims or pioneers. Certainly the lack of a coherent,
continuous plot seems to frustrate some readers. Just as one thinks the story is
taking off, one turns back again to the past, to the history of another in the
menagerie of characters. These stories are tangled and partial, states Amy
Frykholm. She adds:

A Mercy is a meditation on the nature of slavery and freedom, on where
we came from and who we are. Morrison writes about a moment when
racial identity had yet to solidify and polarize into black and white, and
she uses this moment to transform slavery from a historical problem into
a question about human nature. Slavery, in this novel, has both external
and internal components. It isn't merely a legal status; it is also a way of
encountering the world. The trader, for example, should be the most free
of the characters in the book because he is a European man who can own property and other humans. But he is enslaved to an idea of prosperity that costs him his life.45

The story starts with Florens at sixteen, and winds back and forth in time throughout the previous eight years. Each woman on Vaark’s farm is separated from her origins by various circumstances. They form a kind of strained family, and each woman’s viewpoint (as well as Vaark’s and a few others) is used to unfold the story in a kind of counterpoint. Personal histories and motivations reveal themselves slowly. Florens’ viewpoint dominates most frequently, as she struggles with the unexplained abandonment by the mother who held onto her baby boy but let her daughter be taken. Clinging first to Lina as a mother substitute and later to a free black man who comes to the farm to work as a blacksmith, her internal enslavement to the consequences of her abandonment echoes the external powerlessness of most of the characters.

All the women in the novel seem to represent subalternity as they suffer in one way or the other either from the mean and selfish men they confront with or the society they live in. Tim Adams writes, “Each of the women seems locked inside her own head, and inside her own fate. All of them are slaves in different ways.”46 Shipped over from England, Rebekka had to choose between the prospects of servant, prostitute or wife, and though horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed the safest. Lina has witnessed a fall from the Eden of her childhood — her tribe was wiped out by a plague—and she clings to the Mistress as the only stability in her broken world.
For Sorrow, even the kiss is extraordinary. Despite two pregnancies, no man has ever kissed her on the lips. Sorrow changes her name over the course of the novel—she has a daughter and becomes Complete. Florens, meanwhile, swaps one slavery for another; she becomes infatuated with the blacksmith who comes to the estate, a freed slave from New Amsterdam, who wants nothing of her submission.

Rebekka's voice is, in the present of the novel, delirious with fever—she has her husband's illness and, as a result, the world of all four women is reeling on its axis. Without the Mistress, none of the servant girls will have a place anywhere and without the assistance of her servant girls, Rebekka will die. It is on these kinds of paradoxes of mutual female dependency that Morrison builds her brief vision of America's genesis. Florens has gone to the blacksmith for help and, in her journey, for a moment, all of her nation's possibilities seem to lie: “How long will it take will he be there will she get lost will someone assault her will she return will he and is it already too late? For salvation.” (AM: 98)

In casting an African as a free man with an independent mind and body, Morrison pushes the boundaries of the traditional master–slave narrative. The blacksmith, whose very occupation requires him to forge, shape and repair, is a truth-teller sent to remind the enslaved of their humanity. In this way, A Mercy is not so much a novel about race, but a meditation on ownership and the ways in which the enslaved internalize their subordination.
From a historical standpoint, *A Mercy* packs great detail and texture into such a terse novel. Here, ‘the sale of humanity’ respects no nationality, extending itself to European and Native American as well as black, to indentured servants as well as kidnapped Africans. The practice of indentured servitude virtually enslaves the workers, often for the length of their lives and even their children’s lives, as corrupt practices and practitioners add years onto the sentences of individuals with no power to fight back. Class differences lead to people’s wars that in turn lead to lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue, allowing the repression of all people of colour or difference and forever eliminating any hope of cooperation between gender and laborers. And religious differences spawn distrust and resentment at best, and abandonment, humiliating inspections of accusations of demonic possession, and persecution at worst.

Not surprisingly, there’s a particular focus on the female experience. Morrison usually makes the reader work for information, dropping character clues and plot points. She does so with a specific impact on the reader’s relationship with the women of *A Mercy*. One does not automatically know their colour, nationality, religion, or history. What you do know instantly is their gender. Details are revealed not just slowly, but back and forth in time. Morrison forces an understanding of character based on their status as women in a male-dominated world and the events through which they live, rather than depending on the usually defining characteristics of color, nationality, and religion. As those details are filled in (if they are —one never really knows, for
example, exactly what color, age, or nationality Sorrow is), one has already been required to live with these women simply as women.

This scavenger hunt for information has the effect of equalizing many parts of the female experience. The wild women in steerage with Rebekka and the church women of the Baptists had nothing in common with the views of each other, but they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Rebekka concludes that her prospects in life were servant, prostitute, wife and decides that wife is safest, but as with any future available to women, it depended on the character of the man in charge. Sorrow, who in spite of being pregnant twice has never been kissed on the mouth once, finds a measure of her own agency only after giving birth and renaming herself Complete. And Florens’ tale of abandonment, passion, and rejection shows an internal enslavement that can be even more powerful than the external reality.

Florens's quest for freedom is the most complex. As she searches for the black-smith, she is enslaved by her desire for him in a way that destroys what connection she has to the other women on the farm. But the blacksmith tells her that her slavery is her choice. She objects that being owned by the trader is what makes her a slave:

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.
I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be . . . You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind. (AM: 139)

This is a clear indication of how Florence breaks down psychologically and emotionally and starts losing her own self.

Florence has led a life which has been a tale of oppression and subjugation. She remains preoccupied with the thought of her mother’s rejection and her master’s unwillingness of take her. She seems to have recognized the fact that her life is hollow and nobody needs her. She might have misunderstood her mother who, perhaps, saw in Jacob better prospects for her daughter and a chance to escape cruelty which she may have suffered in her life. Florence, nonetheless, remains an ‘other,’ an invisible being who fails to cross all the barriers that hinder her individuality. She had hopes to find love and solace from the unnamed blacksmith, turned to him only to receive rejection. Maggie Galehouse comments:

*A Mercy* is not so much a novel about race, but a meditation on ownership and the ways in which the enslaved internalize their subordination. As romantic and sexy as Morrison's books can be, they always step beyond romance to a more primal place. Against the
backdrop of a territory in the early stages of colonization, \textit{A Mercy} charts nothing less than the colonization of the self.\textsuperscript{47}

Florens follows his directive and turns herself, in the observation of two indentured servants who live near the trader's farm, from “have me always” to “don't touch me ever.” (AM: 142) She defies Rebekka and takes up residence in the house that the trader had been trying to finish before his death. There she begins to author her own story. Morrison seems to argue that while slavery is a hard condition to be in, finding internal freedom is still harder. Morrison says that wrestling “dominion over another is a hard . . . wrong thing” (presumably the sin of the slave owner), but giving “dominion of yourself to another” is “wicked.” (AM: 165)

But what exactly is freedom and what are its benefits? Florens's search for freedom leaves the fragile community of women on the farm destroyed, as if without Florens each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts, unavailable to anyone else. The cost of freedom is terrible if it means having no link to others. "Don't touch me ever" may have something to recommend it, but inviolacy is another kind of prison.

Morrison doesn't give us an answer to this problem. Instead she gives us tiny glimpses into alternative ways to be human together. We see a group of escaped slaves living in the woods and finding strength, comfort and protection in their voluntary solidarity. Rebekka’s story involves recollection of the women with whom she traveled to Maryland, a group of exiled, thrown away
women who teach and help each other, who lightened the journey, made it less hideous than it surely would have been without them. Maybe, in Morrison’s imagination, this is the best we can do for each other. Utopia is the only place where a person can be both truly free and truly loved. If the women on the farm would only choose each other, they would find freedom, friendship and connection in abundance. Morrison provides a hint of what this would look like, and also of why it can't be so. Both exile and slavery are produced by historical and social elements, and they cannot be overcome simply by will or desire.

But this is not to say that *A Mercy* has the awkward feeling of anti-masculinity that many found in *Paradise*. Vaark is compassionate and generous if inconsistent. Will and Scully, the nearby indentured servants who help him, are kind as well as enslaved themselves. Even the teasing young boys are kind in their own way to the wandering Florens. The issue seems not to be man versus woman as much as oppressors versus the powerless. What is at stake is how one’s origins and history impact one’s power to create and shape worlds, internal as well as external.

Florens is a talisman of the unspoken past, and Morrison gives us a number of images to help us accompany her. For example, Florens is careful to tell us that as a child she had dainty, tender feet, feet that her mother lamented would do her no good in life. These feet must harden, though it may come at the cost of her open heart, in order for her to survive. She also explains that she is writing her story on the walls of her master’s folly, which lies deserted after
his death. Emblematically, this is the key—a black woman of history, finally leaves a written record. It would be a somewhat obvious symbolic note if Morrison did not complicate it by the suggestion that Lina’s love of fire will obliterate the narrative. Elinor Teele maintains:

Ultimately, it is Florens who guides us from silence to voice, towards the fire and the destination. Though Morrison shows us not just a black, white or brown person’s experience, but the human experience of our American history, it is still Florens’s strange speech, laced with the Portuguese language of conquerors, which stays with us after the book is finished.48

It is also, most intriguingly, the speech of her mother. For Morrison does not end with the daughter, but with the woman whom Florens assumes has given her away. Brought from Africa in chains to the West Indies, then north to serve as a concubine of the plantation owner, she is finally allowed to explain her point of view, her past, her sacrifices. It is she who gives the title to the book and she who gives us the final moral, “To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.” (AM: 165)

_A Mercy_ is a visceral, intricately textured novel that takes readers right to the origins of America, a place where the seeds of the racial, religious, and class tensions that would later come to fruition in revolution and civil war were already being sown. It is a place where people are forced to make wrenching
decisions. This is a world in which women—white, black, and Native American—are especially vulnerable, literally at the mercy of the men who hold power over them. But the novel is also an itinary of experience as ideas, and it is the vividness and immediacy of these characters that makes the novel so powerful. These are voices that have not been heard before, voices silenced first by cruelty and then by history.
References


14. Morrison, interview by David Streitfeld, sec. B.


32. Morrison, *Love* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 102. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation L.

34. Jessica Jernigan, online.


