

**Representations of Space in Toni
Morrison's *Love, Paradise and A Mercy***

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Abstract

This dissertation will examine postmodern concepts of space in Toni Morrison's three most recent novels – *Love, Paradise* and *A Mercy*, focusing on the construction of new spaces that resist spaces of oppression, and that enable healing from trauma. The dissertation will focus upon the experiences of women in each text, and examine their attempts to construct new spaces of resistance within the largely patriarchal societies they inhabit. The work will examine the affiliation between home and healing and the various issues that affect the construction of a space that constitutes a home, such as the adoption of oppressive cultural values, specifically patriarchal values, by the black community. The dissertation will examine the necessity of constructing new spaces as a means of overcoming both individual and collective trauma. The work will also examine the *reclamation* of spaces that represent oppression, and the necessity of working as a community in order to successfully reclaim these spaces, and transform them into sites that enable healing.

Introduction

My work will focus on the representations of space in Toni Morrison's three most recent novels, *Paradise*, *Love*, and *A Mercy*. I will be exploring Morrison's representation of both physical space and conceptual ideas of space, within the context of the postmodernist constructions of new spaces that 'oppose institutionalised existing spaces which have reinforced existing forms of power'¹. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism at its simplest as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'²; in the three texts named above this is precisely what the women attempt to do, they endeavour to reject preconceived notions of power and dominance, and form a new space in which they can become self-affirmed and defiant.

I will be focusing specifically on the women in each text, as Morrison generally focuses on the experiences of African American women throughout her entire body of work and, as Sunanda Pal has noted: 'female self-realisation, mother-daughter relationship, friendship between women and community bonding are central to her writing'³. I will be examining women's attempts to create a space in which they can heal from the traumas of their past, and can become emancipated and empowered within a space of continuing oppression.

My work will examine the recurring themes which are apparent in

¹ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.292

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.xxiv

³ Sunanda Pal, 'From Periphery to Centre: Toni Morrison's Self Affirming Fiction', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 37 (Sep. 10, 1994), pp. 2439-2443, p.2442
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4401756> [accessed June 22nd, 2011]

Morrison's oeuvre, for example: the role of the black mother and the mother-daughter bond, community and relationships between women, and collective and individual history and past trauma; I will be discussing the development of these themes in her three most recent texts, all of which raise issues regarding space and place, identity and belonging. In her most recent texts, particularly *A Mercy*, I suggest that Morrison revisits themes central to her earlier works. *A Mercy* invites strong comparison with Morrison's *Beloved*, and I would argue that the former could be viewed as a type of 'prequel' to the Pulitzer Prize-winning text, set during the early days of the slave trade, and exploring the effects of slavery on individuals of all cultures at that time, including European, African, and Native American, whilst the latter novel focuses on the later stages of the phenomenon's development.

This dissertation will examine the experiences of women as they attempt to construct a site of defiance and healing within a space of oppression and trauma. My argument will focus upon the following principal areas: the adoption of white dominant values within the black community – from a specifically patriarchal perspective – and the effect this has on the black community. As many critics have previously argued⁴, in adopting such values, the black community effectively repeat the traumas of their past, and emulate the society that they

⁴ Richard Schur's 'Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory', (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), Linda Krumholz's 'Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', (St. Louis University, 2002), Evelyn Schreiber's 'Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison', (Louisiana State University Press, 2010), Channette Romero's 'Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', (St. Louis University, 2005), and Mar Gallego's "'What does it mean to be a Man?'" Codes of Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and *Love*', (Seville, Spain: Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, 2009-2010) all offer arguments regarding the effects of the adoption of dominant white values by black communities.

strove initially to escape. In *Paradise*, for example, the town of Ruby functions as a microcosm of a white American state, emulating values which they have been exposed to such as patriarchy, snobbery and racism, which leads to the town's eventual downfall.

The notion of home as a site of healing is an idea explored frequently throughout Morrison's work and strongly informs bell hooks's notion of a 'homeplace', a site constructed specifically by black women and which functions as a site of healing: 'Historically, black women have resisted white [...] domination by working to establish homeplace'.⁵ In each of the three texts I have chosen to discuss, the search for a site that constitutes a home is a dominant theme. Women in each of the texts who do not have a place that functions as a home in the sense that hooks describes (due to being orphaned, abused, neglected or subject to oppression), struggle to form such a space for themselves in which they can heal from the traumas inflicted upon them. In *Love*, for example, Heed and Christine are consumed by the trauma of their past, which leads to their hatred for one another and to their obsessive attempts to obtain exclusive rights to the house on Monarch Street. In turn, this leads to their inability to construct a homeplace that would enable them to begin to heal from the trauma of their past.

A recurring theme in many of Morrison's texts is that of women working as a community in order to heal and protect one another in a hostile environment - as critics such as Sunanda Pal have noted. In each of the texts I will be examining this remains a strong theme: for example, in *Paradise* the women from the

⁵ bell hooks, 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance', *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p.44

Convent work together to protect one another and help each other heal from the trauma of their past. In *A Mercy*, however, Morrison examines the outcome when women *fail* to work together as a community.

The narration of trauma is a central theme in all three novels; I will explore Morrison's examination of the potentially healing aspects of narrating trauma that features in each of the novels, through 'loud dreaming' in *Paradise*, the 'talking room' (*A Mercy*, p.159) in *A Mercy*, and through Christine and Heed's reconciliatory discussion at the end of *Love*. This relates to a further point of examination: the reclamation of a site of trauma. I will discuss the process the women in each text must undergo in order to reclaim a space, and transform that space into a place of healing.

Morrison frequently explores the mother-daughter bond in her novels, and it is my intention to discuss the depiction of maternal bonds as a site of healing and also a site of empowerment. In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* Andrea O'Reilly examines the way in which 'Morrison develops themes of power, resistance and healing through her depiction of both mothers and those whose ability to become a mother or act as a mother is compromised'.⁶ In each of the three texts I will be discussing, the healing qualities of maternity are apparent, as Maxine Montgomery has argued: through the mother-daughter relationship characters such as Sorrow in *A Mercy* create a space for healing, emancipation and empowerment.

Although some critics, such as Evelyn Schreiber, have examined the three

⁶ Deirdre J. Raynor and Johnella E. Butler, 'Morrison and the Critical Community', *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.180

texts together, there is little comparative criticism available. Although there is much criticism which examines *Paradise*, for both *Love*, and particularly Morrison's most recent novel *A Mercy*, criticism remains scarce, particularly with regard to the subject areas that I will be exploring. Evelyn Schreiber offers an excellent discussion of Morrison's concern with home as a site of recovery from past trauma in *A Mercy* in her book, *Race, Trauma and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* and it includes chapters on *Paradise* and *Love* in which she examines similar issues. In her essay 'Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*', Maxine Montgomery also offers an examination of the function of the home and the search for a sense of self in *A Mercy*. Mar Gallego offers a discussion of the function of the black community in Morrison's *Love* in her essay 'Love and the survival of the black community'. However, other than these few examples and a small number of further scholars who touch briefly on the areas I will be examining, and whom I will acknowledge in the following chapters, there is very little critical analysis that explores the attempts of women in Morrison's texts to create a space for healing within an oppressive environment. My aim, therefore, is to address those areas that I feel have received little critical attention to date, particularly with regard to *Love* and *A Mercy*; these include areas such as the construction of home, its function as a site of healing and the representation of communities of women working together to overcome traumatic pasts through the construction of a site that will enable them to achieve it. The black community's adoption of dominant white cultural values and the ensuing consequences is also an area of study that I would suggest has

garnered little critical attention to date in Morrison's most recent works. I propose that this is a dominant theme in her most recent novels and, as such, it is of central importance to my own study in the forthcoming chapters.

Lyotard's notion of the rejection of metanarratives is especially relevant to my argument, which will examine the production of alternative spaces that oppose and reject existing dominant social values. These new spaces serve as spaces of change, spaces that Edward Soja dubs 'thirdspace' – 'a multiplicity of real-and-imagined places'.⁷ In each of the texts, the combination of real and imagined places is very clear, the women inhabit physical spaces that they must reclaim and transform. They are troubled by past traumas which haunt them in their present lives; these past events serve as an imagined space, which the women must overcome in order to successfully create a new space in which they can resist oppression and heal from the traumas of their past. As Tim Woods notes, bell hooks also discusses the notion of thirdspace, claiming: 'this space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary'.⁸ hooks examines the notion of gendered space, focusing specifically on female experiences of space which I will also be examining in my own work. She defines thirdspace as a site of defiance for women, where the search for one's self is necessary but difficult. The concept of thirdspace is of especial significance to this study that argues that the women in each novel struggle to form an affirmed sense of self through the production of a new space.

⁷ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), p.6

⁸ bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p.149

In considering each text in accordance with a postmodernist notion of the construction of 'new spaces', it becomes clear that in order to free themselves of oppression, it is essential that the women in each novel create a new space – or 'thirdspace' – in which they can become empowered and free from oppression. I will discuss the various outcomes of the 'new spaces' created by the women in each text, and consider the extent to which the women are successful in their attempts to create a place of healing, where they are able to become empowered and emancipated from oppression.

Love and the construction of the 'homeplace'

In her essay 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance', bell hooks introduces the notion of the 'homeplace', which she defines as 'a safe place' constructed by black women, 'where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination'' (hooks, p.42); she goes on to state that a homeplace serves as a space in which individuals may 'become whole' (hooks, p.49). This chapter will focus upon the healing aspects attributed to a homeplace, where individuals in the black community who suffer from any form of prejudice and domination can escape to in order to heal from the wounds inflicted upon them, and will examine the attempts of the female members of the community to form their own homeplace and gain a sense of 'wholeness'.

In this chapter I will examine several key themes within the text that relate to the construction of a homeplace. hooks states that a homeplace is a space constructed specifically by women, therefore I will engage mainly with the experiences of the women in the text and examine their attempts to construct a homeplace within a space of continuing oppression. I will examine the function of Cosey's Resort as a sanctuary for black people to heal from and escape racist persecution, and the community of women essential to its development and success. I will consider the effect of the adoption of dominant white values by the black community and its effect on the people within that community, focusing specifically on Bill Cosey's role as patriarch, a role which he maintains even following his death, and his influence on the women in the novel. I will also

examine the effects of a lack of parental guidance on the women in the text and how this lack of guidance during their youth affects their ability to construct a homeplace. Finally I will discuss the reclamation of a space which once served as a site of trauma, and how the women transform this space into a type of homeplace in which they can heal from their traumatic pasts.

Toni Morrison's eighth novel, *Love*, explores various characters' attempts to construct a homeplace, one of these places being Cosey's Hotel and Resort, situated in the beautiful Sooker Bay on the East Coast of the USA. The hotel is frequently referred to as a safe place for the black people to holiday; the ghostly L⁹, who works as the cook at the hotel, and is one of the characters whose narratives comprise the novel's structure, describes the hotel as the 'best-known vacation spot for colored people on the East Coast'¹⁰, claiming that '[Bill Cosey] helped more colored people here than forty years of government programs' (*Love*, p.9). Her account of the resort certainly suggests its function as a place for black people to escape racist persecution - she describes the resort affectionately, emphasising the sense of safety and security it provided in its heyday:

No matter the outside loneliness, if you look inside, the hotel seems to promise you ecstasy and the company of all your best friends. And music. The shift of a shutter hinge sounds like the cough of a trumpet; piano keys waver a quarter note above the wind. (*Love*, p.7)

⁹ It becomes clear during Heed and Christine's reconciliatory discussion at the end of the text that L died several years before the events of the novel take place (p.189).

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *Love* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.6

Although it is suggested that Bill Cosey runs the resort, it becomes apparent as the novel progresses that he is rather an overseer of the hotel's management, who behaves more as a guest than as an owner¹¹, and it is in fact a small community of women who endeavour to maintain the running of the resort. As bell hooks states, a homeplace is a space constructed specifically by women; what I would suggest is that the hotel appears to serve as an example of such a place initially, as it is solely the women who work to maintain it.

Following his son Billy Boy's sudden death in 1935 due to pneumonia, Bill Cosey withdraws from any managerial duties he claimed at the hotel and it is May, Billy Boy's widow and mother to their daughter Christine, and L who take over the running of the hotel. L often recalls the ease and also the efficiency of their partnership:

When it became clear that the queen of the stove was me, she moved to housekeeping, bookkeeping, provisioning [...] I think I deserve half the credit for the way the hotel grew [...] The two of us were like the back of a clock. (*Love*, p.103)

The women work hard to create the homeplace and thus the sanctuary that Cosey's Resort provides; however, as the novel progresses it becomes apparent that although the resort does provide a safe place for some black people of the time, Cosey's Resort is also extremely exclusive, catering only for the black

¹¹ Vida describes Bill Cosey as '[spending] most days fishing and most nights harmonizing with tipsy friends'. (*Love*, p.36)

bourgeoisie. Mar Gallego argues that the deterioration of Cosey's Resort is a result of class barriers within the black community:

L foresees its deterioration because it could not endure as a 'showplace', clearly signalling class barriers as an explanation for the resort's diminishing fortunes. The fact that the rest of the black community was not allowed into the resort also demonstrates a class consciousness among African Americans.¹²

Such divides within the black community culminate in severe trauma to its members, as Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber states:

While this black community should provide a safe space, bitterness, hierarchies, and unrest infiltrate the community [...] and trauma erupts.¹³

The traumatic effects of a divided community, leading to the inability of individuals to secure a sense of homeplace are apparent in many of the characters in the text. L comments on May's inability to accept her father-in-law's choice of a 'Johnson from Up Beach' as his wife: 'being the daughter of a preacher, she really tried to dredge up Christian charity, but failed whenever she looked at a Johnson.' (*Love*, p.138) May's horror and sense of offence at Bill Cosey's choice of wife goes as far as to lead to the deterioration of her mental health, as she becomes obsessed with obtaining a space within the Cosey household by any means necessary, criticising and bullying Heed and also manipulating her own

¹²Mar Gallego, 'Love and the survival of the black community', *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.93

¹³ Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), p. 139

daughter, Christine, into despising Heed as much as she does. She clings desperately to the house that defines her as being liberated from the poverty of her childhood:

May's seemingly bizarre and erratic behaviour stems from her need to preserve her place in the Cosey household and prevent a return to [her] earlier impoverishment. (Schreiber, p.144)

As a child May experienced little of the security and warmth provided by a homeplace. L describes her as an 'undercherished girl in an overmended coat.' (*Love*, p.137) However, she manages to forge a type of homeplace for herself and her family within Cosey's Resort and works hard to maintain the secure space she has created. When this is threatened by Cosey's choice of wife, May is unable to cope with the threat of the potential destruction of the secure space she has created, which culminates in her erratic behaviour: 'she went from defence to war' (*Love*, p.137).

Class bias is also clear in Bill Cosey's character, despite his choice of wife, which is eventually revealed to be the result of a complex and paedophilic desire for Heed. Sandler, grandfather of Romen and husband to Vida, who used to fish with Bill Cosey as a young man, recalls Cosey's position within the community, noting his efforts to remain separate from the lower classes, despite his generosity amongst them, and also comments on the exclusivity of the hotel:

Cosey didn't mix with local people publicly, which is to say he employed them, joked with them, even rescued them from difficult situations, but

other than at church picnics, none was truly welcome at the hotel's tables or on its dance floor. (*Love*, p.41)

Bill Cosey serves as the prime example of a man who has adopted alternative values to those of the black community at large, an issue Gallego discusses further:

He represents the far-reaching effects of African Americans' adoption of a dominant value system that systematically calls into question the very foundations of the black family and community. (Gallego, p. 99)

In adopting this dominant value system, Bill Cosey disrupts the notion of a homeplace available to black communities which offers a space of equality and self-affirmation: instead he enforces class bias and social segregation through the values exhibited in his resort: 'Cosey's community mimics the hierarchy and exclusive structure of the greater white culture'. (Schreiber, p.144) Bill Cosey also assumes the role of patriarch, dominating the lives of the women who surround him. Throughout the text his effect on each woman is profound, particularly on Heed and Christine, his wife and granddaughter, whose bitter battle for the exclusive ownership of his house on Monarch Street spans the length of the text. It is only at the end of the novel that it becomes apparent that it is Bill Cosey's paedophilic behaviour when the girls were children which is the root cause of the two women's unrelenting hatred for one another: 'that first lie, of many to follow, is born because Heed thinks Christine knows what happened and it made her vomit. (*Love*, p.191)

Cosey remains a looming presence throughout the novel, both in his portrait, which hangs above Heed's bed, and also as a phantom, haunting the house. His literal presence as a ghost in the home invites comparison with Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, in which Sethe's murdered daughter haunts the home on 124 Bluestone Road. Nancy Jesser discusses the effects of such a ghostly presence: 'The home is a place where horror becomes embodied, and where sustaining human connections can be found'.¹⁴ Bill Cosey's ongoing presence in the house on Monarch Street and consequently the women's sustained connection with him obstructs them from constructing the homeplace they crave. Although it appears that it is only Junior, the eighteen-year-old runaway, who can actually *see* Bill Cosey's spirit, each of the women who inhabit the house on Monarch street are in some sense haunted by the man. Emma Parker discusses Morrison's use of phantoms in her work in her essay 'A New Hystery: History and Hysteria in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in which she argues that the character Beloved, as a representation of Sethe's dead child, is a hysterical symptom stemming from both the community's inability to overcome the traumas of slavery, and from Sethe's inability to come to terms with murdering her own child. Parker states that 'hysteria [...] provides a means to express what is otherwise inexpressible'¹⁵ and that Beloved 'represents the return of the repressed'. (Parker, p.4) In this instance, Bill Cosey certainly represents the return of the

¹⁴ Nancy Jesser, 'Violence, Home, and Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *African American Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Indiana State University, 1999), pp. 325-345, p. 326, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2901282> [accessed 19th May, 2011]

¹⁵ Emma Parker, 'A New Hystery: History and Hysteria in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Hofstra University, 2001), pp. 1-19, p.3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/827854> [accessed 20th July, 2011]

repressed for Heed and Christine who have failed to come to terms with the trauma of their past, which was a direct result of Cosey's behaviour, and also for Junior who longs for the father figure she never had. Referring to Freud and Breuer, Parker states that: 'hysterical symptoms disappear when the memory of the disturbing event that first provoked symptoms is recalled and the affect of trauma is aroused'. (Parker, p.13) In this case, it is following Heed and Christine's return to the hotel – the initial site of trauma – that Cosey's spirit disappears: 'the Good Man vanished'. (*Love*, p.196) Parker goes on to state: 'For Morrison's characters, there is no complete recovery from hysteria, only potential for healing' (Parker, p.16). By confronting their past, Heed and Christine allow change for the future: Cosey's spirit disappears, preventing him from corrupting Junior further; however, this comes at the cost of Heed's life.

Bill Cosey is a figure who significantly affects the lives of many of the female characters he encounters, as Anissa Janine Wardi puts it: 'He overshadows their lives, their home, and their relationship with one another'.¹⁶ His dominant presence in the house, even following his death, and his actions throughout the women's lives prevent Heed and Christine from constructing their own homeplace in order to heal from the wounds inflicted on them by Cosey; they are unable to construct the space described by hooks as a space of self-affirmation:

¹⁶ Anissa Janine Wardi, 'A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of *Love*', *MELUS*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Personal and Political (MELUS, 2005), pp. 201-218, p. 205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029779> [accessed 19th May, 2011]

Black women [made] homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts [...] where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us [...] in the public world. (hooks, p.42)

In adopting the role as dominant patriarch of the family and through his continuous objectification of the women who surround him, Bill Cosey disrupts the process of transformation from object to subject, leading to the women's inability to affirm themselves; they remain enslaved by him, even years after his death. Indeed, May is described explicitly as being his slave by L: 'If I was a servant in that place, May was its slave' (*Love*, p.102). Cosey also expresses his desires to 'train' Heed, hoping to end his years of bachelorhood 'by marrying a girl he could educate to his taste' (*Love*, p.110), which suggests her slave-like status. Christine's unrelenting battle to obtain exclusive rights to his house, and boundless hatred for the woman with whom she must share it, serve as a means of enslaving her. Even the all-knowing L who maintains a degree of superiority throughout the text¹⁷ often attempts to excuse Cosey's inappropriate behaviour, thus aiming to portray him in a more positive light. The women certainly do not maintain the sense of dignity hooks that describes; Christine and Heed go as far as to fight over Cosey's grave at his funeral. Heed also suffers the humiliation of being 'spanked' at the dinner table by her husband in front of Christine and May.

It is Heed and Christine who suffer most from Cosey's dominating behaviour, his intervention in their friendship as children impeding both women's

¹⁷ Sandler describes L as 'priestly' in the hierarchy of hotel staff. (*Love*, p.37)

ability to form their own homeplace, and heal from the wounds inflicted by him.

Amanda J. Davis comments on the recurring theme in African American women's literature of violation, rendering women incapable of gaining an affirmed sense of self:

Many African American women writers have demonstrated in their texts how women's wholeness has been continually compromised by the threat of bodily and emotional violation inside and outside of the home.¹⁸

Both Heed and Christine have suffered both physical and emotional violation throughout their lives, this leading to the difficulty which each of them experiences in attempting to form a sense of self. The house on Monarch Street does not offer a space for healing; rather, it is a site of continuing pain, haunted physically and also through the ongoing influence of Bill Cosey, where both women maintain their hatred for one another brought about by his actions in their youth. The house has never served as a homeplace to either woman, rather, it is a site of trauma for both; Heed was sold and moved to Monarch Street to marry a man forty years her senior when she was still a child. Christine comments on the effect of such an upheaval on a child:

“It does something to the mind, marrying before your first period. She needs professional help” [...] “There's virgins and then there's children”.

(*Love*, p.132)

¹⁸ Amanda J. Davis, 'Shatterings: Violent Disruptions of Homeplace in *Jubilee* and *The Street*', *MELUS*, Vol. 30, No. 4, *Home: Forged or Forged?* (MELUS, 2005), pp. 25-51, p. 27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029633> [accessed 19th May, 2011]

Heed has consequently never experienced a homeplace; she is sold by her impoverished family when she is still a child – a sign of their disregard for her and also their inability to provide her with a secure homeplace – and is moved to a house that serves as a site of constant humiliation and prejudice, not a place of safety and healing. Such an upheaval at such a young age has a dramatic effect on Heed's development into a woman: 'Heed was thrust into adulthood [and] had no access to education'. (Wardi, p.209) Consequently she remains notably childlike throughout her adulthood, referring rather disturbingly to Bill Cosey as 'Papa' throughout, which, as well as suggesting her misguided affections for him also indicates her craving for a paternal figure.

In the same way as Heed, Christine has never experienced a sense of homeplace; as a child her mother sends her away to Maple Valley boarding school and upon her return to Monarch Street on her sixteenth birthday she is sent away again. Christine maintains a lifestyle in which she moves persistently from one place to another in search of a space in which she can form a homeplace in order to heal from the wounds inflicted upon her by her dismissal by her family. She seeks refuge from her home life in several locations, including a brothel named Manila's. She recognises, however that in every place she relocates to her aspiration to gain 'privacy' and 'independence' (*Love*, p.92) is an unattainable one, as each place she inhabits – Cosey's Resort, Maple Valley, and Manila's – caters specifically to the needs of men:

All three floated in sexual tension and resentment; all three insisted on confinement; in all three status was money. And all were organized around the pressing needs of men. (*Love*, p.92)

Christine's life is in a constant state of dislocation, 'she defines herself as "displaced"' (Gallego, p.95), and it is due to her itinerant lifestyle and the male-dominated nature of the places she chooses to inhabit that Christine has developed no sense of homeplace. Therefore she is unable to form a sense of self and heal from the trauma she suffered due to the neglect of both her mother and grandfather.

Jean Wyatt discusses the effects of traumatic disruption on Heed and Christine during their childhood, claiming that:

From the time that Heed is jolted untimely into the world of sexuality and marriage up until the [...] women are in their sixties, she and Christine occupy a world of patriarchal meanings that precludes their understanding of what the loss of their friendship means to them; they can see each other only as rivals.¹⁹

The two women are rivals in their desire for the exclusive ownership of a space which they believe can provide the healing they both desire. However, through their reluctance to accept one another as equal victims of a traumatic childhood

¹⁹ Jean Wyatt, 'Love's Time and the Reader: Ethical Effects of "Nachträglichkeit" in Toni Morrison's *Love*', *Narrative*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Ohio State University Press 2008), pp. 193-221, p. 3, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/download/attachments/108495825/JeanWyattCriticalEssay.rtf?version=1&modificationDate=> [accessed 19th May, 2011]

both women remain in a kind of stasis, with no scope for emotional development and healing from the trauma they suffered.

Both Christine and Heed cling to the house on Monarch Street, in a desperate attempt to attain a sense of self:

For both Christine and Heed, Cosey's property represents a worthy self.

By fighting over the estate, they express their need for personal recognition. (Schreiber, p. 139)

Davis states that in her work Morrison often calls into question the 'over-easy reliance on the association between home and safe sanctuary' (Davis, p.48): both Heed and Christine mistakenly believe that in gaining exclusive rights to the house they will be able to achieve a sense of wholeness, and it is only at the end of the novel that both women realise that the house, which serves as a site of continuing trauma, cannot offer this.

Junior, who moves into the house on Monarch Street with Heed and Christine, serves as another example of a woman striving to form her own homeplace. As a child she was raised at the Settlement, a neighbourhood segregated from the rest of the community, where she was bullied and isolated by her family and the other 'Rurals', as they are dubbed, because of her eagerness to learn at school, a trait the rest of the community did not share. The Settlement does not provide the security and safety of a homeplace; in fact, much like Heed and May's homes, it is impoverished and dangerous. Like Heed and Christine, Junior has no real experience of parental care and longs for her father: 'She kept

on looking for the tall, handsome man who named her after himself.’ (*Love*, p.55)

This dysfunction and lack of homeplace in her early childhood lead to her struggle to secure a sense of self, and also to her misplaced sense of security when she encounters Bill Cosey: ‘As soon as she saw the stranger’s portrait she knew she was home’. (*Love*, p.60) In identifying herself with Bill Cosey, Junior also becomes a victim of the wrongs inflicted by him in the past. She, like the other women gives herself to Cosey, the most authoritative adult she knows, as she craves the protection and guidance of a parent, specifically a father. Unlike Heed and Christine, however, Junior does not acknowledge Bill Cosey as a corruptive character, referring to him as her ‘Good Man’. (*Love*, p.116) Her infatuation with Cosey serves as a representation of the on-going destruction caused by Bill Cosey’s adoption of dominant values even years after his death, and how he obstructs women who are desperately seeking their own homeplace in which they can heal from the wounds inflicted upon them and gain a sense of wholeness. In her foreword to the first international edition of *Love*, Morrison states that:

Among the things Christine, Heed, and Junior have already lost, besides their innocence and their faith, are a father and a mother, or, to be more precise, fathering and mothering. Emotionally unprotected by adults, they give themselves over to the most powerful one they know, the man who looms even larger in their imagination than in their lives.²⁰

All three women, due to the lack of homeplace where they could affirm themselves as children, search desperately for a site in which they can form their

²⁰ Toni Morrison, *Love* (New York: First Vintage International Edition: 2005), Foreword xii

own homeplace as adults. Their lack of parental care leads to their misguided desire for the affections of Bill Cosey, whom they mistakenly believe can provide the paternal care they so desire. This desire and competition for his affections leads to traumatic upheaval which prevents the women from forming the homeplace they require in order to begin the process of healing. Ironically, it is the hotel, the site of 'that first lie' (*Love*, p.191), which eventually allows Heed and Christine to begin their process of healing through reconciliation, albeit that this is achieved only hours before Heed's death. The two reconcile as Heed lies dying in Christine's old room, acknowledging their lack of parental guidance as children:

You know May wasn't much of a mother to me.

At least she didn't sell you.

No, she gave me away [...]

Hating you was the only thing my mother liked about me.

I heard it was two hundred dollars he gave my daddy, and a pocketbook for Mama. (*Love*, pp.184-193)

This lack during their childhood of parental care and guidance – key factors in the construction of a homeplace – culminates in their inability to form their own homeplace as adults. It is only through acknowledging this lack of guidance during their youth that Christine and Heed are able to begin the process of healing. bell hooks claims: 'When a people no longer have the space to construct a homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance'. (hooks, p.47) This is the problem for the women in the text: the house on Monarch Street is not

a space in which they can construct a homeplace, as they cannot resist the dominant presence of Bill Cosey in the house which he haunts both literally and also through the continuing effects of his past actions. Heed and Christine can only begin the process of healing after leaving the house and returning to the hotel, the site of 'that first lie' (*Love*, p.191), which has led to the mutual hatred that permeates the house on Monarch Street. Here for the first time they acknowledge the trauma of their childhood, even if they cannot discuss the incident directly: 'Even in idigay they had never been able to share a certain twin shame'. (*Love*, p.190) The fact that the location in which the reconciliation takes place is also the site where the women were first 'introduced [...] to nasty' (*Love*, p.65) through Bill Cosey's paedophilic actions, signifies their reclamation of the space that once offered safety and happiness before it was corrupted by him. For Heed and Christine at least, through their reconciliation, the hotel has developed from a site of trauma to a space of healing and resistance: 'Christine's home satisfied Heed's craving for protection, place, and self-esteem'. (Schreiber, p.149) They have succeeded in reclaiming the site where their suffering began and transforming it into a *type* of homeplace at least, where both women finally begin to experience the sense of wholeness they so desire.

Trauma and Community in *Paradise*

Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*, the third part of a trilogy which includes *Beloved* and *Jazz*²¹, shifts between two main locations – the town of Ruby and the Convent, a renovated house that once served as a type of 'playboy mansion' for a wealthy bachelor. This chapter will explore the ways in which both the townspeople of Ruby and the women from the Convent attempt to create a space in which they can heal from their traumatic pasts, and the problems that they encounter as they attempt to do so.

This chapter will examine the adoption of dominant white values through the depiction of the all-black community of Ruby that exhibits racist values; I will examine how this serves as a means of doubly oppressing the women within the community. I will also examine the patriarchal roles adopted by the men of the community, arising from their need to assert themselves following their rejection by other black people due to their attempts to establish their own all-black community, an event that is dubbed 'The Disallowing'. I will examine how this rejection serves as the main cause for the men's overwhelmingly oppressive and eventually violent behaviour towards the women both within and also on the outskirts of the community. Finally I will explore how the people of Ruby, as well as the women who inhabit the Convent remain in a state of stasis through their

²¹ There has been much critical debate regarding the way in which *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* function as a trilogy, see for example such essays as: 'The Morrison Trilogy' (Cambridge University Press, 2007) by Justine Tally, or "'Passing on" Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*' (St. Louis University, 2004) by Sarah Aguiar.

inability, and also their reluctance, to overcome the events of their pasts. I will discuss the necessity of overcoming these traumatic events in order to move forward and develop a new space for healing and how this process is depicted within the novel.

In Richard L. Schur's reading of the novel, 'paradise constitutes another name for home, a place that provides safety and nurturing'²²; in this instance, therefore, paradise, much like bell hooks's definition of 'homeplace', is a site of safety, nurturing, and healing. In the text, however, the reality of 'paradise' – the all-black town of Ruby – is far removed from such notions. Reverend Misner comments on the distinct lack of 'homes' within the community during a discussion with another resident, Pat Best:

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.²³

Ruby, as Misner states, serves more as a fortress intent on keeping people out: it maintains a preoccupation with racial purity, going so far as to marginalise light-skinned black members of the community. Shur goes on to state:

In *Paradise*, Morrison portrays how African Americans have houses, but not homes. Haven, [...] then Ruby fail to live up to their names because

²² Richard L. Schur, 'Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 276-299, p. 280,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593567> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

²³ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Random House, 1998), p.304

racist and sexist ideologies do not respect the borders established by the townspeople. These communities based on a utopian ideal are not homes because the racial ideologies that the inhabitants of Ruby sought to escape follow them within their hearts and minds. (Schur, p.277)

Despite their relocation, the townspeople maintain the oppressive ideals that they themselves endured in their past through their attempts to preserve a community that bases its values around social exclusion. As in *Love*, the people's adoption of values which once served as a way of oppressing them leads to the continuance of oppression and prejudice within the community:

The citizens of Ruby guard against further oppression by establishing a rigid, isolationist code of behaviour that refuses to allow any new ideas, beliefs, or ethnicities to interfere with their sense of racial pride and community.²⁴

Ironically, in striving to form a community that guards against further oppression, the people of Ruby in fact imitate the communities from which they wish to escape.

Billie Delia serves as an example of a woman from Ruby who is victimised by the community's prejudiced values, the colour of her skin being

²⁴ Channette Romero, 'Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', *African American Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (St Louis University, 2005), pp. 415-430, p. 416, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033672> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

lighter than the rest of the eight-rock²⁵ townspeople leads to constant judgemental scrutiny on the part of the rest of the community. She is perceived as being promiscuous and a troublemaker, a perception that leads eventually to her mother's vicious attack upon her daughter, which stems from her desire to eliminate her daughter's bad name: 'The Royal Ease in her hand as she ran up the stairs was there to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was'. (*Paradise*, p.289) Billie Delia eventually decides to leave the oppressive town and, upon hearing about the attack on the Convent, expresses her desire for the women to return and destroy the town that has been the cause of so much suffering caused by multiple oppressive prejudices and experienced particularly by them. Billie Delia's attitude offers an insight into the true mind-set of the town's male population:

When will they reappear [...] to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? A town that had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded swallowing her mother and almost broken her own self. A backward noplacel ruled by men whose power to control was out of control [...] who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them. (*Paradise*, p.438)

The values upheld by the tenants of Ruby have the most severe effect on the women of the community and particularly on the women from the Convent, as

Schur states:

²⁵ The term eight-rock refers to 'a deep level in the coalmines'. (*Paradise*, p.272) Pat Best describes certain members of the community as eight-rock, defining them as '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'. (*Paradise*, p.273)

The Convent, [...] haunts the community precisely because the fears and psychic wounds that they brought with them get mapped onto the Convent and onto women in general. (Schur, p.290)

Led mainly by the powerful twins Deacon and Steward Morgan, the men of the town adopt patriarchal values and, as Billie Delia states, their power within the community spirals ‘out of control’, culminating in the attack on the women from the Convent. Throughout the text it is clear that women are expected to behave in a certain manner, as Mar Gallego states:

All Ruby’s men [adhere] to the traditional gender division, which keeps “good” women at home, depriving them of any agency or voice in the community. But even more than that, the men hold on to a concept of conventional masculinity and resort to violence in order to re-establish their control.²⁶

It is not only the wives and daughters of Ruby who are expected to behave in such a way and who are victims of the oppression enforced by the men, but also the women from the Convent, despite their placement miles outside of the town. Gallego refers to Carme Manuel’s argument that: ‘African American masculinity is [upheld] at the cost of black women’ (Gallego, p.55), and this certainly appears to be the case in *Paradise*. The attack on the women from the Convent serves as an example of the extreme nature of the men’s desire to re-establish themselves as

²⁶Mar Gallego, ““What does it mean to be a Man?” Codes of Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise and Love*”, *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, No. 14 (Seville, Spain: Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, 2009-2010), pp. 49-65, p. 55, <http://institucional.us.es/revistas/revistas/estudios/pdf/14/03%20gallego.pdf> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

dominant masculine figures, their dominance perceived by them as being threatened by the freedom of the Convent women.

The men strive to gain a sense of purpose through the preservation of their forefather's histories, which leads to their own sense of frustration, as Andrew Read states: 'In modern Ruby, the men are so focused on preserving their forefathers' achievements that they have no personal accomplishments through which to define their masculinity'.²⁷ Consequently their frustration at their own perceived lack of achievement, and thus their undermined sense of masculinity, manifests itself through extreme violence. In an attempt to gain a sense of purpose and control, the men of Ruby endeavour to build a place in which their masculinity is beyond question, where they will never experience the oppression and prejudice suffered by their ancestors; however, this sense of masculine security comes at the cost of the women's continued suffering: 'The men are so intent on their town-building as their glorified purpose, that they forget both themselves and the families they are supposed to protect in the first place'. (Gallego, p.54) The men become obsessed with the rebuilding of the town, particularly the Oven that serves as the town's sacred centre and whose presence they are convinced will uphold the community. Soane Morgan, wife of Deacon Morgan, discusses the men's obsessive behaviour regarding the Oven: 'Oh how the men loved putting it back together; how proud it had made them, how devoted.

²⁷ Andrew Read, "'As If Word Magic Had Anything to Do with the Courage It Took to be a Man": Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's Paradise', *African American Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (St. Louis University, 2005), pp. 527-540, p. 532, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033691> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine'. (*Paradise*, p.141) She goes on to express the true feelings of the women regarding the moving of the shrine:

The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it – rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child's crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together – hours that could have been spent getting the privy door on sooner. (*Paradise*, p.141)

The men prioritise the rebuilding of the Oven over the essential needs of the community. By rebuilding the Oven the men attempt to re-create a space that once provided safety and the possibility of healing, however, this space is no longer available to them. In attempting to re-create this space the men prevent the creation of a new space that is essential to the community's ability to overcome the traumas of the past. As Soane states, the Oven was a necessity for the community of Haven. However, for Ruby, it is the cause of constant disagreements within the community. It serves as a symbol of the achievements of the forefathers for the men, a source of resentment for the women, and a symbol of much-needed change and development for the young people of the community. There is no commonality of perception regarding the significance of the Oven for Ruby.

It is clear throughout the text that fear of the oppression of the past, which lead to the loss of their sense of masculinity and also to their having no sense of purpose or control, torments the men of Ruby: ‘These contemporary men are unable to overcome the shame and humiliation of the Disallowing many generations afterwards, and this feeling of impotence poisons their current lives’. (Gallego, p.54) Such feelings of impotence, as I have indicated above, lead to the severe oppression of women and eventually to the murder of the women from the Convent.

It is suggested by Lone DuPres, the eighty-six year-old midwife of Ruby, that in fact the men are intimidated by the women, particularly women who display any form of superiority over the men; she suggests that in her case it is her profession that is the cause of their fear, recalling her mother’s words of warning:

“Men scared of us, always will be. To them we’re death’s handmaiden standing as between them and the children their wives carry” [...] the midwife is the interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skill so much depended, and the dependency irritated them. (*Paradise*, p.385)

It is clear that the feeling of not being able to exercise control over women’s actions leads to the men’s hatred of the women from the Convent: ‘They don’t need men and they don’t need God’. (*Paradise*, p.392) The men are intimidated by the women’s freedom and ability to care for themselves and each other without any male influence, be it the influence of the men of Ruby or the influence of God himself. This feeling of intimidation, which develops into feverish hatred,

culminates in the murder of the women from the Convent, an event which, rather than saving the diminishing community in Ruby as the men had hoped it would, serves as a means of fracturing any form of community that remained. Linda Krumholz argues that the attack on the Convent is a manifestation of the frustrations that the men of Ruby experience due to their adoption of dominant white values:

The men are blind to the ways that their hidden laws of racial purity, masculine dominance, and economic competition replicate the society they mean to escape and repudiate. The attack on the Convent, on the evil without, is in fact an attack on the perceived evils the New Fathers cannot accept within themselves and their town, evils they project outward.²⁸

Following the attack on the Convent, Deacon Morgan, one of the twins who control most aspects of the town's life, appears to acknowledge weaknesses within the community, particularly amongst the men. He attempts to stop his brother Steward from shooting his former lover Connie, which causes both men, often described as being virtually one person²⁹, to drift apart: 'It was as though he had looked in his brother's face and did not like himself anymore' (*Paradise*, p.427). In dissociating himself from his brother, Deacon begins to assert a sense of

²⁸ Linda J. Krumholz, 'Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (St. Louis University, 2002), pp. 21-34, p. 24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903362> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

²⁹ The men are described as one entity throughout the text, often described as being able to communicate without speaking, Linda Krumholz describes the two men as the epitome of unified authority: 'they share one memory, one purpose, and one belief'. (Krumholz, p.21) Richard Schur offers the interesting argument that 'The doubling of Steward and Deacon Morgan [...] illustrates the fragmentation of self' (Schur, p.249), suggesting that it is only following the separation between the brothers that either can for a sense of individual self.

individual self. He goes on to express his desire to convey his deep love for his wife: ‘she was grand, more beautiful than he believed a woman could be’ (*Paradise*, p.427), and strikes up an unlikely relationship with his former enemy Reverend Misner, to whom he confesses his past wrongs. Gallego argues that through this confession Deacon reveals the true character of the men of Ruby:

Deacon’s final confession actually reveals these men as emotionally crippled figures who are completely lost as to how to construct a healthy version of their manhood away from constraining definitions favored by White patriarchy. (Gallego, p.57)

In adopting and upholding values which once served as a means of oppressing them, the residents of Ruby, particularly the men, perform the same dominant roles inflicted upon them in the past, leading to the inability of the community to create a paradise or, as Schur defines it, a home:

The building of paradise, the building of a home, cannot be complete without dealing with the memories of racism and how those memories continue to haunt institutions and cultural practices. (Schur, p.298)

It is due to their inability to come to terms with the past, and their adoption of the social values of a culture that once served as a means of oppressing them, that the people of Ruby re-create the society they strive to escape. As Reverend Misner states: ‘How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?’ (*Paradise*, p.434)

Sarah Aguiar states that 'By allowing no outside encroachment, Ruby remains dead to change, static'.³⁰ However, it is not only the people of Ruby whose lives remain in a state of stasis, as Aguiar goes on to state, it is also the women from the Convent: 'For most of the novel, they are as static as their Ruby neighbors'. (Aguiar, p.514) Although they are perceived as a small community of 'Jezebels' by the residents of Ruby, they remain far from a 'community' for most of the text. Throughout the novel each woman exists largely as a sole individual, despite their physical state as a group of women, they do not function as a community until the end of the novel. Mavis, who maintains a somewhat stronger relationship with Connie (aka Consolata) due to her being the first to arrive at the Convent, cares only for their relationship, which she perceives as being more meaningful than Connie's relationships with the other women. Gigi (aka Grace) is also concerned only with her relationship with Connie. She finds a box in which she hopes to find treasure and decides she will share it with Connie alone. The two women's competition for Connie's affections leads to their intense hatred for one another, often culminating in extremely physically aggressive outbursts, such as their fist fight in the road following their trip to K.D and Arnette's wedding. Pallas and Seneca do not appear to share the same desire for the exclusive affections of Connie, rather they drift between the feuding women, Pallas (aka Divine) often unable to understand the situation and Seneca attempting to keep the peace between them.

³⁰ Sarah Appleton Aguiar, "'Passing on' Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*", *African American Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (St Louis University, 2004), pp. 513-519, p. 513, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1512451> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

Towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that Connie's only commitment to any other individual at the Convent is to Mother (Mary Magna), whose death leads to her descent into depression and alcoholism. The death of the woman who serves as her mother both spiritually and maternally from the age of nine leaves Connie with no sense of identity:

She had no identification, no insurance, no family, no work. Facing extinction, waiting to be evicted, wary of God, she felt like a curl of paper – nothing written on it – lying in the corner of an empty closet. (*Paradise*, p.351)

As well as possessing no form of physical identification, Connie also feels no sense of identification with the other women with whom she shares the Convent and goes so far as to express her deep dislike for each of them:

When she was sipping Saint-Émilion or the smoky Jarnac, she could tolerate them, but more and more she wanted to snap their necks. Anything to stop the badly cooked indigestible food, the greedy hammering music, the fights, the raucous empty laughter, the claims. (*Paradise*, p.312)

At the beginning of the text the Convent does not offer the space of healing each of the women requires. Although the women who once transformed the house into a school attempted to disguise its original function, it remains clear that the house is a space that once catered exclusively for male desires:

He must have planned to have a lot of good-time company in his fortress: eight bedrooms, two giant bathrooms, a cellar of storerooms that occupied

as much space as the first floor. And he wanted to amuse his guests so completely they would not think of leaving for days on end. His efforts to entertain were no more sophisticated or interesting than he was- mostly food, sex and toys. (*Paradise*, p.96)

The house, rather than offering a space of healing for the women, serves as a space that continues to harm them, or at least facilitates the continuation of their pain. Connie confines herself to the cellar in which the wine that once belonged to the original owner is kept; although it is not the cause of her alcoholism, its presence facilitates her illness. Gigi is affected by her surroundings, finding the image she encounters of the woman with the 'I give up face' (*Paradise*, p.100) extremely disturbing. Mavis maintains an obsession with looking after her dead twins Merle and Pearl whom she believes are present at the Convent: 'She still heard Merle and Pearl, felt their flutter in every room of the Convent.' (*Paradise*, p.244),³¹ Seneca begins to self-harm and Pallas returns to hide the fact that she is pregnant. The house, therefore, despite its fortress-like construction, does not offer safety: 'Shaped like a live cartridge, it curved to a deadly point at the north end. [...] the first-floor windows huddled [...]. Like lookouts'. (*Paradise*, p.96) This description further emphasises the notion that the house does not offer safety, it is rather a site of violence and fear.

³¹ This invites comparison with my previous argument in my first chapter, which suggests that the interaction with phantoms in Morrison's texts is a symptom of hysteria arising from a traumatic event. Mavis's interaction with her dead babies could be seen as a hysterical symptom arising from her inability to accept the loss of her children as she is responsible for their deaths, as in Sethe's case in *Beloved*.

As with Heed and Christine's reconciliation in *Love*, during which they acknowledge the past wrongs inflicted upon them, it is only through acknowledging past wrongs that the women of the Convent begin to function as a stable community, and are therefore able to begin the process of healing. Connie, after experiencing a spiritual encounter takes control, commanding the women: "If you have a place [...] that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me". (*Paradise*, p. 374) The women, who feel they have nowhere that they belong decide to stay and under Connie's guidance begin to tell the stories of the traumas they have suffered through 'loud dreaming' (*Paradise*, p.376):

The women at the Convent learn to heal themselves through confronting and sharing stories of their traumatic pasts, using narration as a means of reconnecting to others and the natural world. (Romero, p.418)

In narrating the stories of their traumatic pasts the women connect with one another, and it is at this point that they begin to function as a community, nurturing and healing one another. In articulating the traumas of their pasts, the women take control of what Edward Soja dubs an 'imagined space' – that is, they take control of the traumas of their past which they continue to experience in their present lives; this enables them to form a new space in which they can begin to heal from these past traumas. The women also discover a way of displacing the wounds inflicted upon them by depicting them on silhouettes of themselves drawn on the basement floor:

These silhouettes become receptacles for all of their negative thoughts, thoughts that previously had been directed against themselves. Rather than internalize the pain or punish themselves with various forms of self-mutilation, the women can examine that pain and mark it on an image instead of on themselves. (Schur, p.292)

The women reject the patriarchal oppression the Convent formerly represented by marking the Convent with their own drawings, reclaiming and transform the space into one that caters for their own needs. The women experience a sense of being cleansed of their traumatic pasts, this cleansing being emphasised by the passage in which they dance together in the rain, celebrating their freedom. They are ‘no longer haunted’. (*Paradise*, p. 380) However, despite being no longer haunted the women are still ‘hunted’, as Morrison puts it, by the people of Ruby who are frightened by the women’s new-found freedom, an issue Cynthia Davis addresses in her essay 'Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction':

The characters who are [...] cut off from reassuring connection and definition, are profoundly frightening to the community, especially to a community dispossessed and “peripheral”; it responds by treating the free person as [a] kind of scapegoat.³²

That is, the people of Ruby use the women from the Convent as a scapegoat for their own problems, displacing their fears and anxieties by projecting them onto

³² Cynthia A. Davis, 'Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp. 323-342, p. 331, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208158> [accessed June 7th, 2011]

the women who are represented as Other. The women of Ruby often use the women from the Convent as a way of shifting the focus from their own wrongdoings, such as adultery, pregnancy out of wedlock, arguments between themselves and with the men of Ruby, as well as seeking refuge at the Convent: ‘women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent.’ (*Paradise*, p.382) Also the men, as I previously have indicated, project their own fears regarding the failings of their community onto the women who are represented as Other.

It is the town of Ruby’s failure to work as a community of equals that leads to their downfall: unlike the women from the Convent, they develop a social hierarchy based around patriarchal and oppressive values drawn from the societies that once oppressed them. This is the underlying cause of their inability to overcome the trauma they experienced in the past, as they merely imitate the society that was the source of the trauma rather than forming a new society – a new space – that allows them to overcome the traumas of their past: ‘Unlike the women in the Convent [...] the people of Ruby continue to be haunted by stories of their past traumas’. (Romero, p.418) It is only through acknowledging and abolishing these wrongs within the community, as many of the women do, and as Deacon begins to do towards the end of the novel, that the town of Ruby may develop into the paradise that Richard Schur describes, a home in which they can develop, progress and heal from the wounds of their traumatic past. (Schur, p.280)

‘Own yourself, woman’: the search for individual identity in *A Mercy*

The idea of communities of women working together as a means of breaking free from the confinements of an oppressive society is a recurrent theme throughout Morrison’s work. Sunanda Pal states that ‘Communities of women in Morrison’s novels act as support systems facilitating the survival of [...] women in a hostile environment’. (Pal, p.2443) Rachel Lister argues that *Love* and *Paradise* conclude with ‘empowering moments of unity between women who have broken out of roles forged primarily through their relationships with men’.³³ In this chapter, I intend to argue that *A Mercy* appears to reverse this pattern, that is, by the end of the novel the sense of community that exists between the women at the beginning of the text has diminished as a result of the death of Jacob Vaark, the man whose relationship with each woman ensured their security. Rather than breaking out of roles forged through their relationships with Jacob in accordance with the trajectory of the female characters in some of Morrison’s other novels, the women are thrown into a state of uncertainty in which their security is undermined. Rather than uniting and producing a new space of resistance, the women drift apart and attempt to forge their own space in which they can reclaim a sense of individual identity.

This chapter will examine the reversal of recurring thematic elements that feature throughout Morrison’s oeuvre; I will explore women’s individual struggles to form a sense of empowered self, as opposed to the communal efforts of the

³³ Rachel Lister, *Reading Toni Morrison* (California: Greenwood Press, 2009), p.119

women discussed in my previous chapters. I will also examine Jacob Vaark's role as patriarch, which is represented in a significantly more positive light to those depicted in Morrison's previous novels. Rather than serving as a figure of oppressive dominance, Jacob is often depicted as the protector and even saviour of the women within the text. I will also examine the affiliation between maternal bonds and the construction of home. I will examine how the women's and also Jacob's lack of a maternal bond affects their ability to construct a home as hooks defines it, in which they can become self-affirmed and empowered.

As in *Love and Paradise*, in *A Mercy* Morrison explores the attempts of a group of displaced individuals to form a sense of self and belonging, and a sense of home in an unfamiliar environment. Schreiber notes that: 'Morrison's novel of dispossessed and transplanted people investigates each character's search for the safe haven of home'. (Schreiber, p.30) However, rather than depict the collective trauma of a community and their attempts to overcome such trauma *as a* community, Morrison explores the *individual* traumatic experiences of displaced peoples and their *individual* search for a space in which they can make a home and heal from the wounds inflicted upon them. Evelyn Schreiber views the America depicted in *A Mercy* as 'a nation of transplanted populations' (Schreiber, p.164), where 'class, family connections, and occasionally luck determine power and ownership', (Schreiber, p.164) and where slavery does not necessarily equate with race; this 'developing America', as she dubs it, 'focuses on the personal trauma of individuals rather than on collective memory and group suffering'. (Schreiber, p.164) Although the women function as a community to begin with,

their search for a sense of empowered self is achieved through each woman's individual struggle.

Each woman's sense of self is constructed according to her relationship with men; as Jacob's wife, Rebekka perceptively notes:

[The women] had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay. [...] Some, like Lina, who had experienced both deliverance and destruction at their hands, withdrew. Some, like Sorrow, who apparently was never coached by other females, became their play. Some like her shipmates fought them. Others, the pious, obeyed them. And a few, like herself, after a mutually loving relationship, became like children when the man was gone.³⁴

Morrison explores each woman's struggle to sever herself from such restrictive circumstances and attempt to form a sense of individual, emancipated, and empowered self, and a sense of belonging within an environment ruled by a patriarch.

As in *Love and Paradise*, male figures dominate the lives of the women; however, in *A Mercy*, the women *rely* upon the dominant male for security and protection, which, for much of the novel, Jacob Vaark provides.³⁵ It is only following his death that their community falls into disarray. Much like Paul D in

³⁴ Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.96

³⁵ In comparison to Bill Cosey in *Love*, or the men of Ruby in *Paradise*, Morrison depicts Jacob Vaark's status as patriarch as a positive thing, he offers stability and security to women who would otherwise be in a worse situation.

Beloved,³⁶ Jacob offers security and helps the women to heal from wounds inflicted upon them in the past. He accepts Florens from her begging mother, takes Sorrow off the hands of a family who do not want her, treats Lina well and respects and loves his wife, Rebekka. The blacksmith, who also represents a superior male figure within the text, is described as a man who aids rather than oppresses the women. Despite his effect on Florens, Lina describes him as having ‘brought one girl to womanhood and saved the life of another’. (*A Mercy*, p.49)

Despite aiding the women throughout the text, the men nonetheless control each of their lives; they simultaneously emancipate and control the women, offering safety and guidance, as well as the threat of leaving the women extremely vulnerable upon their departure, which becomes apparent after Jacob’s death. During their time together prior to Jacob’s death the women see themselves as ‘kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation’. (*A Mercy*, pp.153-4) Each of the characters is an orphan and each of them is a displaced individual. They find comfort in forming a type of family unit within a domestic space. Florens is given to Jacob by her mother, an act which is later revealed to be one of love on her mother’s behalf; Sorrow is orphaned following the death of her father and his crew in a shipwreck; Rebekka is sold by her parents; Lina’s Native American tribe is wiped out by disease and Jacob Vaark himself is an orphan. Morrison explores each character’s attempts to create the

³⁶ In an interview with Marsha Jean Darling entitled ‘In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, Morrison states that she considers Paul D a healing character in her novel *Beloved*. (in *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (Old City Publishing, Inc., 1988), pp. 5-6, p.6 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4020269> [accessed June 22nd, 2011])

sense of family and belonging that they have never experienced, in an environment unfamiliar to every one of them.

Following Jacob's death, the women's relationships with one another diminish, as the security Jacob once provided is no longer available to them:

Three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, [...] subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. (*A Mercy*, p.56)

Without Jacob, who serves as the master of each woman, their statuses are thrown into a position of uncertainty, as it is Jacob's farm that provides their positions within his household, giving them an official role, as well as sense of purpose and belonging. Maxine Montgomery has argued that not one of the women '[has] an identity apart from the [...] roles she is forced to assume',³⁷ however, in this case these roles offer security during a period in which women, as Lina states, are largely unprotected and vulnerable. Rebekka comments on the limited roles available to women: 'her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest'. (*A Mercy*, pp.75-6) Despite being forced into specific roles, these positions provide security for the women on the farm who would otherwise have had none.

³⁷ Maxine L. Montgomery, 'Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*', *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 4 (2011), pp.627-637, p.630 <http://jbs.sagepub.com/content/42/4/627> [accesses June 22nd, 2011]

Once their security is thrown into question following Jacob's death, the women's sense of community deteriorates and they begin to drift apart:

There had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though [...] they were falling away from one another. (*A Mercy*, pp.131-32)

Lina astutely acknowledges that 'As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family – not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all'. (*A Mercy*, p. 57) Lister states that: 'the women on the farm have generated a "false" sense of community' (Lister, p.119): that is, they have attempted to create a substitute for what they truly desire – their own families, specifically a maternal bond that none of them has truly experienced. As Lina states, they are all orphans. Rebekka expresses her desire for a maternal bond that she hopes her marriage, if it provides nothing else, will offer: 'she might have children and therefore be guaranteed some affection'. (*A Mercy*, p.76) However, traumatised by the death her three sons and finally 'unleavened' (*A Mercy*, p.19) by the death of her daughter, Patrician and husband, Rebekka descends into a state of feverish religious worship, shutting herself off from the world around her and severing all connections with the women on the farm: 'she beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock taken down, [and] advertised the sale of Florens' (*A Mercy* p.153). The loss of her daughter serves as the prime reason for Rebekka's unstable state: she is described as having: 'A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in the meadow did nothing to wipe away'. (*A*

Mercy, p.19) Here it is suggested that following the loss of the mother-daughter bond, Rebekka loses the sense of home on the farm that she once felt: ‘the wide untrammelled space that once thrilled her became vacancy. A commanding and oppressive absence. She learned the intricacy of loneliness’. (*A Mercy*, p.90) Rebekka’s behaviour is in direct contrast to Sorrow, who is vacant and ‘kept wandering off getting lost’ (*A Mercy*, p.49) for most of the text, until she herself becomes a mother and symbolically changes her name to ‘Complete’.

Sorrow is raised by her father, the captain of a ship, and appears never to have experienced a mother-daughter relationship. Her creation of Twin, an imaginary friend with whom she spends most of her time, serves as an example of her strong desire for a bond between herself and another female figure, a bond that is denied her by Lina, who forces her to the fringes of the small community on the farm.³⁸ Sorrow’s creation of Twin serves as an example of Soja’s notion of thirdspace – Sorrow combines the reality of her life on the farm with an imaginary companion in an attempt to feel a sense of security and belonging within a hostile environment. Sorrow is eventually able to form an empowered and emancipated sense of self, following the birth of her daughter, which leads to her changing her name:

The young woman’s declaration. “I am your mother” and “My name is Complete” [...] is an emancipating act of self-naming that underscores the potentially healing, redemptive dimensions of maternity, and hence

³⁸ Lina believes Sorrow to be a ‘natural curse’ (*A Mercy*, p.53), going as far as to suggest that it is Sorrow who is responsible for the death of Jacob and Rebekka’s children, and is successful in convincing both Rebekka and Florens of her untrustworthiness.

domestic space among a global community of outcasts. (Montgomery, p.633)

What Montgomery suggests in this extract is the connection between maternal bonds and the construction of a home as a site of healing. Sorrow dedicates herself to her daughter and creating the mother-daughter bond she has never experienced: ‘her baby came first’ (*A Mercy*, p.144), and so the location in which she develops the mother-daughter bond becomes a home, and a site of healing from past traumas where Sorrow (now Complete) becomes self-affirmed and empowered – complete. In the same way as Rebekka, Lina craves a maternal bond, and adopts Florens as a daughter figure upon her arrival at the farm:

Lina had fallen in love with her straight away [...] the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew. [...] Perhaps her own barrenness sharpened her devotion. (*A Mercy*, p.58)

As her own people have been wiped out by disease, Lina has never experienced the sense of identity and belonging provided by a family, so through her adoption of Florens as a substitute daughter, she attempts to create this sense of belonging and provide the mother-daughter bond that both women crave: ‘Mother hunger – to be one or have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which [...] remained alive, travelling the bone’. (*A Mercy*, p.61) However, despite her attempts, as she states above, Florens does not provide the bond Lina craves but merely intensifies rather than satisfies Lina’s yearning for home.

Lina's search for a sense of self, belonging and home is consistent throughout the text; she maintains a preoccupation with forging a place in which she can heal from the trauma of losing her entire community:

She decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (*A Mercy*, p.46)

Her efforts to forge a space for herself at Jacob's farm are finally in vain, in a conversation with Rebekka, Lina expresses her feelings of dislocation: "You and I, this land is our home," she whispered, "but unlike you I am exile here". (*A Mercy*, p.57) Lina succeeds in forming a *type* of space for herself, and a *type* of individual identity forged from the scraps of memories of her mother, and her mother-tongue; however, in common with Rebekka, she is unsuccessful in forming an empowered and emancipated self.

In the same way as Lina, Florens must forge a sense of self without the guidance of a maternal figure, as Montgomery discusses:

Florens must not only create a language that will allow her to convey her [...] experiences in a New World setting, like countless other migratory subjects, she has to do so in the absence of a monolithic maternal history or mother tongue. (Montgomery, p.629)

Throughout the text Florens attempts to recall and understand the memory of her mother's abandonment, a memory so vague it seems like 'those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle'. (*A Mercy*, p.1) Throughout the text she struggles to accept and understand the true reason for her mother's dismissal of her as a small girl, an act that leads to her inability to form a sense of self and which inhibits her ability to attain a sense of home and belonging within Jacob Vaark's household. Florens craves affection: 'she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval' (*A Mercy*, p.59), and is immediately infatuated with a man known as 'the blacksmith', a freed slave who works with Jacob on his third house. When she is confronted with his dismissal upon her arrival at his home, Florens cannot bear the repetition of the abandonment she suffered as a child and, as a result, attacks the man to whom she has become enslaved through her obsessive love. It is following the attack and her journey home – without Jacob's boots³⁹ – that Florens begins to form a sense of empowered self, as Scully, one of the farm workers notes: 'the docile creature they knew had turned feral'. (*A Mercy*, p.144)

The craving for a maternal bond does not apply exclusively to the women in the novel: Jacob Vaark has also experienced no relationship with his mother: 'a girl of no consequence who died at childbirth' (*A Mercy*, p.30), which leads to his own desire to create a home and sense of belonging. He arrives in the New World with hopes of 'making a place out of no place' (*A Mercy*, p.10), and dedicates his

³⁹ A sign that she has gained independence; Florens no longer has the security and protection the shoes once represented. See Montgomery, 'Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*' p.634.

life to building a physical space which will define his identity and status. He states that ““What a man leaves behind is what a man is””. (*A Mercy*, p.87) However, his desire to build a home becomes a desire for wealth and grandeur, leading to his obsessive building of his third unnecessary home that is fuelled by his initial envy of Senhor D’Ortega’s ‘grandiose’ (*A Mercy*, p.13) house at the opening of the text. As Schreiber states:

In coveting D’Ortega’s acquisitions, he loses everything he has – his wife’s respect and his legacy of a good name. Thus, his third, unnecessary house becomes not a home but a mausoleum, a sterile legacy that boosts his ego but destroys all that he has built and loves. He leaves his wife and dependants unprotected in a travesty of grandeur. (Schreiber, p.166)

Although the house does prove unnecessary in many ways, it is nonetheless essential to Florens’s construction of self: ‘She scripts her life’s story onto the walls of Jacob Vaark’s [...] house’ (Montgomery, p.629):

In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. (*A Mercy*, p.156)

Here, the house rather than becoming of site of pain – where Florens will cry over the traumas she documents – becomes a site of empowerment, where Florens relieves herself of the trauma that burdens her and inhibits her ability to form a sense of self. In the same way as the women from the Convent in *Paradise*,

Florens maps her trauma onto a physical space, a space that represents suffering – the house leads to the destruction of the community of women – and consequently reclaims the space, transforming it into a new space that caters for her own needs in the process of self-affirmation:

She [...] evolves from a place where she is, at first, unable to decipher the coded information in her complex world to a site where she is a speaking subject who accurately interprets the symbols around her. (Montgomery, p.634)

Although she cannot decipher what her mother wants to communicate to her, she does establish a connection with her mother through her actions: ‘Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress’. (*A Mercy*, p.159) She understands her mother’s concern with her daughter’s feet as a fear of her being unable to survive the hardships of life; Florens has developed from the child unable to understand her mother’s concern with her ‘too tender for life’ (*A Mercy*, p.2) feet, to a self-affirmed, empowered woman.

Schreiber notes that in *A Mercy*, Morrison explores the search for self, and the process of owning oneself in an unfamiliar environment:

Creating a self and owning it, in spite of homelessness, constitutes the true mercy one can achieve. [...] the concept of home [is] crucial to combating the trauma Morrison reveals in her novels. (Schreiber, p.30)

By establishing a bond with her daughter, Sorrow becomes Complete and this act of self-naming symbolises her empowerment. Through this act of self-naming she

is defining herself as an emancipated and empowered woman. Judith Fletcher states that in Morrison's novels names 'possess a transformative power'.⁴⁰ For Sorrow, choosing her own name leads to her transformation from a vacant, wandering child, to a self-affirmed woman. With reference to Morrison's *Beloved*, Cynthia Lyles-Scott states that:

The motivating factor at the heart of this tale of self-actualization is the theme of naming and nicknaming, through which many of the characters of the novel lose and reclaim their identities.⁴¹

This is equally relevant to *A Mercy* in which many characters have been given names by oppressors and struggle to develop a sense of self and belonging. Both Sorrow and Florens succeed in reclaiming their identities through self-naming. Sorrow becomes 'Complete', forging a home for herself and her baby within the farm. Tim Adams notes, that Florens's 'name itself is loose change'⁴², referring to her sale at the beginning of the text, however her defiant statement at the end of the novel – 'I am [...] Florens' (*A Mercy*, p.159) serves as an example of Florens reclaiming her name and consequently her identity. Florens, through her determination to combat the rejection of her childhood, which led to her inability to form a sense of individual identity, and through her telling of her past trauma by writing it on the walls of the 'talking room' (*A Mercy*, p.159), becomes the free and empowered woman at the end of the text who can affirm with absolute

⁴⁰ Judith Fletcher, 'Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*', *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp.183-198, p.183

⁴¹ Cynthia Lyles-Scott, 'A Slave by Any Other Name: Names and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp.195-202, p.201

⁴² Tim Adams, 'Return of the Visionary', *The Observer*, (October 26th, 2008)

confidence: 'I am [...] Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No Ruth, my
love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last'. (*A Mercy*, p.159)

Conclusion

An examination of *Love, Paradise* and *A Mercy* from a postmodernist perspective on space makes it apparent that Morrison is concerned with notions of gendered space and the necessity of constructing a new, specifically feminine space, which caters for the needs of women within the predominantly patriarchal societies depicted within her novels. These 'new spaces', that resist existing spaces of oppression are essential in the process of overcoming trauma that arises from varying forms of oppression, be it racist or patriarchal in nature. The focus in each novel is on the experiences of women who suffer varying forms of oppression; Morrison depicts the attempts of the women to overcome the oppression they suffer both communally and individually, and examines the varying outcomes of their attempts.

In *Paradise* and *Love*, as in the majority of Morrison's works, the effects of slavery are depicted and explored. Morrison examines how black communities attempt to overcome the traumas of their own and their ancestors' pasts. In these two novels the necessity of communal efforts to overcome the trauma of slavery is depicted clearly: in *Love*, Cosey's Resort functions as a type of 'safe haven' where black people can escape and heal from racist persecution, and where they can begin to overcome communally the trauma of their past. In *Paradise* the people of Ruby endeavour to create an all-black community in which they are able to protect one-another and can begin to overcome the trauma of their past as a community. Although, as this dissertation has discussed, the communities within

each novel often further oppress women, the focus in each novel is nonetheless on the necessity of developing a community in order to overcome trauma. The realities of Ruby and Cosey's Resort are far removed from the intended goal of each 'space'; they are rather 'false communities' that only oppress women further. However, the relative success of the communities of women who work together to create a space for healing within these 'false communities' emphasises the notion that working as a community is essential in overcoming trauma.

Contrary to the focus on community in *Paradise* and *Love, A Mercy* focuses on individual efforts to overcome trauma. Situated within the context of the early days of the slave trade, the characters are not victims of traumatic histories arising from slavery, as in *Love* and *Paradise*, nor are they from the same cultural background that has suffered a collective traumatic past. Therefore, the characters do not engage in collective healing, instead they attempt to overcome their individual traumatic pasts by creating an individual space that caters for their individual needs. Although all three of the novels I have discussed focus largely on the experiences of women, in *A Mercy* Morrison appears to focus more exclusively upon their experiences. Although the theme of enslavement is undoubtedly still important, Morrison explores the enslavement of women more broadly through depictions of both literal enslavement, where women are bought to work on Jacob's farm, and also through the depiction of roles available to women at the time, roles that cater exclusively to the needs of men and that consequently serve as a means of oppressing women. At the opening of the novel the women appear to have created a space for themselves within a patriarchal

environment. This space offers them a sense of identity and belonging as they work together to nurture and aid one another. However, as I have previously argued, the community forged at the opening of the text is rather a false one in which the women work together mainly because they are forced to do so by their circumstances. Moreover, it is a community that relies entirely upon the presence of a dominant male. The 'community' the women create is merely a substitute for what each woman truly desires: a sense of home and belonging. It is due to the falseness of the community that the women are incapable of overcoming the traumas of their past. They have not developed a new space for themselves in which they can begin to heal but rather, they are forced into a community by oppressive external forces that are beyond their control.

The affiliation between home and healing is apparent in each of the novels discussed. Each novel features women who have never experienced a secure home. Morrison examines how these characters, who have no sense of home and consequently no sense of identity, attempt to create this space, termed a 'homeplace' by hooks, in which they can overcome trauma. In each novel women who have no experience of a secure home work together to forge a home within an oppressive environment, a process that is inhibited by the adoption of cultural values by the black community that further oppress women and that alter the definition of a home, which, according to hooks, should offer security and a space for healing. Both *Paradise* and *Love* examine the adoption of dominant white values by black communities, and the ways in which this inhibits the community's ability to overcome a traumatic past. In *A Mercy* Rebekka adopts religious values

in an attempt to overcome the loss of her children and husband, however, in the same way as the black communities in *Love* and *Paradise* who adopt the values of a society that once oppressed them, by adopting ideals which are not her own, Rebbeka remains unable to form a new space within which she can overcome the trauma she has suffered.

As well as depicting the creation of 'new spaces' that enable healing, each novel explores the reclamation of spaces that have served as spaces of oppression, and the transformation of such spaces into an environment that enables healing. In *Love*, Heed and Christine revisit the site of the traumatic event, and in so doing reclaim the space and consequently overcome the trauma of their childhood. The women from the Convent mark their pain on the floor of a space that represents female oppression, which serves as a means of reclaiming that space, and transforming it into a female space that facilitates each woman's need for healing. In the same way, Florens marks the walls of a space that represents female domination with her own story of female defiance and, in so doing, begins the process of overcoming her traumatic past. This calls into mind Hélène Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in which she states: 'Woman must write her self'.⁴³ In *A Mercy* and *Paradise* this is precisely what Florens and the women from the Convent endeavour to do: in writing their traumatic experiences on a space that represents female oppression, they establish their own identities as free, self-affirmed women, rejecting and opposing the oppressive spaces that they inhabit by

⁴³ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 875-893, p.875, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239> [accessed August 20th, 2011]

transforming them into spaces in which they may become empowered and free of oppression.

What is clear from reading these novels from a postmodernist perspective on space, and also as a group of texts, is Morrison's continuing exploration of specifically female spaces that reject oppression, and the necessary process of acquiring and constructing such a space as a means of recovering from both collective and also individual trauma. In each novel women are victims of severe oppression and struggle to form a space that satisfies their own desires for a sense of identity, empowerment and belonging within a patriarchal environment. Lyotard's notion of the rejection of metanarrative is most prominent in these depictions of women developing new spaces that resist oppression. Morrison maintains a preoccupation with depicting the experiences of oppressed women throughout the three novels discussed, as well as in her entire body of work. As this dissertation illustrates, the construction of a new, female space that resists existing spaces of oppression in which women can heal from the traumas of their pasts remains a consistent theme throughout. As this dissertation illustrates, the concept of the need to construct a new, female space resistant to existing spaces of oppression, in which women can heal from the traumas of their pasts, is one which is central to the author's work.

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