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**Transforming America: Toni Morrison
and Classical Tradition**

by

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Contents

Introduction	1
Part I Tragedy and the American Dream	
I.i “ <i>Si Quaeris Peninsulam Amoenam . . .</i> ”	29
I.ii Mythical Promises	48
I.iii The Tragic Hero, Fate and Freedom	61
I.iv The Chorus and Individualism	73
I.v An Interest in Survival: Tragic and Anti-Tragic Modes	96
Part II Classic Constructions of American History	
II.i Representative Men or Foundational Ancestors?	110
II.ii “Discovery” and Early Settlement	123
II.iii The Colonies and The New Nation	138
II.iv The South, Slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction	152
II.v Black Migration and Urbanization	185
II.vi The Civil Rights Movement	196
Part III Traditions of Purity in American Life	
III.i The Power of <i>Miasma</i>	206
III.ii Images of the Impure and the Pure	218
III.iii The Rage for Revenge	250
III.iv The Restoration of Africa	283
III.v The Reinvention of Tradition	306
Conclusion Aesop, The Classics and American Studies	316
Abbreviations	324
Bibliography	325

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Declaration

This thesis is my own work. It has not been submitted for a degree at another university and does not contain previously published material. A version of the material in II.ii, "‘Discovery’ and Early Settlement", is forthcoming in the April 2007 issue of the *Journal of American Studies* as "A New ‘Romen’ Empire: Toni Morrison's *Love* and the Classics".

Abstract

This thesis examines a significant but little-studied feature of Toni Morrison's work: her ambivalent engagement with classical tradition. Analysing all eight novels, it argues that her allusiveness to the cultural practices of Ancient Greece and Rome is fundamental to her political project. Illuminating hegemonic America's consistent recourse to the classical world in the construction of its identity, I expand on prior scholarship by reading Morrison's own revisionary classicism as a subversion of dominant US culture. My three-part study examines the way her deployment of Graeco-Roman tradition destabilizes mythologies of the American Dream, prevailing narratives of America's history, and national ideologies of purity. Part I shows that Morrison enlists tragic conventions to problematize the Dream's central tenets of upward mobility, progress and freedom. It argues that while her engagement with Greek choric models effects her refutation of individualism, it is her later novels' rejection of a wholly catastrophic vision that enables her to avoid reinscribing the Dream. Part II demonstrates that it is through her classical allusiveness that Morrison rewrites American history. Her multiply-resonant echoes of the epic, pastoral and tragic traditions that have consistently informed the dominant culture's justifications for and representations of its actions enable her reconfiguration of colonization, of the foundation of the new nation, of slavery and its aftermath and of the Civil Rights Movement. Part III illuminates how the author uses the discourse of pollution or *miasma* to challenge Enlightenment-derived valorizations of racial purity and to expose the practices of scapegoating and revenge as flawed means to moral purity. Her interest in the hegemonic fabrication of classical tradition as itself a pure and purifying force is matched by her insistence on that tradition's African elements, and thus on its potent impurity. Her own radical classicism, therefore, is central to the transformation of America that her novels envision.

“ ‘I too have become acquainted with ambivalence,’ I said.
‘That’s why I’m here.’
‘What’s that?’
‘Nothing, a word that doesn’t explain it.’ ”

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952

“PaPa LaBas, you must come clean with these students. They must have a firm background in the Classics. Serious works, the achievements of mankind which began in Greece and then sort of wiggled all over the place like a chicken with its neck wrung.”

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 1972

“The past has to be revised.”

Toni Morrison, 1989

Introduction

One of Toni Morrison's recent projects is a revision of Aesop's Fables. In her hands, "The Ant and the Grasshopper" has been metamorphosed into *Who's Got Game: The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (2003).¹ The new version recasts the creatures and their argument in an urban American setting, transposes their language into the idiom of contemporary black speech, and makes the moral of the story ambiguous. At a reading of the work in 2003, the author said she was drawn to Aesop because "there is a way in which you can twist it, modernize it, turn it on its head" (Address, Washington DC). Such a perspective perfectly exemplifies the subject of this thesis: Morrison's ambivalent relationship with classical tradition.

My study examines the engagement with the culture of Ancient Greece and Rome — with classical myth, literature, history, social practice and religious ritual — that is a striking feature of all eight novels. Morrison studied four years of Latin at Lorain High School, and was a Classics "minor" (while an English "major") at Howard University in 1951-53 (Taylor-Guthrie 50; vii). As several scholars have observed, the "Western" literary tradition was central to her intellectual formation.² My own concern is not simply to illuminate the extent of Morrison's classical allusiveness but to suggest *why* this author — one clearly committed to the politics of her identity as an African-American woman

¹ The Aesopian *Who's Got Game?* series, which Toni Morrison has co-written with her son, Slade Morrison, currently comprises three books: *The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (2003), *The Lion or the Mouse?* (2003), and *Poppy or the Snake?* (2004). There is no extant published criticism of these works.

² For example, David Cowart writes, "her literary interests and the literary influences on her from the end of high school to the time she left Cornell University with a Master's degree [. . .] were not Afro-American" (88-89). Marc Conner writes, "it is [. . .] indisputable that the classical aesthetic tradition played a powerful part in the formation of her mind and her imagination" ("Aesthetics" xx).

— should make recourse to a heritage that is conventionally seen as “European”, “white” and “canonical”.

Why are there *Moirai* in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a Circe in *Song of Solomon* (1977), and a Seneca, Pallas, Apollo, Juvenal and an August Cato in *Paradise* (1998)? Why are there echoes of Dionysiac ritual and classical scapegoating practice in *Sula* (1974)? Why does the description of the settling of Isle des Chevaliers in *Tar Baby* (1981) reverse the creation myth with which Ovid begins *The Metamorphoses*; why do Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* and Euripides’s *Medea* all resonate in *Beloved* (1987)? Why does Violet come from “a mean little place called Rome” in *Jazz* (1992; 138), and why is Romen called Romen in *Love* (2003)? My contention is that Morrison’s revisionary classicism is fundamental to the transformation of dominant American culture that her work effects. Her novels’ dialogue both with the nation’s Graeco-Roman inheritance and with classically-informed literary forebears as various as Phillis Wheatley, William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner and Ralph Ellison simultaneously enables her deconstruction of America’s past and present and her articulation of its possible future.³

To the best of my knowledge, this thesis is the first full-length, oeuvre-wide analysis of the function of classical tradition in Morrison’s work. Prior

³ The issue of Morrison’s relationship to Faulkner is a notoriously troubled one, not least because, as John Duvall observes in his contribution to Kolmerten’s collection, *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-envisioned* (1997), “[her] remarks about the relation of her work to Faulkner’s show a decided ambivalence. His influence is at times affirmed, at times denied, at times simultaneously affirmed and denied” (5). But, as Duvall goes on to point out, “that she has read Faulkner closely and carefully is undeniable” (5). About Ralph Ellison Morrison is similarly ambivalent: in a 1981 interview she says she “admires [his work] enormously” (Taylor-Guthrie 96), but has often remarked, as she does to Hilton Als in the 2003 *New Yorker* “Profile”, “The title of Ralph Ellison’s book was *Invisible Man*, [. . .] and the question for me was, ‘Invisible to whom?’. Not to me” (Als 74).

scholarship comprises individual essays examining Graeco-Roman allusiveness in single novels, and has for the most part focused on allusions to the Demeter/Kore myth in *The Bluest Eye*, on the deployment of Oedipal and Odyssean paradigms in *Song of Solomon*, and on the engagement with Greek tragedy in *Beloved*.⁴ The quality and usefulness of this existing material is variable. For example, in “Lady No Longer Sings the Blues” Madonne Miner demonstrates how *The Bluest Eye*’s commonalities with and differences from both Ovid’s tale of Tereus and Philomela and the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* contribute to that novel’s representation of Pecola and to its themes of “rape, madness and silence” (85). And Eleanor Traylor helpfully elucidates the various Roman connotations of the name “Valerian” in *Tar Baby* (138). But while Kimberly Benston’s “Re-weaving the ‘Ulysses Scene’” convincingly argues that in *Song of Solomon* Morrison creates a “womanist” version of Oedipal and Odyssean archetypes (103), many essays on the classicism of this novel are disappointing.⁵ Bessie Jones’s “Greek Tragic Motifs in *Song of Solomon*”, for example, points out the presence of these elements but does not analyse either how or why Morrison deploys them.

In her psychoanalytical study, *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (2000), Marianne Hirsch asserts that in *Beloved* the author “uses Oedipus and Demeter

⁴ Extant single essays on the classical allusiveness in individual novels include: on *The Bluest Eye*, those by Demetrakopoulos and by Miner; on *Song of Solomon* those by Benston, Freiart, Trudier Harris, and by Bessie W. Jones; on *Tar Baby* by Traylor; and on *Beloved* those by Corti, Haley, Kimball, Malmgrem, Otten, (“Transfiguring the Narrative”), and Schmutde.

⁵ Among Benston’s best points is the observation that through Circe and Pilate in *Song of Solomon* Morrison revises the dangerous, enchantress-like characters of the woman in red and of Sybil in *Invisible Man*. He writes:

If Morrison critiques Ellison by directly refashioning the Ulyssian experience of bewitchment—suggesting that the black woman, far from blocking or distorting the male quest, serves as its enabling agent—she more radically undermines its assumed equation of maleness with mobile self-discovery by subtly presenting the female quest as a parallel, if not prior, version of its male counterpart. (Benston 100)

as intertexts which serve to confront a Western notion of family with the realities of a slave economy” (201). Her consideration of Morrison within the context of other feminist writers who deploy the Demeter/Kore paradigm is illuminating. But several specific considerations of *Beloved* and Greek tragedy are politically and/or historically disengaged to a surprising degree. In his essay, “From Melodrama to Tragedy”, Terry Otten (who also discusses tragic elements of the earlier novels in his longer work, *The Crime Of Innocence*) primarily sets out to “prove” the novel’s tragic status. Like Kimball before him and like Schmudde after him, he focuses on illuminating the nature of Sethe’s dilemma, on the fact that both she and Baby Suggs display classic *hubris*, on the Greek choric elements in the novel and on the fact that Morrison invokes Oedipus when she describes Sethe’s face as resembling a “mask with mercifully punched-out eyes” (*Beloved* 9; Otten, “Transfiguring” 293; Kimball 59).

In her thesis on “the liberation of the Medea figure”, meanwhile, Karen Donnelly does consider some effects of *Beloved*’s classicism. She argues that through Sethe Morrison challenges the mythical character’s status as “a paradigm of the destructive woman, a negative example of womanhood” (560). Shelley Haley, who is likewise predominantly concerned with issues of gender, points out that the author “moves in and out of the Medea-myth, sometimes parallel and sometimes contrapuntal to it” (178). But Lillian Corti obscures the historical specificity of the *Beloved* story by arguing that Euripides’s *Medea* and Morrison’s novel “share the same basic plot” (63). This assertion ignores

Sethe's very different (and politically urgent) motive for killing her children.⁶

The limitations of much of this critical material, together with the fact that there is no published analysis of Graeco-Roman tradition in *Jazz*, *Paradise* or *Love*, highlight the need for the in-depth, historically- and politically-engaged study of Morrison's classicism that my own work sets out to be.⁷ My approach expands on the debate that precedes it by reading the novels' allusiveness as a specific intervention in a hegemonic "America" to which a strategic dependence on classical tradition has always been integral. The fact that dominant American culture has repeatedly enlisted Greece and Rome in the construction of its identity and the justification of its politics explains the novelist's conflictedness about deploying that tradition. But the omnipresence of American classicism also explains its potential as a radical resource; Morrison's reappropriation and reformulation of ancient tradition is central to the reconfigurations of America that her work envisions.

A significant body of literature documents the extent to which the nation has made recourse to the Graeco-Roman world in its processes of self-definition. As Caroline Winterer writes in her recent work, *The Culture of Classicism* (2002), "From the time of the first European settlements in Virginia and

⁶ Morrison herself has frequently resisted any suggestion of a direct equivalence between Medea and Sethe. In a much-quoted *Publishers Weekly* interview of 1987 she says of Sethe: "this is not Medea who kills her children because she's mad at some dude, and she's going to get back at him. Here is something that is *huge* and *very* intimate" (Amanda Smith 51). In a similar vein, in 1988 she told Paul Gilroy, "Margaret Garner didn't do what Medea did and kill her children because of some guy" (Morrison, "Living Memory" 180).

⁷ The only gesture towards a consideration of the classicism of *Paradise* that I have come across in published form is Ron David's brief discussion of the names "Seneca" and "Pallas" in his consciously unscholarly textbook, *Toni Morrison Explained* (1989; 174-77, 180-82). Sharon Jessee's 2003 conference paper "'The Gods are Laughing at Us': Toni Morrison's Trilogy and Classical Greek Lyric Tragedy" comprises an illuminating reading of the author's engagement with *The Oresteia* and *The Bacchae* in *Paradise*, on which my own work builds.

Massachusetts [. . .] reverence for ancient models helped to structure ethical, political, oratorical, artistic and educational ideals” (1). Indeed, as Martin Snyder points out in his analysis of Peter Martyr’s early-sixteenth-century *Decades*, classical myths of the Golden Age shaped Europeans’ perceptions of America before they had even encountered it.⁸

By the late Eighteenth Century, the emerging nation’s self-conscious classicism had developed into what Meyer Reinhold has called “an American cult of antiquity” (24). As he documents in his *Classica Americana* (1984), this era was characterized by:

the ubiquitous classical quotations and tags; the common use of classical pseudonyms; the revival of classical place names; the constant adducing of classical parallels; even the frequent use of classical names for slaves in the southern states. Overshadowing all of these was the tireless and purposeful reading by early Americans of the classics as a repository of timeless models of guidance in republicanism and private and civic virtue. (Reinhold 24)

In *The Founders and the Classics* (1994) Carl J. Richard highlights the specific tendency of Jefferson, John Adams and others to draw analogies between their own political project and the foundation of the Greek and Roman Republics. My thesis demonstrates how the Morrisonian oeuvre engages all these ways that the creators of the new nation “used, and even misused and abused” their classical heritage (Reinhold 19).

⁸ As Snyder writes, although Martyr:
never himself visited the new world, [. . .] by suggesting parallels between antiquity and the new world, and especially by introducing the myth of the Golden Age into the vocabulary of America, he provided future writers with a set of categories and expectations to aid them in interpreting the unknown land. (151-52)

Antiquity continued to perform specific and powerful ideological functions throughout the Nineteenth Century. As Winterer and many other scholars have observed, antebellum defenders of American slavery enlisted Greek and Roman precedent, and for them classical pastoral traditions held widespread appeal. And in the Victorian and Progressive eras classicism was deployed as a conservative force: as an “antidote” to “modernity” it continued to inform historiographical mythologies as well as the construction of gender and racial identities (Winterer, *Culture* 5).⁹ It is this consistent dominant cultural reliance on Graeco-Roman tradition that Morrison’s own classical allusiveness undermines.

Of course, the scholarship on America’s strategic use of Greece and Rome analyses a phenomenon that is already highly visible in the national culture. From place names such as “Athens” and “Ithaca” to “Syracuse” and “Cincinnati”; from the civic architecture of Washington DC and the plantation houses of the South to the idiom of college fraternities; and from the popularity of epic movies such as *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Gladiator* (2000) to the postmodern “Caesar’s Palace” in Las Vegas, the pragmatic use of the classical world in dominant American self-expression is unmissable. And it is a pragmatism which Morrison’s novels share and exploit. For example, when describing Nel’s visit to her New Orleans-based grandmother in *Sula*, she includes the detail that “Cecile Sabat’s house leaned between two others just like it on Elysian Fields” (24). The author enlists the Homeric resonances of this area’s

⁹ See Winterer, *Culture* 68-76, 92-98, and Winterer, “Victorian Antigone”. For an overview of scholarship on the classicism of the South see my section “The South, Slavery, The Civil War and Reconstruction” in Part II of this thesis.

name to contrast Cecile's morally unconventional but happy home with the repressive orderliness of her daughter's.¹⁰ But the fact that the collapsing neighbourhood that the Wrights inhabit is part of a town called "Medallion" indicates the author's preference for an ironic deployment of place names which highlight the disparity between dominant cultural aspirations and African-American realities.

The most blatant counterpointing of this kind occurs in *Tar Baby* and recurs in *Paradise*. In the earlier novel, Jadine thinks of Son's dreadlocks as "Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair" (113). And in the more recent work, when visiting Eddie in prison Seneca attributes his fellow prisoners' decorousness to the fact that "Attica was on their minds" (132). In both these references to the site of the notorious prison uprising of 1971, Morrison plays on the discrepancy between the civic idealism that the original naming of a town in upstate New York connotes and the absolute antithesis of liberty and of civil rights that the word "Attica" has come to represent in American (and particularly African-American) cultural memory.¹¹ The exploiting of this dissonance is characteristic of Morrison's ludic allusiveness throughout her work.

There are of course many tensions, ripe for exploitation, inherent in both the nation's repeated recourse to classical analogy and in its self-conscious creation of an American mythology that is conceived as a counterpart to or a continuation of a Graeco-Roman precedent. The writing of Ralph Waldo

¹⁰ Radice defines the Homeric Elysian Fields as "the abode of the blessed, home to those singled out for happiness" (109).

¹¹ In September 1971 the inmates at Attica Jail staged a large-scale uprising which was quashed by the state troopers after a four-day stand off. The troopers — using violence out of all proportion to the threat they faced — killed thirty-two inmates and eleven prison guards, and injured hundreds more. In 2000 surviving inmates were awarded compensation as the result of a class-action suit. See "Attica inmates settle for \$8m". 24 Jan. 2000. 11 Aug. 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/591230.stm>>.

Emerson epitomizes the paradox that cultural assertions of innovation and independence from Europe relied heavily on the European past to make their case. For example, while famously lamenting in the 1836 version of his essay, “Nature”, that “our age is retrospective; it builds the sepulchres of the fathers” (*Selected* 35), eight years later in “The Poet” he asserts that the new American infrastructure rests “on the same foundation as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphi” (*Selected* 281).¹² Richard Slotkin has observed that “the poets of the early years of the republic [. . .] attempted to fabricate an ‘American epic’ that would mark the beginning of a national mythology” (*Regeneration* 3). And as John Shields documents in *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* (2001), explicit reference to the ancient world was a recurring feature of the nation’s literary myth-makers.

Shields’s study of the Graeco-Roman allusiveness of Edward Taylor, Cotton Mather, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville (among many others) is a testament to the classicism of the American “classics”. He does not discuss twentieth-century writers in any detail, so does not point out that the writings of canonical American Modernists such as Pound and Williams articulate new and equally complex relationships with classical tradition. My thesis argues that Morrison’s own classicism is key to her dialogue with these authors who — in their search for what she sceptically labels “the quintessential American identity” — make such frequent use of the worlds of Greece and Rome (*Playing* 44).

¹² Jonathan Raban identifies a similar insistence on America’s analogical relationship to Greece and Rome in his *Bad Land* (1996), where he observes of early-twentieth-century Midwestern school textbooks that, “Side by side with the tales of Ulysses’ adventures, Jason and the golden fleece, Orpheus and Euridyce, Theseus and the Minotaur, were the fabulous life stories of great Americans like Franklin, [. . .] Lincoln, and Ulysses S. Grant” (169).

Shields's subtitled phrase, "Classical Origins of the American Self", and his work's underlying proposition, "the recovery of a heretofore lost key which unlocks the American self" (ix), are problematic in their assumption that there is one essential American self. In explicitly positioning his book as a supplement or counterpart to R.W.B. Lewis's 1955 work, *The American Adam*, Shields appears to ignore the scholarship of recent decades which has problematized the "myth and symbol school" of the "old" American Studies (xxi).¹³ It is unlikely that Morrison would be sympathetic to the universalizing conception of Americanness that shapes his work, for her novels comprise a challenge to the works purporting to define the "American experience" that characterized the decades of her own intellectual formation. While Lawrence Buell summarizes the (now well-known) grounds on which the work of Lewis, Leo Marx and others has been attacked — "for its methodological naiveté and for its consensualist ideology, its attempt to contain cultural diversity and conflict within a unitary formation" ("Commentary" 13-14) — critics have paid less attention to the way these scholars rely on classical tradition in the construction of their minority-alienating theories.¹⁴ That Morrison's own classicism functions as a rebuke to these "old-school" Americanists, and as a

¹³ Shields does close his work by referring to "the American self or selves", and expresses his wish to "engage the dilemma of difference", but his overall conception of his study as an investigation of the "classical half of Americanness" strikes me as unnecessarily reductive (362, xii, x).

¹⁴ For other attacks on universalizing theories of Americanness, see Slotkin, *Regeneration* 4, Bruce Kuklick 81-83, and Nina Baym 215-21. It is interesting that Robert F. Berkhofer refers to the "myth and symbol" era as "the classical period of American studies" (280). In *The American Adam* Lewis compares the archetypal American hero to Oedipus (128), and in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) Leo Marx draws a parallel between the American protagonist and "the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode" (3).

complicating of their concerns, usefully illustrates George Lipsitz's claim that she is an exemplary practitioner of the "new" American Studies.¹⁵

Any African-American claim to the nation's analogous relationship to the ancient world is of course even more fraught with tension and ambiguity than are similar claims made by those writing from within the dominant culture. An indisputable strength of Shields's *American Aeneas* — one that has informed my reading of Morrison — is its analysis of Phillis Wheatley's work and its interpretation of her classicism as "subversive" (117).¹⁶ Shields's observation that in 1784 Wheatley addresses the new country as a "new-born Rome" brings to mind Pauline Hopkins's terming Boston "the modern Athens" in her 1902-03 "magazine fiction", *Of One Blood* (Shields xxxv; Hopkins 548). This thesis demonstrates that in the complexity and conflictedness of its classical allusiveness Morrison's oeuvre is part of a genealogy that includes not only Wheatley, Hopkins and Ellison, but others such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Robert Hayden, Paule Marshall and Ishmael Reed. And in highlighting Morrison's interactions with the classicism of these writers I argue that in her work ambivalence is not, as it is for Ellison's *Invisible Man*, "*Nothing, a word that doesn't explain it*", but is instead an empowered and empowering stance (*Invisible Man* 10; italics in original).

Ironically enough, it may be the extensiveness of dominant America's

¹⁵ Lipsitz writes, "one might argue that the most sophisticated cultural theorists in America are neither critics nor scholars, but rather artists — writers Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko [and others]". He then goes on to discuss *Beloved* as "a vivid illustration of the necessary connection between the basic categories of European cultural theory and the basic concerns of American cultural discourse" (322).

¹⁶ I discuss Shields's reading of Wheatley in Part II of this thesis, in the section "The South, Slavery, The Civil War and Reconstruction".

deployment of classical tradition that explains the scholarly hesitancy in addressing Morrison's engagement with that same heritage. It is a commonplace, and understandably so, for critics who do address the Graeco-Roman allusiveness in her work to express anxiety about what they are doing. Marianne Hirsch, for example, begins the Prelude to her *Mother/Daughter Plot* by asserting that "the classical paradigms" she discusses "belong firmly to the tradition of Western patriarchy" and that it is "surprising" that "classic Western structures still serve as frames of reference" in the novels of Morrison and Alice Walker (29).¹⁷ And Shelley Haley begins her comparison of *Medea* and *Beloved* by declaring her "unease" (178). It is of course essential that critics take account of Morrison's complaint to Nellie McKay, in 1983, that responses to her work had often failed to "evolve out of the culture, the world" out of which she wrote, and that "other kinds of structures" had been "imposed" on her writing (Taylor-Guthrie 151). But as the following overview demonstrates, her encounters with classical tradition as a student, her comments about it in interviews, and her careful articulation of her position in relation to it in a key essay all reveal her decades-long interest in the Graeco-Roman world and its interactions with African-American culture. Her non-fictional perspectives on classicism are as ever-changing and as conflicted as are her fictional ones, but it is from this embrace of contradiction that her writing draws its power. For it is Morrison's pragmatically flexible engagement with America's classical heritage that enables her to reveal that these paradigms are neither as "firmly"

¹⁷ In a footnote, Hirsch writes that "to read the works of Afro-American writers within the contexts of a tradition shaped by the texts of Greek mythology is indeed to make very large claims for the influence of this tradition" (201).

nor as exclusively entrenched within “the tradition of Western patriarchy” as Western patriarchy would like them to be (Hirsch 29).

The author’s attitude to the education she received at Howard University is itself characterized by ambivalence. Her student years there (from 1949-53) clearly comprised excitement at intellectual discoveries combined with frustration at the university’s social and academic conservatism. In a 1985 interview she reflected:

The things I studied were Western and, you know, I was terrifically fascinated by all of that, and at that time any information that came to me from my own people seemed to me to be backwoods and uninformed. [. . .] I remember I asked once to do a paper in the English Department on Black Characters in Shakespeare, and they were very much alarmed by that. [. . .] Howard [. . .] was very sort of middle class, sort of upwardly mobile and so on. (Taylor-Guthrie 174-75)

These observations reveal how she was at once formed by and was already politically at odds with the 1950s “liberal” environment she encountered.¹⁸

Though Morrison has not spoken publicly in any detail about her experiences as a Classics minor, the university “Bulletin” for the years 1951-53 reveals that the type of class available to her was that of the uncontroversial survey: “Greek Civilization”, “Roman Civilization”, “Vocabulary Building”, “Greek Literature in English”, “Latin Literature in English”, “Greek Drama in English” and so on (Howard 85-86).¹⁹ But she may well have been influenced

¹⁸ In his *New Yorker* “Profile” of 2003 Hilton Als writes that Morrison “found the social climate [at Howard] stifling” (68).

¹⁹ It has not been possible for me to ascertain either which classes Morrison took or which texts/ translations she studied. Data protection law prevents Howard University from releasing such information, and in a letter of April 7, 2003 Morrison’s assistant’s assistant, Maria Purves, informed me that the novelist was unable to provide these details herself.

by the indomitable Frank Snowden Jr., who was “head of department” at that time, who has been an instructor at Howard since 1940, and who (in his nineties) officially holds the Chair of Classics there to this day. Snowden is himself a politically enigmatic figure, in that in recent years he has been an outspoken critic of Afrocentric scholarship, and yet as early as 1946 he published an article on “The Negro in Ancient Greece”. The title of his first book, *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970), indicates the intellectual preoccupation of his seventy-year career.²⁰ The book establishes a comparative context between the USA and the ancient world — pointing out, for example, that “in the Greco-Roman world” there was “no prohibition against miscegenation” (195) — that Snowden may also have discussed in his teaching in the 1950s. Morrison’s oeuvre-wide interest in racially-conscious analogies between America and the classical world, as well as her enthusiastic reception of Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), may well originate in an early exposure to such thought.²¹

For the years that Morrison “minored” in Classics, Professor Snowden is listed as the instructor of “Greek Drama in English” (Howard 86). Given the widespread engagement with Greek tragedy in her novels, as well as the fact

²⁰ Snowden’s other publications include *The Image of the Black in Western Art, 1: From the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire* (with J. Vercoutter et al.), New York: Morrow, 1976, and *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983. In “Bernal’s ‘Blacks’ and the Afrocentrists”, an essay which appeared in Mary Lefkowitz’s and Guy Maclean Rogers’s *Black Athena Revisited* (1996), Snowden takes explicit issue with Martin Bernal and with “Bernal-Afrocentrist practice of describing Egyptians as blacks” (115). Snowden writes that “it is unfortunate that Afrocentrists fail to realise the serious consequences of their distortions, inaccuracies, and omissions” (127).

²¹ In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison writes, “As the sociologist Orlando Patterson has noted, we should not be surprised that the Enlightenment could accommodate slavery; we should be surprised if it had not” (38). Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* draws direct comparisons between Greek, Roman and American slavery. For example, he writes that “[i]n the U.S. South there developed the last and most perfectly articulated slave culture since the fall of the Roman Empire” (76). For further examples of this comparativism see Patterson 6, 12, or 338.

that the majority of her comments about classical tradition illuminate her interest in this genre, it seems likely that she took this class. Its “discussion of the definition, origin, and development of tragedy and comedy based on the *Poetics* of Aristotle” may well have given rise to the unambiguously Aristotelian terms in which she identifies Greek tragic elements in William Faulkner’s novels in her M.A. thesis of 1955 (Howard University Bulletin 86).²² But just as her novels comprise a reconfiguration of the tragic vision conventionally attributed to the *Poetics*, her non-fictional observations attest both to her indisputably self-conscious deployment of the classical genre and her ambivalence about it. In 1981, for example, she observes to Charles Ruas of her works’ open-endedness that “the endings are multiple endings. That’s where the horror is. [. . .] I suppose there is a strong influence of Greek tragedy, particularly the chorus, commenting on the action” (Taylor-Guthrie 101). A month later, she expands on this to Thomas LeClair:

Black readers often ask me, “Why are your books so melancholy, so sad?” [. . .] There is a comic mode, meaning the union of the sexes, that I don’t write. I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation. There’s a whole lot of space in between, but my inclination is in the tragic direction. Maybe it’s a consequence of my being a Classics minor. (Taylor-Guthrie 125)

This thesis engages the author’s critical perspective on “the tragic mode” — a perspective implicit in what she calls the “whole lot of space in between” her

²² Morrison’s M.A. thesis (written in the name of Chloe Ardellia Wofford) was submitted at Cornell University in 1955. Entitled “Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated”, it includes several observations about how Faulkner “patterns [his] histories after the Greeks” (24).

writing and that genre — as much as it does her writing within it.

In 1985 — two years, that is, before the publication of *Beloved* — interviewer Bessie Jones asks Morrison whether she sees “any relationship between Greek tragedy and the Black experience”. The novelist replies:

Well, I do. I used to be a little confused about it, and I thought it was just because I was a Classics minor that it was important to me. But there was something about the Greek chorus, for example, that reminds me of what goes on in Black churches and in jazz.²³ (Taylor-Guthrie 176)

Later in the same interview, she says that her protagonists “are not everyday people”. She continues, “They really are extraordinary [. . .]. That may go back to the other question about using models from Greek tragedy which seems to me extremely sympathetic to Black culture and in some ways to African culture” (Taylor-Guthrie 181). But analysis of her words about models from Greek epic reveals her own decreasing sympathy for or increasing scepticism about the notion of a straightforward equivalence between African-American experience and classical heroic characters.

In 1976 the novelist articulates a direct comparison between the cultural practices of black American men and *The Odyssey*. In an analogy which gave rise to the title of Benston’s article on *Song of Solomon*, she observes that “the big scene is the traveling Ulysses scene, for black men. [. . .] that going from town to town or place to place [. . .]. That’s what they do. It’s the Ulysses theme, the leaving home” (Taylor-Guthrie 26). But returning to this subject

²³ For Morrison’s further commentary on the significance of the chorus see Taylor-Guthrie 58-59, 101, and 176, and see also her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”.

three years on, she expresses anger about the apparent different value systems by which classical heroes and black men are judged. Of fathers' decision not to bring up their children, she observes that "this is a liberty that Black men have always taken" and that "that is called abandonment of the family or something". "On the other hand", she continues:

Ulysses abandoned his child for twenty years and he didn't go anywhere since he was just hanging out over there with the Sicilians. But he is considered a hero! His wife stayed home and did little wifely things. He knew that there was a child there and never once said that he had to go home to his son. He said he had to go home to his property. But you see, he is a classic! (Taylor-Guthrie 65)

Here Morrison's words intimate the feminist intervention in classical mythology that much of her novels' allusiveness enacts.²⁴

By 1981, Morrison is perfecting a resolution of the "European versus black" dilemma that might best be described as the maintaining of irresolution. Of her deployment of the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*, she writes, "If it means Icarus to some readers, fine; I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly" (Taylor-Guthrie 122). This insistence that any classical allusion should enhance rather than diminish the specificity of African-American experience finds most powerful expression in her 1989 essay that is central to the concerns of this thesis:

"Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American

²⁴ By 1983 Morrison positions her novels as a direct counterpoint to both classic and classical traditions. "Friendship between women is not considered a suitable topic for a book," she says. "Hamlet can have a friend, and Achilles can have one, but women don't, because the world knows that women [. . .] choose men first, then women as second choice. But I have made women the focal point of books in order to find out what women's friendships are really all about" (Taylor-Guthrie 154).

Literature”. Here she warns against critics making connections between black and dominant cultural traditions that subsume the former into the hierarchies of the latter. “Finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature has value, but when its sole purpose is to place value only where that influence is located it is pernicious”, she writes (10). “These approaches [. . .] can lead to an incipient orphanization of the work in order to issue its adoption papers”, she continues. “They can confine the discourse to the advocacy of diversification within the canon and/or a kind of benign co-existence near or within reach of the already sacred texts” (“Unspeakable” 10). In reading her novels’ classical engagement as key to her political project, my thesis avoids these pitfalls.

Within the “Unspeakable” essay there is an implicit suggestion as to how to connect Graeco-Roman and African traditions without enacting a process of “orphanization” (10). At the start of the piece, Morrison reiterates her own sense of affinity with classical culture, commenting on Greek tragedy’s “similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy” (2). In a metaphor that she reserves for her highest accolades, she says of the classical genre that she feels “intellectually at home there” (2-3). Some pages later, as part of her discussion about canon formation, she mentions the theory that the true (African) origins of Ancient Greek culture have been strategically erased. Championing Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece* (1987) as “a stunning investigation of the field”, she summarizes his argument. “Seventy years to eliminate Egypt as the cradle of civilization [. . .] and replace it with

Greece”, she laments (6).²⁵ While within this essay Morrison does not explicitly link her interest in the falsification of the origins of Greece to her feeling “at home” in Greek tragedy, my work demonstrates that much of her fictional classical allusiveness asserts the interconnectedness of African and Graeco-Roman cultures that the dominant culture has obscured. In engaging Greece and Rome the author is not “borrowing from” or even insisting on her right to “share” in a pure, white legacy. Instead, like Pauline Hopkins a century earlier, or like Derek Walcott or Wole Soyinka in more recent times, she is reappropriating a tradition which emerged from the interactions and affinities between Europe and Africa, and thus was never either pure or white.²⁶

Morrison’s ambivalence about classical tradition is inevitable, then, given that she encounters it from at least three contradictory positions. As an American, she is purportedly a beneficiary of the legacy of Greece and Rome, but as an African-American she is alienated from that inheritance and from the dominant culture it supports. In Du Bois’s well-known phrase, she can only access antiquity from behind the “veil” (Du Bois, *Souls* 2). Theories of the African influence on classical civilization, however, make possible an understanding of African-Americans as bequeathers of America’s legacy, and

²⁵ Since the publication of *Black Athena* a well-known controversy surrounding Bernal’s work has developed, which I discuss at some length in Part III of this thesis. As I also consider there, and as Bernal himself acknowledges, many of the arguments *Black Athena* makes are scholarly assertions of theories that had already been popularized by African-American literary writers and Afrocentrists for decades before the appearance of this book (Bernal 433-37). My own concern is not to determine whether or not Bernal’s theory is “right” but to consider the light that Morrison’s interest in his work sheds on her own project. It is interesting that in the preface to *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics* (2001), Bernal includes Toni Morrison in his list of those he thanks for their “great help and patient understanding” (xi).

²⁶ While Ron David briefly mentions *Black Athena* in his discussion of the name “Pallas” in *Paradise* (182-84), and while Shelley Haley invokes it in her analysis of *Beloved* and myths of Medea (183), neither of these critics mentions Morrison’s explicit endorsement of Bernal in her “Unspeakable” essay. To the best of my knowledge, my own detailed consideration of the novelist’s interest in the Africanness of classicism is the first of its kind.

thus of Morrison as simultaneously classicism's offspring and its ancestor. This paradoxical predicament enables rather than disables her work's subversiveness, exemplifying Catherine Belsey's theory in *Critical Practice* that the very condition of oppression or alienation — requiring an individual to assume “incompatible or contradictory” subject-positions — can also be a source of resistance (60).²⁷ Morrison encapsulates the potent ambiguity of her outlook in her 2005 Foreword to *Song of Solomon*, where she writes that the novel comprises “a journey, with the accomplishment of flight [. . .]. Old-school heroic, but with other meanings” (x). It is through the “other meanings” afforded by her multiple perspectives that she transforms both classical tradition and dominant American culture, and thus fulfils in several ways at once her own imperative that “the past has to be revised” (Taylor-Guthrie 264).

The notion of transformation is itself a fraught one in African-American cultural history. In his 1925 publication *The New Negro*, Alain Locke famously declared that the black man had undergone a “metamorphosis” (Introduction 3). “In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is being transformed”, he writes (6); “A transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses” (7). But both Ellison in *Invisible Man* and Morrison in *Jazz* engage sceptically with this discourse, questioning the optimism and the efficacy of such proclamations. Ellison discredits the concept of a changed and changing black

²⁷ Belsey argues that the assumption of conflicting subject-positions can destabilize “the ideology of liberal humanism”, which “assumes a world of non-contradictory (and therefore fundamentally unalterable) individuals whose unfettered consciousness is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action” (62). Other critics who apply Belsey's theory to Morrison's novels include Katrine Dalsgard in her article on *Paradise* (238), and Gay Wilentz in her article on *Song of Solomon* (61), “Civilizations Underneath”.

identity through the narrator's disguising himself as Bliss Proteus Rinehart.²⁸ Ultimately the narrator chooses invisibility over "the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities", deciding that "the notion" that "you could make yourself anew" was "frightening" and comprised "the real chaos" (499). And in *Jazz* Joe Trace reflects on the futility of his repeated self-reinvention in response to the changing political and social circumstances in which he finds himself. Before he met Dorcas, he observes, he had "changed into new seven times". and of the subsequent affair and murder, he ruefully comments, "I changed once too often. [. . .] You could say I've been a new Negro all my life" (123, 129). Through his bitter comment that "you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped", Morrison critiques the celebratory rhetoric of *The New Negro* (*Jazz* 135). She suggests that the transformation of black identity does not result in genuine political advancement but is instead a charade under which reality "stays the same".

Implicit in Locke's announcement of a "metamorphosis" and the Invisible Man's confrontation with a "merging fluidity of forms" is an invocation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Locke 3; Ellison 491).²⁹ This thesis is innovative in demonstrating the recurring and crucial engagement with *The Metamorphoses* in the Morrisonian oeuvre, and argues that both through her references to this poem specifically and through her Graeco-Roman

²⁸ Within the novel Ellison does not make it explicit that the "P" of "B.P. Rinehart" stands for Proteus. In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke", however, he writes that "the P. is for 'Proteus,' the B. for 'Bliss'" (71).

²⁹ Rinehart's middle name brings Ovid's several descriptions of the sea god Proteus to mind (such as *Met.* VIII.731-37), while Ellison's description of "the real chaos" invokes Ovid's myth of the "Chaos" that preceded the world's creation (*Invisible Man* 499; *Met.* I.9). Essays on Ellison's deployment of classical tradition include those by O'Connor and Goings, by Scruggs, by Stark and by Tischler. None of these discuss the novel's invocation of *The Metamorphoses*, however.

allusiveness generally Morrison transforms not African-American identity but America itself.³⁰ Rather than black society having to adapt itself to suit the dominant culture, it is the dominant culture itself that must be changed.

Analysis of a key allusion to *The Metamorphoses* in *Paradise* — one in which Morrison “outOvids Ovid” by both referring to and transforming an Ovidian tale — usefully illustrates this overall effect of the novelist’s classicism.

In the trilogy’s third novel, Connie and Deacon make love by a “shallow gully” where there are “two fig trees growing into each other”; they are grateful for the “shade of dusty leaves and the protection of the agonized trunks” (*Paradise* 230-31). Through this detail Morrison alludes to Ovid’s story of Baucis and Philemon. In the Latin poem, this aged couple are rewarded with eternal togetherness for welcoming the disguised Jupiter and Mercury into their humble cottage: they are changed into “two trees from one twin trunk grown side by side” (*Met.* VIII.724). Morrison enlists the Ovidian theme of sanctuary both through the refuge which the trees provide for the lovers and through the refuge which the Convent and the modest but generous hospitality of Connie comprise. At the same time she alters the Roman tale to suit her own political ends. While Baucis and Philemon provide a home for male gods, Connie takes in for the most part “broken girls, frightened girls” (*Paradise* 222). Such an adaptation epitomizes Morrison’s deployment of classical tradition throughout her work. It exemplifies an intertextual process which critics before me have variously described: in Adrienne Rich’s terms it is “re-vision” (35); in Gates’s terms it is “repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference”

³⁰ The only published essay that discusses Morrison’s engagement with *The Metamorphoses* in any detail is Miner’s, which describes the echoes of Ovid’s tale of Tereus and Philomela in *The Bluest Eye*.

(*Signifying* xxiv); in Benston's terms it is a "reweaving" and a "performance" (95); and in Hirsch's terms the myth is "modified, reconstructed and transformed" (29).

In *Paradise* Morrison constructs an obvious juxtaposition between the welcoming Convent, which functions as a kind of utopia, and the unwelcoming town of Ruby, which (as it is a commonplace to observe) functions as a paradigm of dominant cultural America. The contrast illustrates the dilemma Morrison articulates in her essay, "Home" (1997), where she ponders "how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet non-racist home" (5). Her challenge is to transform the "house" that is flawed, exclusivist America — the "house" that is national ideology and the national literary canon, that is the novel as a genre and that is language itself — into the better versions of reality that she conceives of as "home".³¹ I understand this to be the unifying impulse in the novelist's work, and it is one that her classical allusiveness both fulfils and illustrates. For (to borrow the phrase with which she describes her adaptive treatment of Aesop) it is possible to describe her overall project as a "turning" of the Baucis and Philemon myth "on its head" (Address, Washington DC).

In Ovid's tale, the couple's "small home" is "transformed / Into a temple" in which "columns stand beneath the rafters" and the ground is "paved" with "marble" (*Met.* VIII.699-703). It becomes the kind of structure that the buildings most expressive of the sacred tenets of Americanism — the White House, the Capitol Building, the National Archives, the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, the Supreme Court — aspire to be. Morrison's aim is an

³¹ For a discussion of the significance of the concept of "the house" in Morrison's work see Conner, "Sublime" 53-65.

exact reversal of this process: to “convert” the temple-like structures of American dominant culture into what Ovid calls an “old cottage home”, a place, as she fantasizes in *Jazz* (and reiterates in “Home”) that is “both snug and wide open [. . .] with a doorway never needing to be closed” (*Met.* VIII. 697; *Jazz* 221; “Home” 12).

While in 1997 Morrison writes of her quest for a “race-specific yet non-racist home”, back in 1970 she opens her very first novel with the sentence, “Here is the house” (“Home” 5; *Bluest Eye* 1). The national mythology or ideology of pure white happiness which the “primer” house and family represent is dismantled by all the novelist’s subsequent writing, and just as she positions this edifice foremost within her works, so it gives rise to the thematic structure of this thesis.³² For my study is organized not as separate analyses of the classicism of each novel in its chronological position, but as an investigation of the way the classicism of the oeuvre destabilizes predominant American mythologies. The body of my thesis thus comprises three parts: the first examines Morrison’s assault on the ideology of the American Dream, the second explores her reconfigurations of the mythological narratives of mainstream American history, and the third demonstrates her extensive engagement with national ideologies — or “official stories”, as she calls them in her essay on the O.J. Simpson case — of moral, racial and intellectual purity

³² I am using “ideology” and “mythology” interchangeably after Catherine Belsey’s paraphrase of Althusser on Karl Marx: “ideology is not simply a set of illusions, [. . .] but a range of representations (images, stories, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live” (53). Morrison uses the word “mythology” to mean “ideology” in her essay, “Friday on the Potomac”, where she writes of “mythologies that render blacks publicly serviceable instruments of private dread and longing”, and of “the pressure of racist mythologies” (xviii). Campbell and Kean usefully summarize the symbiosis of American myth and ideology in their *American Cultural Studies* 9-10.

(“Official” vii). Together these thematic investigations illustrate the fundamental role of her classicism in her deconstruction of what she calls “the architecture of the *new white man*” (*Playing* 15; italics in original).

In *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) Richard Slotkin writes that “through myths the psychology and worldview of our cultural ancestors are transmitted [. . .] with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected” (3).³³ Part I of my thesis, “Tragedy and the American Dream”, investigates the ways in which Morrison’s deployment of the tragic genre works to challenge the predominant national mythology of the Dream. I begin by arguing that her simultaneous use and revision of the conventional Aristotelian tragic mode must be understood in relation to genealogies of both black and white literature that adopts that mode before she does. My demonstration of the interconnected or mutually constitutive nature of the Dream and of tragedy illuminates the problematic power of the classical genre to reinscribe dominant ideology; this power in turn explains Morrison’s revisionary perspective on that genre. Illustrating her conflictedness, I go on to show that while she enlists concepts such as the tragic downfall or tragic insight to destabilize many of the Dream’s mythical promises, she also problematizes as much as she deploys the paradigm of the tragic hero in her exploration of the realities of freedom.

Next I show that it is her engagement with Greek choric models that enables her critique of the American creed of individualism and her reconfigurations of the relationship between the individual and society. And I

³³ Another critic who invokes Slotkin’s *Regeneration* in relation to Morrison is Michael Awkward, in “Myth, Ideology and Gender in *Song of Solomon*” (99).

end this part by demonstrating that an increasing scepticism about the efficacy of calamitous tragic vision characterizes the trajectory that the eight novels comprise. The development from the unrelieved bleakness of the ending of *The Bluest Eye* to the parody and melodrama integral to *Love* represents the multiple negotiations of the tragic mode that a non-reinforcing challenge to the American Dream requires.

Part II of my thesis addresses Morrison's interventions in what I am calling the "Classic Constructions of American History". In his *Modern Medea* (1998) — an account of the life of Margaret Garner — Stephen Weisenburger refers to several contemporaneous representations of the slave woman's infanticide that are expressed in classical terms.³⁴ Such cultural impulses epitomize dominant American historiography's repeated ideological recourse to the ancient world that Morrison's own classicism enables her to question. I begin this part by illustrating the novelist's attack on national hagiographic practice and its conscious indebtedness to Graeco-Roman tradition. I then show how the allusiveness of *Tar Baby* and *Love* — to *The Metamorphoses*, to the legend of Lucretia and to the myth of Kore — destabilizes mythical justifications for and accounts of the colonization of America. I go on to illuminate the many ways in which *Paradise* interrogates the Puritans' and the Founders' sense of their analogical relationship to Greece and Rome, a sense which continues to inform American exceptionalism to this day.

³⁴ Weisenburger discusses the painter Thomas Noble's calling his picture of Margaret Garner "The Modern Medea" (7-8), the fact that abolitionists compared Garner to Virginius (an infanticide who killed his daughter to preserve her honour) (86-87), and that an 1856 *New York Tribune* editorial compared her "to the Greek hero Mithdrates, who sacrificed his wife and sister rather than give them up to a life of concubinage" (202).

My subsequent readings of *Beloved* and *Jazz* highlight Morrison's exposure of the American South's long-standing sense of its affinity with the classical world. I show how these novels unravel the Southern hegemony's strategic use of tragic, epic and pastoral conventions in its defence of slavery and its representations of the Civil War and its aftermath. Interpreting *Jazz* as a counter-pastoral that is in dialogue with Virgil's first Eclogue, I argue that this novel insists on non-mythologized representations of both the rural South and of black urbanization and city culture. Finally, I demonstrate that Morrison's representations of the Civil Rights Movement in terms of multiply-resonant classical allusions — of which the reference to dragon's teeth in *Song of Solomon* is the most striking example — enable her both to critique this problematic decade in American history and to invest the struggle for true equality with new power.

In *Invisible Man* the narrator undergoes famously disastrous experiences while working for a manufacturing company that glories in the slogan, "KEEP AMERICA PURE / WITH / LIBERTY PAINTS" (196). The third and final part of my thesis, "Traditions of Purity in American Life", examines Morrison's deployment of the concept of *miasma* or pollution in destabilizing the classically-informed notions of purity that structure mainstream American culture. I show that through their own engagement with the discourse of *miasma*, with classical purification rituals and with literature that exemplifies the confluence of Graeco-Roman and African cultures, the novels expose the processes by which a purified classical tradition has functioned in the construction of damaging ideologies of racial and moral purity. In their critique of the Enlightenment and its legacy, the works protest the dominant cultural

dependence on what Morrison calls “the miasma of black life” while they assert the radical potential of a re-contaminated intellectual tradition (“Friday” x).

An overview of the changing but persistent role of classicism in American racial thought and constructions of national identity contextualizes my illumination of Morrison’s representations of the impure and the pure. I go on to show that from depictions of characters’ obsession with washing and laundry to articulations of the irrational in terms of Dionysiac imagery and Ovidian allusion, the novels problematize cultural preoccupations with purity. Next, in “The Rage for Revenge”, I demonstrate that through engagement with *The Oresteia* and *The Bacchae* Morrison challenges cherished notions of American justice as a morally purifying force. She both exposes the unavailability of “justice” to African-Americans and protests the irrational, vengeful acts done in that concept’s name.

Finally I analyse Morrison’s interest in the work of Wole Soyinka and in Egypt’s cultural legacies. I argue that this, together with her reconfiguration of various myths of origin in *The Metamorphoses*, enables her to restore the African presence in America’s classical heritage. Her insistence on the influence of Africa on Greece and Rome and thus on the classically-derived United States is a strategy that is full of potential. And it is one means by which she reinvents the very concept of tradition itself. For, like Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1993), her work envisions tradition not as a conservative force, nor as an instrument of oppression, but as “a stimulus towards innovation and change” (Gilroy x).

Part I Tragedy and the American Dream

I.i “*Si Quaeris Peninsulam Amoenam . . .*”

In 1907, Henry Adams claimed that “America has always taken tragedy lightly” (*Education* 1100). Two decades later, William Carlos Williams made a similar observation, lamenting that Americans “have no sense of the tragic” (*In the American Grain* 180). But the versions of America that Toni Morrison both perceives and creates, unsurprisingly, do not reflect the Progressivist cheerfulness that Adams and Williams identify. In *Playing in the Dark* she highlights the bleakness of the nation’s “early and founding literature”, observing “how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted” it “truly is” (35).¹ And as I have already stated, she once said that her own writing is “in the tragic mode”, and has claimed to feel “intellectually at home” in “Greek tragedy” (Taylor-Guthrie 125; “Unspeakable” 3). This first part of my thesis explores the extent and effect of her novels’ engagement with the tragic genre. It argues that her work as a whole depends on that mode, but is not, in fact, straightforwardly “in” it. Instead, her oeuvre comprises a conflicted, revisionary relationship both with Greek tragedy and with “classic” American literature — white and black — that is itself in the tragic tradition. Ultimately, it is her very ambivalence about the “tragic mode” that makes possible her unambivalent assault on dominant American ideology.

¹ Morrison is of course not the first to make this observation. Similar, more canonical verdicts about classic American literature include those by writers with whom Morrison is in many ways at odds, such as D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam*, Harry Levin in *The Power of Blackness* (1958), and Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960).

In her assessment of canonical white American literature, Morrison observes “how antithetical it is to our modern rendition of the American Dream. How pronounced in it is the absence of that term’s elusive mixture of hope, realism, materialism and promise” (*Playing* 35). The author clearly relishes the irony that the most highly-prized literary expressions of a nation devoted to the “pursuit of happiness” are so pessimistic. Given the problematic position of African-Americans in relation to the “American Dream”, on the other hand, it is perhaps less ironic than inevitable that much of her own writing is characterized by the absence of hope and the absence of promise. A child is reduced to an alienated psychosis; a young woman meets an early and lonely death; a young man jumps from a cliff; a marriage and a love affair disintegrate; an ex-slave is tormented by the ghost of the daughter she murdered; an unhappily married man shoots his girlfriend; the pillars of a community massacre a group of vulnerable women; two former friends attempt to destroy each other in their conflicting claims to a legacy. It is a truism (and a critical commonplace) to remark on the extent to which Morrison’s own storylines are “antithetical to [. . .] the American Dream” (*Playing* 35). This chapter seeks to extend that observation in its specific concern with the way her deployment of tragic conventions functions in her destabilizing of the Dream. It examines her work’s interaction with Greek drama, with white American tragic novels and with the significant body of African-American writing that recruits the “tragic mode” in its struggle against insidious ideology. I argue that Morrison negotiates a position simultaneously within and without all these genealogies in her own demythologizing project.

For while *Moby-Dick* (1851), *An American Tragedy* (1925) and *American Pastoral* (1997) might all be described as tragic novels that problematize the American Dream, the same can be said of *Clotel* (1853), *Native Son* (1940) and *Linden Hills* (1985).² Indeed, my examination of Morrison's relationship with tragedy reveals that the well-charted controversy within African-American letters about what Gates calls "the ideology of mimesis", which has been typically characterized as the "experimental" versus the "protest" schools of writing, or abbreviated to the "Hurston-Wright debate" (Gates, *Signifying* 179, 182), might be re-cast as a dispute about the efficacy of non-tragic versus tragic modes of writing.³ Historians of African-American literature have paid little attention to the frequency with which the principal defenders of both positions use the actual word "tragic" in their arguments. "I am not tragically colored", Hurston famously insisted in 1928 ("How it Feels" 115); Hughes conversely complained in 1939 that "those novels about Negroes that sell best" comprise "the pathetic or melodramatic, perhaps, but not the tragic" ("Democracy and Me" 128-29). A decade later Wright pointed out with ironic pride that "we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James" ("How Bigger Was

² According to Hilton Als's *New Yorker* "Profile", "As a child, Morrison read virtually everything, from drawing-room comedies to Theodore Dreiser, from Jane Austen to Richard Wright" (Als 67). Morrison discusses *Moby-Dick* in complimentary terms in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken", where she calls it "a complex, heaving, profound, disorderly text" (18).

³ Morrison alludes to this debate in her recent Foreword to *Sula*:

It may be difficult now to imagine how it felt to be seen as a problem to be solved rather than a writer to be read. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston—all had been called upon to write an essay addressing the 'problem' of being a 'Negro' writer. [. . .] And since my sensibility was highly political and passionately aesthetic, it would unapologetically inform the work I did. (x-xi)

For discussions of the "experimental versus protest" debate see Gates, *Signifying* 179ff and Marc Conner's introduction to *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison* (2000), especially xiii-xx. Conner's summary re-frames the debate as a (false) dichotomy between the "political" versus the "aesthetic", and notes Morrison's own contempt for what she calls "the art/politics fake debate" (x). My focus on the political efficacy of tragedy supplements the dissolution of the binary between the "aesthetic" and the "political" that Conner's book effects.

Born” 462). In the following investigation I show that Morrison’s dismantling of the American Dream necessarily emerges from, critiques and even to some extent resolves what Ellison calls, in his Introduction to *Invisible Man*, “those ongoing conflicts, tragic and comic, that had claimed [his] group’s energies since the abandonment of Reconstruction” (xviii).

Since both the key terms on which this argument depends — “tragedy” and “the American Dream” — are potentially vague and unwieldy, at once clichéd and still-contested, it is essential at this early stage to clarify the senses in which I am using them.⁴ With regard to “tragedy”, many scholars are keen to unseat Aristotle from his position as pre-eminent tragic theorist, pointing out the inapplicability of his formulae to many Greek plays which are nonetheless “tragedies”, or showing that later critics obscured the intentions of the *Poetics* by turning “inferences” into “rules” (Draper 16).⁵ Interpretations of Greek tragedy informed by a conventional Aristotelianism — which emphasize the protagonist’s downfall and the “plot elements” of “reversal”, “recognition” or “discovery” and “destruction” or “calamity” — are a defining feature of mid-twentieth-century classical scholarship. But both these and the structuralist approaches of the 1970s have given way in recent decades to post-structuralist readings more concerned with the politics of Athenian culture than with

⁴ R.D. Draper observes of “tragedy” what Jim Cullen points out of “the American Dream”: each comprises multiple meanings, is part of an on-going controversy, and cannot satisfactorily be reduced to a definitive formula (Draper 11-12, Cullen 5-7).

⁵ Arthur Miller writes, “There is no more reason for falling down in a faint before the *Poetics* than before Euclid’s geometry, which has been amended numerous times by men with new insights” (“Tragedy” 164). For further caveats about Aristotle see Draper 16, Gould 217 and Goldhill, “Collectivity”, 244 and 247.

concepts such as the tragic “fall”, the tragic “flaw” and the extent of the tragic hero’s self-determinism.⁶

Aristotelian definitions of tragedy are nonetheless central to my arguments here. This is because Morrison’s own articulated sense of “the tragic” is clearly indebted to such readings, and because her deployment of “classic” concepts such as the tragic fall or tragic insight are fundamental to her attack on the American Dream. At the same time, however, her novelistic formulations of “the tragedy of resistance” involve a critical revision of Aristotelian perspectives such as the privileging of individual agency or the insistence on calamity.⁷ It is her departure from as well as her deployment of the Aristotelian “tragic mode” that enables her deconstruction of the Dream.

Given that Morrison was a Classics “minor” at Howard from 1951-53, the influence of conventional Aristotelianism on many of her configurations of the tragic (both non-fictional and fictional) is not surprising. As I have already intimated, the *Poetics* were taught as part of Howard’s “Greek Drama in

⁶ I am using the term “conventional Aristotelianism” because, as John Jones points out in his provocative chapter “New Fictions for Old”, “While [. . .] this is not the only ancient text to be subjected to a series of misapplications [. . .] the *Poetics* must be distinguished by an almost total failure of contact between Aristotle’s argument and the successive traditions of exegesis” (11). The “Aristotelianism” from which Morrison’s tragic vision emerges itself represents only one reading (Jones would say, distortion) of the *Poetics*. Jones’s most striking point about the extent to which non-Aristotelian concepts are conventionally attributed to Aristotle is the fact that “there is no evidence—not a shred—that Aristotle entertained the concept of the tragic hero” (13). The mid-twentieth-century Aristotelian approach to tragedy is epitomized by H.D.F. Kitto in *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*, editions of which were published in 1939, 1950, and 1961. Jean-Pierre Vernant dominates the later structuralist scholarship, for example in his *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (1972), while Simon Goldhill’s 1986 publication *Reading Greek Tragedy* ushered in the recent post-structuralist approaches in which the Princeton-based Froma Zeitlin is also a leading practitioner. I am indebted to Dan Orrells for the several conversations which have helped me to think through and contextualize Morrison’s relationship to Aristotelian tragic theory.

⁷ I have borrowed the term “the tragedy of resistance” from Carole Anne Taylor’s *The Tragedy and Comedy of Resistance: Reading Modernity Through Black Women’s Fiction* (2000; 5).

English” class, and Morrison’s articulation in her 1955 M.A. thesis of the influence of Greek tragedy on William Faulkner clearly attests to the role of Aristotle’s work in her intellectual formation. “The fall of a once great house”, she writes there, “old family guilts inherited by an heir; the conflict between individual will and fate and the self-wrought catastrophe of the protagonist are all immediately recognized traits in Greek tragedy” (24).⁸ Her description of *The Bluest Eye*’s “dangerously free” Cholly Breedlove as one who lives “a very tragic life” indicates the Aristotelian sense of the self-determining hero which informs all of her protagonists (*Bluest Eye* 125; Taylor-Guthrie 19). And her repeated insistence that her characters experience moments of “revelation” brings Aristotle’s famous emphasis on tragic “recognition” or “discovery” to mind (Taylor-Guthrie 125).

Of the endings of her novels, Morrison declared in 1985 that “something important has happened; some knowledge is there—the Greek knowledge—what is the epiphany in Greek tragedy” (Taylor-Guthrie 177). The *Poetics* resonate indisputably, then, in her own conception of the demythologizing process, or the “removal of cataracts”, as she puts it, that her oeuvre effects (Taylor-Guthrie 37). At the same time, the author’s sense that by a novel’s close she has shattered the illusions of both characters and readers usefully explains the efficacy of the tragic genre as a mode of resistance: tragedy is at once caused by and works to destabilize myth. To bear in mind Vernant and Vidal-Naquet’s thesis that “myth is both in [Greek] tragedy and

⁸ There are obvious echoes here of Aristotle’s famous definitions of tragedy as involving a “fall into misery” that is “not due to vice and depravity but rather to some error” (trans. Dorsch 48), and of his emphasis on “calamity” or “catastrophe” as one of the three key elements of the genre (trans. Dorsch 47).

rejected by it” is to understand how the mythology of the American Dream is both *in* Morrison’s novels and rejected *by* them (*Myth and Tragedy* 14).⁹ The Dream both causes and is destabilized by the tragic experiences she depicts. Yet it is by finally rejecting the “calamity” that defines the Aristotelian tragic mode, as well as through her modifications to the conception of the “error-prone” individual hero, that the author avoids endorsing the Dream she sets out to expose.

To make such claims demands clarification of my own and Morrison’s understanding of “the American Dream”. In his recent work, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003), Jim Cullen points out that the concept has a long tradition, is “a complex idea with manifold implications”, and that “there is no *one* American Dream” (5, 6, 7). It is pertinent to this study that the same cultural enterprises or ideologies which he identifies as key expressions of the “Dream” — the Puritan settlements, the Declaration of Independence, “Upward Mobility”, the Civil Rights Movement, the “Dream of Home Ownership” and “the Coast” — operate in Morrison’s novels as key mythical processes which lead to characters’ downfalls. And to recall the novelist’s own articulation of what she calls “a promise genuinely promising” — that “with luck and endurance one could discover freedom; find a way to make God’s law manifest; or end up rich as a prince” — is in effect to summarize the historian (*Playing* 34).

⁹ Building on Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, William Blake Tyrrell and Frieda S. Brown argue in their *Athenian Myths and Institutions* (1991) that Greek tragedy problematizes the ideologies to which Greek myths are integral. Sophocles’s *Ajax*, for example, “explores the destructive potential of the civic *arete* [standard of excellence] through the historically removed figures of Homeric *aristoi*, particularly Ajax as son of warrior” (65).

Cullen also identifies several themes which the Dream's various realizations have in common. He quotes the earliest published use of the term, which is by the scholar James Truslow Adams in his interestingly-named work *The Epic of America* (1931); Truslow discusses "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank" (Cullen 4). Both Truslow and Cullen understand the Founding Fathers' proclamation of the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to be, in the later writer's words, "the source code of the American Dream" (4, 36). Finally, Cullen highlights the Dream's recurring impulses: "the quest for equality" (8), "the confidence of individual citizens that *they* will be the ones who overcome the odds" (7), and the paradoxical concept of "freedom" (9-10).¹⁰ It is these values, I argue — equality, freedom and individualism — that Morrison's tragic vision and her manipulations of tragic form subject to scrutiny. The novelist exploits the fact that for African-Americans "the great discrepancy between the American social creed and the American social practice", as Alain Locke describes it (13), is a dilemma fraught with tragic potential.¹¹

Not everyone, however, has perceived this potential. William Carlos Williams, for example, locates the nation's supposed *lack* of tragic "feeling" in the ideology of the Dream. Parodying popular opinion, he writes, "Who is open

¹⁰ Cullen explores the obvious paradox that the "men" to whom the Declaration of Independence refers assumes a definition of "man" as "civilized white male" (51).

¹¹ Of course, I have borrowed the term "dilemma" from Gunnar Myrdal, who is discussed by Cullen on 117. The existence of this "discrepancy" has been remarked upon by countless cultural critics since America's inception. Despite the frequency with which it is discussed, however, it is an irony that continues to resonate. One particularly effective exposé is in James Baldwin's essay, "The American Dream and the American Negro", first published in the *New York Times Magazine* in March 1965 (after the passing of the Civil Rights Bill):

The Southern oligarchy which has still today so very much power in Washington, and therefore some power in the world, was created by my labor and my sweat and the violation of my women and the murder of my children. This in the land of the free, the home of the brave. No one can challenge that statement. It is a matter of historical record. (715)

to injuries? Not Americans. [. . .] Let the sucker who fails get his. What's tragic in that? [. . .] He didn't make good, that's all" (*Grain* 180). But to consider the "American Dream" and "tragedy" together — particularly Aristotelian notions of tragedy involving a calamitous downfall — is to see that they are in fact interdependent or the flipside of each other. In *The Power of Blackness* Harry Levin asserts that "the union of opposites [. . .] is the basis of the American outlook" (xi) and posits "the American Nightmare" as "the dark other half" of the American Dream (3, 7). The catastrophic tragic downfall, likewise, can be understood as the antithesis of the fulfilled American Dream.¹²

The two opposing concepts have much in common. For example, Cullen states that the notion of individual "agency" lies "at the very core of the American Dream" (10); according to Aristotelian and structuralist readings of tragedy, questions of agency also lie at the core of that genre. Cullen asserts that part of the Puritans' legacy, inherent in the Dream, is "the willingness to do something difficult, painful, unintentionally mischievous, or finally impossible" which "gives purpose to individual lives"; this could serve as a description of the conventional tragic hero's predicament. And that equivalence in turn highlights how both concepts depend, in various ways, on "the gap between ideals and reality" (Cullen 117). The historian David Blight has shown the extent to which "romance" and "tragedy" were mutually constitutive in the mythologizing processes by which the Civil War became part of dominant

¹² Although Levin's organizing binary does usefully illustrate the interdependence of "the Dream" and "tragedy", Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* comprises an implicit challenge to this work, which is one of the key texts of 1950s American Studies with which the Morrisonian project is in conflict. As I go on to argue, Morrison's conception of America ultimately dissolves the "dream/nightmare" binary. It is also worth noting that Levin's repeated deployment of the imagery of blackness and darkness together with his failure to engage adequately with issues of race and slavery exemplify the "wilful critical blindness" that Morrison sets out to counter (*Playing* 18).

“American memory” (216-17). So if the American Dream is itself a romance — as novels like *The Great Gatsby* (1925) suggest — it must contain within it the possibility of tragedy.

Morrison implies as much in a crucial but seldom-discussed passage in *Song of Solomon*, in which Milkman, while spying on his mother in the train station, misses a useful moral lesson hidden in a mural of the “Great Seal of Michigan” (121). Under the painting of two rearing deer and an eagle, “Purple Latin words stretched in a long ribbon beneath the seal: *Si Quaeris Peninsulam Amoenam Circumspice*” (123).¹³ The conventional translation of this motto is, “If you seek the beautiful peninsula, look around you”. But the verbs “quaero” and “circumspicio” have such a range of meanings that the sentence could also be translated as, “If you seek the beautiful peninsula, look out!”, or even, “If you acquire the beautiful peninsula, look out!”. In other words, if you’re looking for (or if you find) the promised land, be careful. Morrison tells us that “Milkman didn’t understand the Latin” (123); the protagonist is fabulously oblivious to the author’s point about the vulnerability of those who pursue and even those who have achieved the American Dream. The Dream is about moving up in the world; tragedy is about falling down. No wonder, then, that Morrison deploys the “tragic mode” in her attack on the country’s most pervasive myth.

The idea that the Dream exists in polar opposition to tragedy depends on an understanding of tragedy as ultimately pessimistic, embodying Aristotle’s

¹³ This is the official state seal and motto of Michigan.

“destruction” or “calamity” with no final consolatory or redemptive vision.¹⁴

This “tragedy-as-pessimism” school is the understanding of the genre adhered to by many of Morrison’s African-American literary ancestors: for example, when Hurston or Hughes or Wright discuss the relationship between the “Negro” and the “tragic” they are clearly envisaging representations of what Gates calls “a determined, defeated black whole” (46). Meanwhile the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* defines the stereotype of the “tragic mulatto” as “‘tragic’ because [his or her] racial identification results in personality disintegration and even death” (Grimes-Williams). But to survey Morrison’s oeuvre is to see that her representations of catastrophe are increasingly nuanced: the various expressions of hope that characterize the endings of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise* and *Love* suggest the novelist’s developing scepticism about the political efficacy of the Aristotelian tragic mode’s calamitous vision. As I go on to demonstrate, the synthesis of tragic and anti-tragic perspectives in her later work exemplifies what Carole Anne Taylor calls “a revisionary, expansionary view of both tragic awe and comic rapport as potentially permeable, even simultaneous modes” (80).¹⁵ Such simultaneity is the means by which Morrison avoids reinscribing the American Dream, an ideology which wholly catastrophic tragic vision ultimately serves.

The paradox that the Dream is actually strengthened by its antithesis, tragedy, involves wider questions about the relationship between tragedy and

¹⁴ Of course, not all tragic theorists accept this position, and indeed not all Greek “tragedies” do end in unmitigated disaster. While Steiner writes that “the romantic vision of life is non-tragic” and that Christianity is an “anti-tragic vision of the world” (Draper 26), and I.A. Richards asserts “the least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal” (146), W.H. Auden asserts that Christianity comprises “the tragedy of possibility” (Draper 37). Examples of Greek tragedies with non-catastrophic endings include *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus, and *Alcestis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides.

¹⁵ Taylor here is writing of Bessie Head and Toni Cade Bambara.

the dominant culture. As this study places Morrison's engagement with the tragic genre within several frameworks — that of Greek tragedy in its original setting, Greek tragedy in the American setting, and both Euro- and African-American writing in the “tragic mode” — it is necessary briefly to consider tragedy's relationship to the mainstream in each context. For since the dramatists of Athens and African-American tragic writers occupy such contrasting positions in relation to their dominant cultures, it is easy to assume that the latter, those writing from beyond “the veil” are by definition more radical critics of hegemonic culture than were the Greeks (Du Bois, *Souls* 2). But the reality is much more complicated.

Many scholars have documented the fact that drama in Athens was a state-sponsored activity. The playwrights, actors and chorus all benefited from state subsidies, and according to Simon Goldhill, there even existed a “Theoric Fund” which “made payments to the citizens to enable them to attend the theatre” (“Audience” 55).¹⁶ As Cartledge observes, “the experience of play-going at the Dionysia was supposed to be [. . .] a school for citizenship in the Athenian democracy” (“Greek” 126-27). But there is less agreement about whether the drama was more an instrument of propaganda or a site of debate. Augusto Boal insists in *Theater of the Oppressed* that because “the repressive function” is “the fundamental aspect of Greek tragedy”, the form is of no use to marginal groups (25). The more moderate A.G. Little (an American whose 1942 book, *Myth and Society in Attic Drama* is now deemed very “old-fashioned” but is one that Morrison may well have encountered at Howard) describes the drama as “a solvent for social conflict” and discusses “the use to

¹⁶ For an account of the state funding of tragic performances in Ancient Athens see Wilson 4.

which [tragedy] was put in the service of the state” (vi, 18). More recently, Edith Hall points out that while “tragedy legitimizes the value-system necessary to the glorification of Athens and the subordination of slaves, women, and other non-citizens”, nonetheless “the polyphonic tragic form [. . .] challenges the very notions which it simultaneously legitimizes” (Hall, “Sociology” 118). Perhaps the overriding inference to be drawn from this debate is that whether tragedy is exploited to radical or conservative ends, it is unquestionably a highly influential, politically powerful genre.

Directly contradicting Boal’s thesis that tragedy can only reinscribe oppression are Lorna Hardwick’s discoveries about the function of Greek drama in postcolonial cultures. Analysing productions and adaptations of classical tragedies in Ireland, South Africa and Nigeria, she argues that the ancient plays can articulate radical protest and constitute a “catalyst for change” (“Decolonizing” 1). In Eastern Europe as well, she writes, Greek tragic drama “has been significant in the struggle to develop free political and cultural identities and to resist imposed ones” (“Decolonizing” 1).¹⁷

But in the United States — a “postcolonial”-turned-imperialist nation — the dominant culture has historically used tragedy as a tool to arrest change. Caroline Winterer’s recent study of American classicism makes the point that Greek tragedy held little interest for the Rome-obsessed Founding Fathers and for the early Republic generally, but that it became a popular instrument of conservatism during the turbulent Nineteenth Century. It was not until 1820 that Greek drama “rose to prominence in the [university] curriculum”; this was

¹⁷ Hardwick’s study of West African reconfigurations of Greek tragedy include those by Soyinka, whom I go on to discuss at length in Part III (Hardwick, “Decolonizing” 8-10).

an era of rapid change in the United States that not coincidentally heralded the nation's "recruit[ing] classicism for a radical new purpose: antimodernism" (Winterer, *Culture* 92, 4).

The question about whether Greek tragic tradition serves radical or conservative ends persists in relation to the classically-informed work of white male American novelists as various as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Scott Fitzgerald, Norman Mailer and Philip Roth. But while novels such as *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), *The Great Gatsby*, *An American Dream* (1965) and *American Pastoral* indisputably explore the tragic potential of the American Dream, it is arguable that they do not actually challenge its ideology. For Zenobia, Jay Gatz, Stephen Rojack and Seymour Levov are all deeply flawed characters, and these flaws allow the reader to lament the individual's fate and to wish he or she had succeeded, had realized the Dream, rather than to deplore the ideology by which the character is brought down.

Such processes illustrate Sacvan Bercovitch's point, in his epilogue to *The American Jeremiad* (1978), about the difficulties inherent in effecting genuine critique of the national ideology. Bercovitch divides literature concerned with American identity into two traditions, that of the "jeremiad" and the "anti-jeremiad" (191). "[B]oth the jeremiad and the anti-jeremiad foreclosed alternatives", he writes, "the one by absorbing the hopes of mankind into the meaning of America, the other by reading into America the futility and fraud of hope itself" (191). The conception of "America" as a "totalistic bipolar system" means that "the defiant act that might have posed fundamental social alternatives became instead a fundamental force against social change" (204); the authors Bercovitch surveys are characterized either by "a refusal to

abandon the national covenant” or a demand for “the rededication of the spirit of America” (181, 197). Many of the novels Bercovitch identifies as “jeremiads” or “anti-jeremiads” are simultaneously tragic works representing downfalls and calamities in the Aristotelian vein, and it is this paradigm’s own “totalistic bipolar” relationship to the American Dream that makes it a problematic mode of critique.¹⁸

Bercovitch’s study does not consider any African-American writing, but it is arguable that the dilemmas about effective modes of cultural representation, and the need for aesthetic strategies that critique American mythology without reinforcing it, have been more urgently felt in black than in white literary production. It is no wonder Langston Hughes wanted to write tragedy, given the fact that in 1929 “Instructions for Contributors” to the “Negro Press” told writers not to submit “any stories that are depressing, saddening or gloomy” or that would “engender ill feelings between blacks and whites” (Gates, *Signifying* 179). Yet black writing that overtly “protests” risks being beneficial to the dominant culture. Wright’s *Bigger* is hanged; Petry’s *Lutie* abandons the son she loves and is last seen on a train to Chicago; William Wells Brown’s mixed race daughter of a president drowns herself, and her descendants can only survive abroad. Given America’s historical inclination to disappear its black population, either through murder or “recolonization”, and

¹⁸ The writers Bercovitch surveys include Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Adams, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos and Pynchon (176-204). The relevance of Bercovitch’s thesis to Morrison’s work was suggested to me by Katrine Dalsgard’s article, “The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain”. Therein, Dalsgard argues:

It follows from Bercovitch’s emphasis on the traditionally exceptionalist critique of the discrepancy between ideal American visions and actual American practices that, for all of his acknowledgement of this discrepancy, he maintains the theoretical possibility of an ideal America based on an ancestral, pedagogical model. (241)
In *Paradise*, by contrast (Dalsgard continues) “the problem [. . .] is not to be located in a discrepancy between exceptionalist theory and practice, but within exceptionalist theory itself” (241).

to deny the existence of miscegenation, the catastrophic “fiction of obliteration” (as Gates calls it) might be considered a risky strategy (*Signifying* 46).

James Baldwin certainly thought so. His 1949 article, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” — which is one of the essays selected by Morrison for the Library of America collection — anticipates aspects of Bercovitch’s argument in its assertions of the inefficacy of representing calamitous black experience. Baldwin allies *Native Son* with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and argues that Wright’s novel is “a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy” (18). The “‘protest’ novel”, the essay asserts, “so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary” (“Everybody’s Protest Novel” 18, 16). Morrison’s own ambivalent negotiations of the tragic concept of “destruction” or “calamity” are fundamental to her success in protesting the American Dream without ramifying it.

This discussion has shown that in choosing to deploy the “tragic mode” Morrison engages a genre that is multi-faceted, historically-burdened, heavily-invested and controversial. But she is not the only African-American woman writer to establish an overt dialogue with classical tragedy in critiquing the American Dream. An important predecessor is Paule Marshall, whose *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) makes frequent reference to Greek drama in depicting a Bajun family torn apart by conflicting dreams of home ownership. Morrison’s technique and its effect, however, are very different from Marshall’s. *Brown Girl* is explicitly allusive, attempting to create an equivalence — Silla leads

Deighton home “as Antigone led her blind father into Colonus”, for example — in a manner that Morrison for the most part eschews (170). Instead, her explorations of characters’ ill-fated pursuit of wealth, status and happiness depend on implicit allusions and a revisionary deployment of tragic conventions such as the chorus.

Arguably, the rare occasions when Morrison does suggest a direct equivalence between her characters’ situation and Greek tragedy add little to the novels’ power. The extended analogy between Aunt Jimmy’s funeral and a “street tragedy” in *The Bluest Eye*, for example, intrudes rather awkwardly on the fast-moving account of Cholly’s past (112), and in *Tar Baby* Valerian’s meditation on how “the instinct of kings was always to slay the messenger” becomes a somewhat laboured comparison that adds little to the horror of his discovery (245). More effective is her adaptation of tragic method for her own purposes.

A recurring narrative strategy is to reveal at the outset a plot’s climactic event; *The Bluest Eye*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* relate the violent denouement of their stories on the first page. Since we know what is going to happen, as Claudia MacTeer says, “*there is really nothing more to say - except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how*” (*Bluest Eye* 3; Morrison’s typography). In original performances of Greek tragedy, Athenian audiences’ familiarity with mythical tradition meant they already knew a play’s storyline before they watched it. This enabled them to focus on the morally ambiguous causes of events, and on the playwright’s unique handling of a well-known myth. Morrison’s disruptions of chronology create a similar effect: our attention is drawn to the complicated reasons for the protagonists’ catastrophic actions.

This focus on “how” rather than “what” effectively highlights the insidious role of myth, emphasizing for example that it is Cholly’s and Joe Trace’s belief in America’s promise of readily-available happiness and success that exacerbates their frustration and despair. Morrison’s “tragic mode” destabilizes national ideologies, then, as much through a repetition (with difference) of the Greeks’ methods and vision as through overt allusiveness or analogy.

Indeed, the very concept of an “equivalence” between African-American literature and Greek tragedy is a complex one. Morrison must surely find Du Bois’s claim that he “sit[s] with Shakespeare and he winces not” to be ideologically problematic (*Souls* 67), given that she rejects any comparison between black and canonical literature that seeks to validate the former by a “kind of benign co-existence near or within reach of the already sacred texts” (“Unspeakable” 10). But, as I have outlined in my Introduction, it is exactly this process which much existing scholarship on her relationship with tragedy enacts. Terry Otten’s essay on *Beloved*, “From Melodrama to Tragedy”, is particularly problematic for its focus on whether or not the novel should be classified as “tragic” rather than on the effects of Morrison’s engagement with the mode. His assertion that *Beloved* “places the community of African American characters in the larger context of classical tragedy” sets his work at ideological odds with the novelist’s own position (“Transfiguring” 292, 296).¹⁹

¹⁹ In *The Crime of Innocence* Otten argues that “the sacrificial death of Pecola’s innocence in the planting of Cholly’s seed produced melodrama, [. . .] not high tragedy” (16). Stanley Crouch’s now notorious review of *Beloved*, in which he argues that the novel “fails to rise to tragedy” (67), similarly deploys a metaphor of height or elevation to suggest tragedy’s position. This imagery (though obviously conventional) comprises a suggestion of the unquestionable superiority of classical tragedy, and indicates the truth of Raymond Williams’s observation (used in a different context) that “the ordinary academic tradition of tragedy is in fact an ideology” (*Modern Tragedy* 48).

My focus on how Morrison's engagement with tragic traditions specifically critiques American ideology, then, extends the scholarship that precedes it. In the four-part discussion that follows, I first demonstrate the extent to which characters' downfalls (in a conventional Aristotelian mode) result in "discovery" or "information" about mythical national promises of upward mobility, wealth and home ownership. Next I examine how the convention of the "tragic hero" informs the author's exploration of the problematic concept of freedom. I show that a revisionary deployment of the "hero" paradigm, in which she questions the dichotomy between individual "error" and uncontrollable "Fate" by bringing the effects of social circumstances to the fore, is key to the novels' political efficacy.

I go on to propose that the model of the Greek chorus is fundamental to Morrison's exposure of the troubled relationship between American individuals and American society, but that at the same time her critique of "rugged individualism" extends Greek choric traditions in significant ways. And finally I analyse the novelist's developing rejection of catastrophic denouements and the parody of the tragic genre that become increasingly evident in her work. "[L]aughter is serious", realizes Violet in *Jazz*. "More complicated, more serious, than tears" (113). I argue that it is the novels' various anti-tragic impulses, as well as their tragic ones, which enable Morrison's complicated and serious assault on the American Dream.

I.ii Tragic Perspectives on Mythical Promises

In *Love*, Vida Gibbons understands Bill Cosey's downfall to be the story of "a commanding, beautiful man surrendering to feuding women, letting them ruin all he had built" (36). While the novel's accumulating revelations destabilize this interpretation of the Cosey empire's collapse, the ultimate failure of the resort-founder's project remains an indisputable fact. The tale of a dream corrupted corresponds with the series of individual downfalls — with the stories of unfulfilled aspirations, impossible ambitions and thwarted happiness — that comprise the rest of Morrison's oeuvre. This section explores the way the author's widespread deployment of the tragic mode challenges the myths about upward mobility, about wealth and about home ownership that are fundamental to the American Dream. It does not aim to "prove" that specific novels are or are not "tragedies", but in demonstrating the role of tragic vision in the works' demythologizing processes, it does draw attention to that vision's pervasiveness. It also illuminates the way Morrison engages classical myth and various classical socio-religious conventions to intensify her representations of unhappy, catastrophe-riven households. This analysis is important because critics have hitherto paid surprisingly scant attention to the extensiveness of a conventional Aristotelian sense of calamitousness, of the tragic fall and of tragic insight in the novelist's flawing of the American creed.

"Ruin, falling, losing, mindlessness", Morrison recalls of her childhood years in her recent Foreword to *Love*, "were not only in our nature now, they signaled our future" (x). No existing criticism has discussed the fact that Morrison's novels are replete with both people and things that literally,

physically, fall over or fall down. These repeated descents echo the protagonist's downfall or near-downfall which structures each plot, and together they insistently embody the antithesis to the upward mobility that defines archetypal American success stories such as Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), or Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912). In the following pages I am deliberately listing the most striking examples of this "falling phenomenon" in an attempt to convey their combined effect.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia fantasizes that Maureen Peel will "fall off a cliff" (49), and observes that adults merely "glance" at Frieda and herself when they "trip and fall down" (5). Junior laughs when, as a result of his bullying, girls "fell down and their bloomers showed" (68); this anticipates his assault on Pecola, in which "they both fell", as does the cat (71). During Cholly and Pauline's fights "there was only the muted sound of falling things"; these articulate the collapse of their marriage and anticipate Cholly's crime (32). Meanwhile the "snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement" echo Pecola's defeat when she "slid" to the floor in the juice of her mother's cobbler (72, 84). And in contrast to the novel's unequivocal victim, who is left lying on the floor after her father has raped her (129), Mrs MacTeer stands firm "while the world falls down about her" (148).

The same preoccupation continues in *Sula*. Echoing the demise of the eponymous heroine, who recklessly asks Eva, "What the hell do I care about falling?" (93), the second Dewey "kept falling down off the porch" (37), Teapot "fell down the steps" (114), and Ajax's smile "kept slipping and falling, falling, falling" (135). Sula condemns the townsfolk for being "more terrified of the freefall than the snake's breath below" (120); she herself conversely "leaped

from the edge and went down howling” during sex with Ajax (165). In this novel Morrison frequently uses the actual word “fall” where a different one might sound more natural or appropriate. Sula wonders, for example, how she can endure her lover’s presence “without falling dead” (134), and Nel asks herself (of Chicken Little’s drowning) “how come it felt so good to see him fall?” (170). More conventional idiom in these contexts might be “*dropping* dead” and “fall *in*”, and Morrison’s deliberate word choice makes it surprising that the much-repeated motif of falling has provoked so little comment.

The author similarly eschews a more appropriate verb in *Tar Baby*, when Jadine tells Son that she “fell in” the sinking mud (185). *Song of Solomon*, meanwhile, is punctuated by falls: Mr Smith’s suicidal leap (23), the man Pilate met in Virginia who fell to the floor thinking he was falling off a cliff (41), Macon Sr.’s being shot off his fence, Miss Butler throwing herself off the banister (242), and baby Jake falling through Solomon’s arms (324). These both anticipate and are inverted by Milkman’s jump at the novel’s end; the fact that the footstool breaks his fall when his breastfeeding mother guiltily drops him perhaps gives him the confidence, in his flying dream, to assume “he could not fall” (15, 298).

In *Beloved* Morrison gives concrete expression to the absolute collapse of Sethe and her daughters through their tripping up on the ice, and frames the moment with the four-times-repeated line, “nobody saw them falling” (174-75).²⁰ Variations on both the word and the act of “falling” recur throughout the

²⁰ Carole Anne Taylor writes, “the narration presenting Sethe’s outing with Beloved and Denver [. . .] repeats with lyrical authority that ‘nobody saw them fall’, invoking in its difference all the resonance of both the fall from grace and the tragic fall so omnipresent in Western symbology” (43). The scene on the ice is resonant of the skating scene in Dreiser’s *American Tragedy*; in the earlier novel the young people’s reckless falls anticipate their imminent car crash and Clyde’s subsequent downfall.

novel, most notably during *Beloved*'s monologue and Paul D's self-meditations (212, 221). And in *Jazz*, the way Dorcas repeats the word at the moment of her death creates the effect of slow motion: "Am I falling? Why am I falling? Acton is holding me up but I am falling anyway. Heads are turning to look where I am falling" (192). This emphasis on her physical flooring reflects the downfall of Joe and the descent into insanity of Violet, whose various "collapses" include the time when she "sat down in the middle of the street" (24, 17). The protagonists' emotional and moral demise is prefigured by Rose Dear's being thrown out of her seat and jumping down a well (98, 101), Joe's fall out of a tree to meet Violet (103), and Wild's falling down in front of Golden Gray (149).

The moral ambiguity of Joe's behaviour is intensified by his unspoken insistence to Dorcas that he didn't "fall in love with [her], he rose in it" (135), and that after shooting her he wanted to "catch her before she fell and hurt herself" (130). It is surely not a coincidence that he begins his love affair with the girl in the "fall of 1925" (37), anymore than is the fact that the freakishly-cold fall of 1941 presages the tunnel disaster in *Sula* (151-62). Morrison herself draws attention to the same punning on the season in *The Bluest Eye* (5), pointing out the "closet innuendo" in Claudia's opening sentence, "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (3), which invokes the Biblical fall as well as the nation's entrance into World War II (Afterword 171).

Meanwhile, in *Paradise* the apparent "total collapse of Ruby" at once repeats and is instigated by an attempt to avoid the fate of its forerunner, Haven, in which "freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948" (304, 5). Details about minor falls

once again give resonance to the central characters' major lapses; for example, Deek remembers he and his twin deliberately falling off a railing as boys, while Pat Best is saved from attacking her own daughter with an iron because she falls down the stairs (203). It is no surprise, therefore, to find Morrison deploying the same technique in her most recent novel. At its start, Sandler is gritting the icy ground to prevent Vida slipping over; Cosey is obsessed with an anecdote about "some child who fell down in horse manure running after a posse" (*Love* 139); when June defends herself against the Correctional's Administrator he "fell one story" (117); and at the novel's end Heed falls out of the attic of the old hotel (177). Throughout the oeuvre, these repeated downward movements (resonant as they are of both the Genesis story and the classical tragic downfall) directly refute the optimistic emphasis on success, ascent and progression that characterizes the ideology of the American Dream.²¹

What Cholly, Sula, Milkman, Jadine, Sethe, the Traces, the Morgans, Heed and Christine have in common is a very American quality: they aspire. Morrison grounds their falls (or near-falls) in their vulnerability to myths about a better life from which, in Slotkin's words on the power of mythology, they draw their "imperatives for belief and action" (*Regeneration* 7). Their calamitous experiences, of course, expose the insidiousness of the myths.²²

²¹ Critics who discuss the allusions to Genesis in Morrison's novels include Otten in *The Crime of Innocence* and Conner in "Toni Morrison's Winter's Tale"; see also essays by Hunt and by Lepow.

²² Valerian Street is to an obvious exception to my assertion in that, as a white, exceptionally wealthy industrialist, he clearly represents rather than is oppressed by the dominant culture. For this reason he is excluded from my discussion in these pages. But his dysfunctional marriage to the lower class Margaret exposes as myth the idea of America as a classless, traversable society; her own unhappiness in his care and her discomfort at her new position are a major factor in her crimes.

For example, the Breedlove family, Milkman, Joe and Violet and Ruby's Founding Fathers submit to dominant cultural messages about the accessibility of wealth, success and contentment. The unhappiness of Cholly and Pauline and the Traces springs in a large part from the failure of life in the North to meet the migrants' "great expectations" (*Jazz* 9). Joe's belief that in Harlem "whitepeople literally threw money at you", and that "if Booker T. was sitting down to eat a chicken sandwich in the President's house in a city called capital [. . .] then things must be all right, all right" reveal his susceptibility to the kind of mythical optimism expressed by Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and of Washington's autobiography (*Jazz* 106-07).²³ In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*, the narrators' accounts of the young couples' beliefs — that "in a young and growing Ohio town whose side streets, even, were paved with concrete [. . .] what could go wrong?" (*Bluest Eye* 91), or that Harlem is a "City better than perfect" (*Jazz* 112) — operate as tragic ironies because the author has already disclosed the characters' painful confrontations with real life and the disastrous consequences of their disappointment.²⁴

By contrast, what is striking about the tragic vision of *Paradise* is not so much its irony (which, in the fact that "so clean and blessed a mission devour[ed] itself" is so complete as to be almost intangible) as its dependence on the protagonists' flaws of pride and blindness (292). While several critics

²³ For discussion of Douglass and Washington in relation to the American Dream see Cullen 113-16. Cullen describes Douglass's narrative as "one of the most vivid illustrations of the Dream of Upward Mobility" (70).

²⁴ Relevant to this consideration of *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz* is Jennifer Hochschild's 1996 study, "Facing Up to the American Dream", which, in Cullen's words, "compiles data suggesting that working-class black Americans [. . .] believe in [the Dream] with an intensity that baffles and even appals more affluent African Americans, who see the dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collective as well as personal advancement" (Cullen 6).

use the word “tragic” or “tragedy” to describe the men’s attack on the Convent, to the best of my knowledge no one has drawn attention to the recognisably Aristotelian terms in which Morrison describes both the execution and the collapse of the project that is Ruby.²⁵ In her descriptions of the town’s governing men the author creates the effect of a morality tale in her insistent employment of the vocabulary of conventionally-understood *hubris*. The Fathers are “superior” (116), “haughty” (194), “smug” and “outrageously prideful” (298-99), while “the glacier that was Deacon Morgan’s pride. Its hidden bulk, its accretion and unmovability” comes close to being a character in its own right (279).

The author gives the paradoxes of blindness and insight — a conventional theme of tragedy from *Oedipus the King* to *King Lear* — an equally central role in this novel. Dovey Morgan recognizes a truth about her husband, Steward, that he himself cannot see: his moral stature diminishes as his wealth and advancement increase. In his very success, his achievement of the Dream, are his failure and his fallenness: “The more he gained, the less he became”, Dovey realises (287), and “the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses” (82). Morrison contrasts the insistently-unseeing Steward with his twin brother, Deacon, who finally undergoes an Aristotelian process of

²⁵ Peter Widdowson writes, for example, that “the convent shootings in 1976 locate the tragedy squarely in the black community” (324); Jill Jones argues that Morrison revises Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* by making her black versions of Thomas Sutpen “create a tragedy of their own”, and talks of the Founding Fathers’ “tragic flaw” (6). Philip Page refers to the shooting of the women as “the tragedy” (“Furrowing” 645), while in her exploration of Morrison’s critique of American exceptionalism, Katrine Dalsgard argues that “the community’s massacre of the women at the Convent figures as a tragic inversion of American ideals” (241). In conceiving of Ruby’s plight in tragic terms, Morrison ironically exploits the fact that the “real” Founding Fathers and their historical new republic had little interest in classical tragedy, presumably not considering the Greek tragic vision relevant to their optimistic outlook. As Caroline Winterer writes (of the genre’s sudden vogue in the antebellum period), “tragedy had been scorned frequently in America before 1820” (92).

recognition and reversal. Steward quite literally refuses to look at himself; during the shooting he ignores a mirror because “he does not want to see himself stalking females or their liquid” (9). He remains unchanged by the crimes he perpetrates at the Convent, and directs his energies afterwards to moulding K.D. in his own image and to perpetuating the prosperity of which he is so proud. Deacon, on the other hand, while gun in hand “looks at Consolata and sees in her eyes what has been drained from them and from himself as well” (289).²⁶ He recognizes and fully owns the extent of their crime, admitting to Pious DuPres that “this is our doing. Ours alone. And we bear the responsibility” (291). Having been almost a caricature of arrogance he becomes a humble, barefooted seeker of forgiveness. And while he once tried to convince himself that “except for a crack here, a chink there, everything in Ruby was intact” (112), he comes round to seeing that in their misconceived pursuit of their dream, the community (in Reverend Misner’s words) is “outrageously [. . .] flawed and proud” (306).

It is arguable, however, and interesting, that the text-book tragic vocabulary and tragic structures of *Paradise* make that novel less emotionally compelling than are the subtler, more understated configurations of the tragic that characterize Morrison’s other works. A more nuanced use of the tragic fall paradigm to problematize the American Dream can be found in *Song of Solomon*, where the complexity arises from Milkman’s inconsistent attitude towards the Dream together with his inconsistent fulfilment of the tragic hero’s role. As several critics have observed, through his limp and his association with

²⁶ The figure of Tiresias resonates in the blind Connie, who has “in sight” with which she can resurrect the dead (247), and in the Reverend Mother, who though she is partially-sighted “sees everything in the universe” (47).

incest Morrison signposts the fact that her protagonist is both like and unlike Oedipus. Scholarship has tended, however, towards typological or psychoanalytic analyses of the character's parodic relationship to the classical archetype, rather than considering any specific engagement with the Sophoclean tragedies.²⁷ To these observations I would add that Milkman inherits and stands in parodic relation to tragic Oedipal tradition as well, because his path to enlightenment is not a process of steadily-increasing revelation and self-knowledge, turning on a specific crime, but rather a series of fits and starts, lapses and epiphanies. Each of his attempts to secure wealth and personal advancement results in a humiliating setback — he is arrested in his hometown, he ruins his clothes in the cave outside Danville, and he is attacked in Shalimar — yet each time his ensuing insights are only partial. And through making his final flight or attempted flight ambiguous both in outcome and mood, Morrison avoids clarifying whether through it her protagonist is pursuing upward mobility to an absurd, literalized degree or whether, like his great grandfather before him, he is abandoning the concept and its correlative American values altogether.

Song of Solomon is unambiguous, by contrast, in its exploration of the tragic potential of “the dream of home ownership” (Cullen 132). The fate of the Butler family is the most extreme testimony to the dangers of excessive

²⁷ Examples of comparisons between Milkman and Oedipus include Bessie Jones's, who writes of Milkman's shorter leg, “This deformity may also be compared with Oedipus's swollen ankle in Greek drama” (106). Examples of psychoanalytic/typological interpretations include Kimberly Benston's and Garry Brenner's. Benston reads the novel as a “subversive feminist manifesto” which destabilizes the “male quest” defined by both Oedipus and Odysseus (93); Brenner interprets the novel as a challenge to Otto Rank's “monomyth”, which reduces the stories of various mythical and biblical heroes (including Oedipus) to a single paradigm (115).

property love: Circe recounts that the family “loved [their] place. [. . .] Stole for it, lied for it, killed for it” (247), but Miss Butler finally commits suicide in the “crumbling” porticoed house (242, 220). As does Eugene O’Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), Morrison exploits the ironic discrepancy between the nobility aspired to through neoclassical architecture and the baseness of the inhabitants’ actual lives.²⁸ The decrepit state of the mansion obviously reflects the family’s downfall. Throughout her work, even where a building is not neoclassical Morrison deploys similar association between a house and its inhabitants, recalling the classical concept of the *oikos* or household, a compound of edifice and family. In several novels, the author’s repeated concern with “the fall of a once great house” recruits this Greek social paradigm in her attack on a specific American preoccupation: love of real estate (M.A. Thesis 24).²⁹

Morrison suggests that the fate of the Dead family, for example, might not be far-removed from that of the Butlers. Milkman’s comfortable home on Not Doctor Street is a “big dark house” which appears “more prison than palace” (9-10), while the houses where Macon’s tenants live are personified,

²⁸ O’Neill’s descriptions of the Mannon house in *Mourning Becomes Electra* include the following: “It is a large building of the Greek temple style that was the vogue in the first half of the nineteenth century. A white wooden portico with six tall columns contrasts with the wall of the house proper which is of grey cut stone” (9-10); “The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its sombre grey ugliness” (15). In Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* the neoclassical style is similarly associated with hubristic aspiration: “Others took long rambles among the rustic lands and by-paths, pausing to look at black, old farm-houses, with their sloping roofs; and at the modern cottage, [. . .] and at the more pretending villa, with its range of wooden columns, supporting the needless insolence of a great portico” (118-19).

²⁹ Pantel and Zidman provide a useful definition of *oikos*: “The Greek *oikos* was [. . .] a complex entity embracing both people and property, bound together by common ties of kinship, residence and labour. Thus it could embrace also the unrelated persons and the slaves who lived and worked within the same unit” (80). Personification of houses in Morrison’s work does not always function as an attack on materialism. The spiteful, venomous 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved* is informed by the Greek conception of the *oikos*, but indicates the author’s concerns with history and revenge more than property ownership. In Part II I also discuss Morrison’s engagement with the specific role of neoclassical architecture in the South.

“in league with one another against him” like “squat ghosts with hooded eyes” (27).³⁰ And in *Tar Baby*, while Valerian deliberately eschews the neoclassical style in the construction of L’Arbe de La Croix, going to vast expense “to keep it from looking ‘designed’” and to achieve a “blessedly unrhetorical” effect (9), it is his own studied innocence that contributes to the tragic collapse of his household and his home. After the Christmas dinner débâcle L’Arbe de la Croix is “demoralized” and becomes a “house of shadows” that the broken Valerian lets “go to pieces” (218, 237, 287). The neglected house symbolizes the corrupted nature of Valerian and Margaret’s dreams of wealth, success and happiness.

Like Marshall’s Boyce family in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the Breedloves’ position on the margins of American society in *The Bluest Eye* is signalled by the fact that they are “renting black[s]” (17). In her depiction of the Breedloves’ demise Morrison deploys several classical traditions about houses and homes that emphasize the family’s suffering. The squalor of their “abandoned store” obviously contrasts both with the “green-and-white-house” of the primer and the “proud house” where Pauline works (24, 80). But the author also suggests that wealth and luxury are not in fact the conditions by which a “house” becomes a “home”: she juxtaposes the absence of memories and of affection in the Breedloves’ place with the MacTeers’ house, which though “old” and “cold” is full of “love, thick and dark as Alga syrup” (5-7). The contrast between the MacTeers’ happy home, with its healthy stove at which the girls’ father is a “Vulcan guarding the flames”, and the Breedloves’

³⁰ Morrison’s deployment of personified houses recalls Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. In *Brown Girl*, where an explicit engagement with Greek tragedy pervades the plot driven by Selina’s ambition to own an American home, “the unbroken line of brownstone houses down the long Brooklyn street resembled an army massed at attention” (3).

hellish living space in which “the fire seemed to live, go down, or die according to its own schemata” invokes the classical belief in the sacredness and symbolic function of the hearth, at which the goddess Hestia presides (47, 26).³¹ The Breedloves’ ineffective, unpredictable stove reflects their dysfunctional family life. And while Mr MacTeer defends his home and family from the perversions of Mr Henry, Cholly and Pauline violate their domestic space by attacking each other. Significantly, the worst fight occurs over a lack of coal for the fire, and ends with Pauline hurling “the round, flat stove lid” at Cholly (29, 33).

As acts of violence these fights obviously pale by comparison with Cholly’s rape of Pecola. The child’s collapse on the kitchen floor represents the ultimate desecration of the sanctity of the home. Madonne Miner correctly observes that “Pecola’s rape occurs within her own house, and this fact increases its raw horror” (88); what she doesn’t point out is that in staging events in this way Morrison engages the outrage that accompanies violence within the domestic space in Greek tragedy, for example when Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon “within the house” (*Ag.* trans. Lattimore 1344), or when Medea does the same to her children (Euripides, *Medea* 1311). Baby Suggs’s impotent rage at the fact that Schoolteacher and his men “came in [her] yard” (*Beloved* 179), and Alice Manfred’s feeling “truly unsafe because the brutalizing men and their brutal women were not just out there, they were in her

³¹ Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, in her study of Morrison’s work that focuses on identifying archetypes, describes Pauline Breedlove as “an inverse Hestian force” (33), but does not highlight how Morrison deploys the contrasting stoves symbolically. The critic also perceives *Sula*’s Eva to be “a deeply sane and cautiously protective Hestia, an overseeing Demeter” (55). The fact that Morrison describes Claudia’s father as “Vulcan” revises the moniker “Black Vulcan” that Lewis dismisses as a description of Father John towards the end of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923; Toomer 1160). Morrison’s eschewal of the word “black” indicates her unease about asserting equivalence between black and classical culture, as does her critique of the phrases “*Black Orpheus*” and “the copper Venus” in *Tar Baby* (115, 62).

block, her house” (*Jazz* 74), enlist the same classical precedent that the author uses to such devastating effect in her first novel.

The Bluest Eye is the most conventionally tragic novel in Morrison’s oeuvre, and the allusions to Vulcan and the classical hearth are not the only ones by which the author intensifies both the novel’s sense of tragic violation and its critique of the American Dream. The engagement with the myths of Persephone’s rape by Hades, and Philomela’s by Tereus — which Madonne Miner and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos have separately documented — reinforce the novel’s bleakness. Morrison in fact outdoes her classical antecedents in the pessimism of her tale. Philomela at least expresses what has happened to her through the weaving of a tapestry, but Pecola, lost to psychosis, does not communicate her experience to anyone (Demetrakopoulos 34). And while the original Demeter/Persephone myth involves the daughter’s annual restoration to her mother, *The Bluest Eye* focuses solely on the destruction that the rape entails. It is the story of “Demeter Denied” (Demetrakopoulos 31), and of Persephone permanently lost.³² These adaptations of classical myth contribute to the shattering of the myth of happiness and security that the children’s primer comprises, and enhance the tragic vision of the novel as a whole.

In 1985, Morrison said of her fiction that “it is Greek in the sense that the best you can hope for is some realization and that [. . .] suffering is not just anxiety. It’s also information” (Taylor-Guthrie 177). This discussion has shown

³² Morrison’s deployment of this myth in *The Bluest Eye* is strikingly unlike nineteenth-century American deployments of the Demeter/Persephone paradigm that use it to celebrate motherhood and to sanctify domesticity. As Sarah Way Sherman discusses, this convention is exemplified by Alcott’s *Little Women* (19).

that Aristotelian conceptions of catastrophic downfall and suffering, often enhanced by classical customs or motifs, are central to the exposure of the dangers inherent in the American Dream that the novelist's work effects. And while it is arguably in the revisionary deployment of tragic paradigms that the dynamism of her writing lies, her unconventional reconfigurations obtain much of their power from their co-existence with the conventional "sense of the tragic" that I have outlined here (Williams, *Grain* 180).

I.iii The Tragic Hero, Fate and Freedom

One of the many characters in *Invisible Man* whose words resonate through Morrison's oeuvre is the "old singer of spirituals" whom the protagonist encounters during his "descent" through Louis Armstrong's music (10). When asked to define the "freedom that [she] loves so well", she replies, "I done forgot, son. It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. [. . .] Ever' time I starts to walk my head gits to swirling and I falls down" (11). Many critics have discussed Morrison's exploration of what she calls "the problems and blessings of freedom", but few have focused on the role tragic conventions play within this (*Playing* 7).³³ For it is through her deployment of the tragic hero paradigm, in particular, that the author analyses a concept which is fundamental to the American Dream, which (as "liberty") is sanctified by the Declaration of Independence, and which

³³ See, for example, Philip Page's *Dangerous Freedom*, which presumably takes its title from *The Bluest Eye*'s description of Cholly as "dangerously free" (125).

comprises specific ironies and paradoxes in terms of African-American history. At the same time, Morrison creates a revisionary perspective on the conventional conceptions of the tragic protagonist that suggests her scepticism about the role of "Fate" or "destiny" in preventing self-determination. This in turn enables her exposure of the way that historical realities are often disguised as "Fate".

Arthur Miller has argued that tragic heroism depends on freedom. He attributes Aristotle's insistence that the protagonist be "highly renowned and prosperous" to the fact that Greece was a slave society, and points out that "when a vast number of people are divested of alternatives, as slaves are, it is rather inevitable that one will not be able to imagine drama, let alone tragedy, as being possible for any but the higher ranks of society" ("Tragedy" 165). Morrison deliberately eschews protagonists of high rank; she thereby implicitly rejects the slavery from which her characters have emerged. And casting Cholly, Sula, Sethe and Joe Trace as tragic heroes enables her both to insist on their freedom, to assert African-America's right to self-determination, and to question freedom's value. For her novels are not just concerned with the implications of legal slavery and Emancipation. They also reveal the pleasures and the dangers inherent in freedom from responsibilities to family, the economy and the community. The novels insist that being free means being free to fall. This tragic perspective resists the simple-minded celebration of freedom that dominant cultural versions of American identity so often entail. And it shows that liberty's relationship to life and happiness is anything but "self-evident".

During the “twenty-eight days” between Sethe’s safe arrival in Cincinnati and her arrest for murder, the community teach her how to “claim herself” (95). One of the defining experiences of freedom, she realizes, is “to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day” (95). This capacity for choice is also a prerequisite of tragic heroism; in Arthur Miller’s words, “so long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life [. . .] he cannot be debarred from the heroic role” (“Tragedy” 165). Morrison’s characters repeatedly make life-changing decisions or insist on self-determination in ways which unequivocally prove their heroism. Of Sethe’s decision to slit Beloved’s throat, and Dorcas’s to protect Joe Trace, the author has famously admired the fact that “a woman [. . .] placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself” (Taylor-Guthrie 207-8). There is heroism in the exercising of their autonomy.

Characters’ choices are often less grand in scale: Sula’s decision to sleep with Nel’s husband or to put Eva in a home, or Jadine’s to run off with Son, are hardly magnanimous gestures. But whether decisions are noble or ignoble, Morrison repeatedly places great emphasis on the act of choosing, and on the fact that this process proves freedom. “Just as he had decided on his name, on the walnut tree he and Victory slept in, a piece of bottomland and when to head for the City, he decided on Dorcas” (*Jazz* 30): Joe Trace is (apparently) a free man. “I *chose* you”, he says in his meditation to Dorcas, [. . .] I saw you and made up my mind” (135). With similar pride, Sethe tells Paul D that her escape from Sweet Home was the first thing that she ever “did on [her] own. Decided” (162). Such statements exemplify Morrison’s assertion about her protagonists to Claudia Tate: “They express either an effort of the

will or a freedom of the will. It's all about choosing. [. . .] If you own yourself, you can make some type of choices, take certain kinds of risks" (Taylor-Guthrie 164-65). And taking risks is a way to prove that you own yourself.

The complexity of the relationship between tragic choice and freedom is intimated, perhaps unintentionally, by Terry Otten in his essay, "*Beloved: From Melodrama to Tragedy*". On first reading, his assessment of Sethe's dilemma may appear uncontroversial:

[N]ot until she crosses into freedom [. . .] can Sethe claim ownership of her children and acquire the capacity for choice that distinguishes high tragedy. [. . .] The ability and obligation to choose is the dividing line between melodrama and tragedy. ("Transfiguring" 291)

But the specifics of this phrasing actually distort the function of the tragic mode in the novel. In his concern with proving that the novel is a tragedy, here and throughout the essay Otten implies that Sethe's and Morrison's overriding aim is to achieve that generic status.³⁴ But what is important is surely the inverse: Morrison does not make Sethe act freely so that she can be tragic; it is rather that the author gives her character a tragic choice as the ultimate means by which to assert her freedom or to claim her freed self. The generic engagement is a political strategy.

Interestingly, however, Otten's implied inference that to be free is to be tragic does relate importantly to Morrison's exploration of freedom in other novels. Cholly is just the first in a succession of characters who are "dangerously free" and whose actions are calamitous (*Bluest Eye* 125); the list

³⁴ Otten again implies that tragedy is a desirable end in itself in "Transfiguring" 287 and 289.

includes Shadrack, Son and Joe Trace among others. In a much-quoted passage, the author describes Cholly at the start of his adult life as “free to feel whatever he felt. [. . .] In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. [. . .] It was in this godlike state that he met Pauline Williams” (125-26). The four-times repeated “free” in this page resounds as a curse or a bell of doom. And the freedom that Shadrack finds himself consigned to is similarly terrifying; Morrison symbolizes the directionlessness that accompanies his insanity in the landscape of his hospital grounds, where there are “no fences, no warnings, no obstacles at all” (*Sula* 11). In *Paradise*, the drifting Gigi denies that she is “lost” (67), but bitterly responds to Robert Best’s decision not to charge her for the ride to the Convent with the thought, “Yeah. I’m free all right” (68). And Junior in *Love* — described as “rudderless, homeless” — is in a similar predicament (199). Through all these characters and through Son, a fugitive criminal who is “without human rites” (*Tar Baby* 11), Morrison suggests that for African-Americans “freedom” is too-often interchangeable with “dispossession”.

The author nonetheless insists on the heroic potential of her apparently disenfranchised characters, and to that extent her description of Cholly as “godlike” is sincere. In a 1976 interview she says:

Cholly [. . .] lives a very tragic life. [. . .] He is the thing I keep calling a ‘free man’, not free in the legal sense but free in his head. [. . .] It’s that kind of absence of control that I wanted [. . .] I’m interested in characters who are lawless in that regard. (Taylor-Guthrie 20)

Fifteen years later this “absence of control” becomes reformulated as Joe Trace’s belief that he is “free to do something wild” (120), and Morrison is interested in the wildness as much as the freedom. Joe’s murder of Dorcas, like Sethe’s of *Beloved*, or Shadrack’s leading the townfolk to their deaths in the tunnel, divorces the concept of liberty from the sugary rhetoric of politicians or the lyrics of patriotic songs. It is no accident that when Eva sets light to Plum she looks to him like an “eagle” — both the bird of Zeus and the symbol of American democracy — and she has to step over a copy of “*Liberty* magazine” (46). Freedom in these novels involves *hubris*, violence, and outrageousness; it is the stuff of tragedy as well as *Dreams*.³⁵

Of course, not every free or free-thinking character in the Morrisonian oeuvre is prone to the excesses of Eva, Joe or Cholly. With a revisionary mischievousness that typifies the novelist’s attitude to classical tradition as a whole, in *Sula* the author associates the name of a Greek hero specifically renowned for his outrageous lack of self-control, Ajax, with her own Ajax/Albert Jacks, who though very much in the “free in his head” mould neither commits any shocking crime nor suffers a downfall.³⁶ He simply has an affair with Sula, leaves her when he’s had enough and is never heard of again. And Sula herself, though far from morally blameless in that she drowns Chicken Little, apparently watches her mother burn and sleeps with other

³⁵ It is interesting to consider Morrison’s exploration of the dangers of freedom alongside E.R. Dodds’s chapter, “The Fear of Freedom” in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951). Dodds uses an axiom by T.H. Huxley as that chapter’s epigraph: “A man’s worst difficulties begin when he is able to do as he likes” (236).

³⁶ Sophocles’s *Ajax* opens with the eponymous hero having slaughtered a herd of sheep, believing they are Greek generals, in a fit of insane rage at not being awarded the arms of Achilles by Agamemnon and Menelaus. Another revision by Morrison is that the Greek Ajax lives in the shadow of his father’s greatness and expectations whereas Morrison’s Ajax is besotted with his mother, and we hear nothing about his father.

people's husbands, does not commit a definitive crime to equal Cholly's rape or Joe's shooting. Her own downfall comprises a different (but nonetheless important) perspective on the problematic nature of freedom and its pre-eminence in the ideology of the American Dream.

It is through Sula's fall that Morrison questions the concomitance of the pursuit of wealth and upward mobility with liberty in the national creed. The eponymous heroine's "experimental life" is in one sense very American, in that she is the epitome of the free, self-made individual. The community despise her for her individualism and her indifference to them; as voiced by Nel, they believe "you can't be walking around all independent-like" (142). Yet they also object to the fact that Sula refuses to fulfil their other expectations, which are also quintessentially American assumptions. Sula is "completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things" (119), and to Nel's outrage, she doesn't "work" (142). Morrison shows that true freedom involves a freedom from the other defining "pursuits" of the American Dream; she thereby exposes the aporetic nature of the Dream's ideology. And ultimately, the tragic predicament of each of these characters — Cholly, Shadrack, Son, Sula, Joe, the Convent women and Junior — questions the value of the freedom that that predicament simultaneously asserts.

At the close of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*, the mixed-race protagonist, Clare Kendry, dies in a fall from the upstairs window of a Harlem apartment. The drama of the novel rests on the unanswered question as to whether she did in fact *fall*, or whether she either jumped or was pushed. In other words, Larsen asks whether ultimate responsibility for the calamity lies with Fate, with the

woman herself, or with the world or culture she inhabits. Through her own protagonists' downfalls, Morrison negotiates and questions the same ambiguous matrix of predestination, self-determination and a destructive environment.³⁷

The extent to which individuals can control their own destiny — which has been conventionally cast as the defining dilemma of tragedy and is the defining assumption of the American Dream — is one of her central concerns. And to a large extent, her novels reject the idea of “Fate”. The author sets her protagonists apart from the fate-bound heroes found in so many Greek tragedies in order to redirect our attention to the social and political factors that have made self-determination such a struggle in African-American experience.

Claudia's observation that “the seasons of a Midwestern town become the *Moirai* of our small lives” suggests that the Lorain of *The Bluest Eye* is governed by the natural world as the Greeks were subject to the Fates or *Moirai* (*Bluest Eye* 147). Betty Radice identifies the Hesiodic *Moirai* as “Lachesis, who assigns man's lot at birth, Clotho, who spins the thread of life, and Atropos, who ‘cannot be turned’ from cutting it at the moment of death” (116). Morrison deploys the imagery of spun thread and its association with natural forces a second time when Claudia describes a winter that “stiffened itself into a hateful knot”, one that only Maureen Peel can “splinter” into “silver threads” (47). Yet in her closing words Claudia actually refutes the notion that either Fate or Nature is to blame for the calamity, suggesting instead that to think this way is a form of moral escapism. She observes, “when the land kills of its own

³⁷ Ambiguity about a physical fall also occurs in Morrison's short story, “Recitatif”, in which Bobby and Twyla ultimately cannot remember whether the mute kitchen woman, Maggie, falls over, was pushed over by the elder girls or whether they themselves joined in an attack on her. Like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, however, the silent, shadowy Maggie is unequivocally a victim rather than a hero figure.

volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course” (164).

In her M.A. thesis the author includes “the conflict between individual will and fate” in her definition of Greek tragedy (24). But in her novels she revises the forcefulness of Fate or divine will that is so fundamental in the downfalls of Agamemnon, Oedipus or Pentheus by depicting characters who fail to achieve their dreams not because they are predestined to do so but because specific historical circumstances and their disadvantaged position in society make a mockery of their aspirations.³⁸ Paul D’s bitter recollections of the way the carefully-plotted escape from Sweet Home fell apart indicate the apparent futility of characters’ trying to plant their futures or live according to a design (222-24). But the author insists that it is the individual’s struggle with political realities rather than with cruel Fate that brings them down. For example, the details she provides about Cholly’s traumatic past and desperate present discredit Fate as the cause of his actions. The political and economic disadvantages he has faced — all of which arise from motivated human action rather than supernatural whim — clearly play a part in his crime. Likewise there is no sense that Sethe’s and Joe Trace’s acts of murder are attributable to a divinely-ordained “lot” they were apportioned at birth. If there were, it would diminish the element of political protest in the novels.

There are echoes of *The Bluest Eye*’s “Moirai” in *Sula*, where the imagery of knots and threads persists. “Laced and silent in his small bed” the insane Shadrack “tried to tie the loose cords in his mind” (11). He becomes

³⁸ Not all Greek tragedies, of course, give such an important role to divine will or Fate as do *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus the King* and *The Bacchae*. For example, Euripides’ *Hecuba* and *Medea* examine the relationship between suffering and crime as *The Bluest Eye* or *Jazz* do.

obsessed with his shoelaces, which the nurse “had tied into a double knot”: “his fingernails tore away at the knots” and “his very life depended on the release of the knots” (12). But Morrison’s account of Shadrack’s past insists that he is bound not by a cosmic force but by the destruction of his self that World War I has wrought. Thus she transforms the “knots” of Fate into the “nots” that history causes — that is, into the multiple absences which comprise his identity: “no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book” and so on (12). This revised sense of the tragic accords with Raymond Williams’s resistance to “the separation of ethical control, and more critically, human agency, from our understanding of social and political life” which leads to our readiness to label so much suffering “accidental” (*Modern Tragedy* 48). Morrison insists that it is the deliberate policies of the dominant culture that makes self-determination so problematic for her characters, even as that culture promises them (in Cullen’s paraphrase of Thoreau) that they “*can* advance in the direction of their dreams to live out an imagined life” (Cullen 10; italics in original). But she also suggests that Fate, while antithetical to the freedom or self-determination that underpins the American Dream, is nonetheless a concept often invoked by those attempting to disguise its restricted accessibility and to cover up the realities of inequality and oppression. “Fate” is itself a useful myth.³⁹

The author is more willing to blame “social and political life” for her characters’ downfalls than are many of the characters themselves. The narrator of *Jazz* is sceptical of Joe Trace’s belief that he is free, believing instead that he is “bound to a track” (120) and that even though the City “makes people think

³⁹ Cullen writes, “One of the greatest ironies [. . .] of the American Dream is that its foundations were laid by people [the Puritans] who specifically rejected a belief that they *did* have control over their destinies ” (10).

they can do what they want and get away with it” (8), in reality “you can’t get off the track [it] lays for you” (120). But while in one sense it is the City’s “design” that keeps African-Americans down, in that “everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks)” (9, 10), Morrison destabilizes the narrator’s view of the City as some kind of unauthored, inevitable Fate, and redirects attention to those who designed or control it.⁴⁰

Paradise’s Ruby is the epitome of the designed town: “Central Avenue, three wide graded miles of tarmac, began at the Oven and ended at Sargeant’s Feed and Seed”, while “the four side streets east of Central were named after the Gospels” (114). But unlike the Harlem of *Jazz*, which appears to subject its inhabitants to its own plans, the ordered nature of Ruby is a physical realization of the “plan” of its self-determining Founding Fathers (106), an embodiment of “the idea of [Haven] and its reach” (6). Given the Morgan brothers’ pride in the extent to which they have hitherto controlled their own destinies, their insistence that the Oven’s original motto read “Beware the Furrow of His Brow”, or their preference for an overbearing, Old Testament-style deity, is somewhat ironic (86). Having exercised an almost hubristic free will with regard to their own lives, they deploy this conservative theology in an attempt

⁴⁰ In his essay, ““A Music Seeking Its Words””, Richard Hardack writes that music in *Jazz* erases individual will as much as the City does:

This Dionysian “music that intoxicates them more than champagne” represents the force of Nature’s/the City’s possession [. . .]. Throughout *Jazz*, characters become entirely lost in the grip of the narrator’s music [. . .]. This music locates the site of the children abandoned—fragmented and amputated from their parents—by a wild nature which is not simply stronger than individual will, but which nullifies the very concept of a self-contained individual will. (462)

To my mind Hardack exaggerates the extent to which characters in this novel lack “individual will”.

to restrain or restrict the freedom of the next generation (84-87, 143). As Billie Delia wryly observes, their “power to control is out of control” (308).

To that next generation, the freedom that is the goal of the Civil Rights Movement is closely allied to the concept of a God who does not preordain individuals’ fate. Destry tells the town’s Elders that “no ex-slave who had the guts to make his own way, build a town out of nothing” could have urged people to “beware” the furrow of God’s brow (*Paradise* 84); instead, the motto surely urged citizens to be “His instrument”, to “Be the Furrow of His Brow” (87). While the townsfolk never resolve their dispute, the novel’s closing emphasis on Deacon’s redemption endorses this second theology that allows for free will and individual responsibility. It is also possible to see the novel’s optimistic ending as a refutation of the classical model of humans as playthings of the gods. While the Morgan brothers err in attempting to impose excessive control and order on their lives and on those around them, with Richard Misner the novel nonetheless rejects the notion of religion as “a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil”, and suggests that the death of Christ “moved the relationship between God and man from CEO to supplicant to one on one” (*Paradise* 146). The repetition of the word “supplicant” connotes not just the Jews of the Old Testament but also the prototypical hero who at once aspires to divinity and is a powerless toy in the hands of the gods. *Paradise* finally suggests that we are not ruled by Fate, confined to “the perpetual dark of choicelessness” (146), but are individuals who must take responsibility both for our own lives and for changing the political and social realities we encounter.

The conventions of tragedy, then, enable Morrison to explore what James Baldwin calls “the dangers and responsibilities of freedom” (“Discovery” 141), while her politically-motivated refutation of Fate constitutes a modification of the conventional tragic condition. She questions whether African-Americans’ downfalls are ever merely the “accident” or “misadventure” that Clare’s fall from the window in *Passing* is labelled (112, 114). She rejects the determinism of Mailer’s Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream*, who apparently believes his lover dies not because she is poor and vulnerable but because his refusal to walk around a skyhigh parapet angers the gods. And she revises the bleak vision of Richard Wright, who chooses “Fate” as the title of the chapters of *Native Son* which culminate in Bigger’s execution (273).⁴¹ In her Foreword to *Love*, Morrison recalls of her childhood that “[b]ack then, in the forties, we believed we were already forsaken, destined to fall down” (xii). But the novels refute the idea that anyone is “destined to fall down”. In their negotiations of the “tragic hero” paradigm they stress the possibility of individual freedom, but suggest that this is neither as readily available, nor as straightforwardly conducive to happiness, as the ideology of the American Dream would have us believe.

I.iv The Chorus and Individualism

In *Beloved*, Morrison writes that following Paul D’s departure from 124 and

⁴¹ James Baldwin writes of Bigger’s fatalism, “For Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry [. . .] but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth” (“Everybody’s Protest Novel” 18).

Stamp Paid's abortive attempts to visit Sethe, "the women were free at last to be what they liked" (199). With the phrase "free at last", the author ironically repeats the quotation from a spiritual with which Martin Luther King ends his "I Have A Dream" speech (King 83).⁴² It is clear that, abandoned by those around them, the women are not so much "free" as completely and dangerously isolated.

In essays and interviews Morrison frequently contrasts dominant cultural and African-American expectations about the relationship between the individual and the community. In "City Limits, Village Values" (1981), for example, she complains that white critics "tend not to trust or respect a hero who prefers the village and its tribal values to heroic loneliness and isolation" (38). And, discussing her second novel with Anne Koenen, she observes that "[c]ritics devoted to the Western heroic tradition—the individual alone and triumphant—see *Sula* as a survivor", whereas "in the black community she is lost" (Taylor-Guthrie 68). Through the fate of Pecola, Sethe, Milkman and the Convent women as well as *Sula*, the author challenges the individualism fundamental to the American Dream by exploring the tragic consequences of isolation. As Marc Conner points out, "the great truism of Morrison scholarship is that her primary theme is 'community'" ("Sublime" 49). My aim in this section is not to rehearse that truism, but instead to draw attention to the ways that in critiquing American individualism Morrison deploys a defining feature of Greek tragedy: the chorus.⁴³

⁴² The final sentence of the speech reads: "And when we allow freedom to ring, [. . .] all of God's children [. . .] will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last'" (83).

⁴³ In his work, *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (2001), Cyrus R.K. Patell discusses Morrison's critique of American individualism (29-32), but does not discuss her deployment of Greek choric elements.

In the very same year — 1955 — that Lewis published the study of the isolated, purportedly universal American hero that is *The American Adam*, Morrison wrote her M.A. Thesis on “Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated”. While Lewis explored nineteenth-century configurations of “the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling” (5), Morrison’s study of modernist writers argued that alienation “takes on the quality and proportion of a tragic flaw” in Faulkner’s work (3), and that “isolation” brings about the downfalls of Jason and Quentin Compson (25, 28). Her own novels explore the dangers of alienation — and the specific problematics of freedom’s proximity to isolation in the African-American context — that Robert Stepto charts in his 1979 study of black narrative, *From Behind The Veil*. Stepto outlines the dichotomous archetypes of the “articulate survivor”, who sacrifices community and familial ties in the interests of “highly individualized mobility”, and the “articulate kinsman”, who enjoys the “balms of group identity” but must endure “the most oppressive environment” (167). He writes that *Invisible Man* is “a grand attempt to answer” whether a questing figure can be “both an articulate survivor and an articulate kinsman”, and whether “all such quests” must end “in imposed configurations of social structure” (167, 165). Morrison’s work — most obviously *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* — is similarly concerned with this dilemma. And her engagement with models of interaction between the classical tragic protagonist and tragic chorus is a crucial means by which she challenges

the apparent mutual exclusivity of self-determination and kinship, thereby fulfilling Stepto's challenge to reconfigure social structures.

It is relevant to recall here that Morrison lists "the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris" as one of the "similarities" between Greek tragedy and "Afro-American communal structures" ("Unspeakable" 2). The other similarity that she mentions is "the function of the song and chorus", and it is to the Greek chorus that she frequently points when highlighting classical tragedy's affinity with her own work. Most pertinent to this study is her observation to Bessie Jones that "there was something about the Greek chorus" that reminded her of "what goes on in Black churches and in jazz" (Taylor-Guthrie 176). The author goes on to explain:

[T]here are two things. You have a response, obviously. The chorus being the community who participates in this behaviour and is shocked by it or they like it or they support it. And [. . .] I have to make it possible for the reader to respond the way I would like the chorus to in addition to the choral effects in the book itself. (Taylor-Guthrie 176)

As she positions her own work within the existing African-American tradition of writing modelled on call-and response, the author here adds the Greek chorus to the conventional analogies drawn between the communities within novels, the community of readers, black church congregations, gospel choruses and jazz musicians responding to a soloist.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The body of secondary material treating "call-and-response" in African-American literature is vast. Most obvious examples include Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), and Callahan, *In the African-American Grain* (1988). See also Maggie Sale, "Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*".

The classical scholar Simon Goldhill has rightly pointed out that there is no “single model to account for choruses in [Greek] tragedy”, not least because the Attic genre was “*experimental*” (“Collectivity” 247; italics in original). This explains the various, often conflicting claims about the Greek choric function in twentieth-century readings; for example, scholars have long debated whether the chorus in Greek tragedy can in fact be simply interpreted as representing “the community”.⁴⁵ But Morrison unquestioningly conceives of her fictional communities in choric terms. When she writes, in the “Unspeakable” essay, of the insurance agent’s flight in *Solomon* provoking a “tender but amused choral-community response”, she invents a compound adjective that reveals her sense of the two structures as interchangeable (29). My contention is that in her critique of American individualism Morrison engages and to some extent revises mid-twentieth-century conceptions of the Greek chorus (and of tragedy as a whole) as a phenomenon that reflected the changing relationship between the individual and the community in Ancient Athens.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Morrison’s emphasis on and considerable claims for the choric role comprise a distinct divergence from what Goldhill calls Aristotle’s “strategic exclusion of the collective song from his privileging of agency [. . .] as the essence of tragedy” (“Collectivity” 244).⁴⁷ Both her emergence and departure from these intellectual contexts are key to her reassessment of communal responsibility in American culture.

⁴⁵ While Otto Longo calls the chorus “the staged metaphor for the community” (17), Gould points out that the chorus has been variously understood as “the ideal spectator”, “the poet’s voice”, “representatives of the citizen body” of Athens, or a group defined by its “marginality” (217-20).

⁴⁶ Little’s *Myth and Society in Attic Drama* and E.R. Dodds’s *The Greeks and the Irrational* exemplify this position.

⁴⁷ Gould writes, “Aristotle (notoriously) could define ‘tragedy’ without reference to the chorus, but we can hardly do so” (216).

The analogy between African-American models of call-and-response and Greek tragic models of the protagonist's interaction with the chorus is compelling because both cultural forms have been seen as expressive of social change, and specifically of developments in the interactions between the individual and the group. E.R. Dodds describes the Greek Archaic Age (the last years of which saw Aeschylus's first performances) as a time when "the individual [. . .] began to emerge for the first time from the old solidarity of the family"; this was an era of increasing "personal rights and personal responsibility" (*Greeks* 76, 46). And A.M.G. Little writes that "the Athenians emerge from an inarticulate but coherent group into an articulate but disorganized congeries of individuals" (12), and that "tragedy developed from the sublimation of group conflict with the predominant chorus as its symbol" (50).⁴⁸ Meanwhile, in analysing how the blues internalized the "antiphony" of older African-American musical forms (221), Lawrence Levine suggests that during Reconstruction the message that "the individual molds his own destiny" was "thrust upon" Freedmen by "Yankee schoolteachers". He writes that "there was a direct relationship between the national ideological emphasis upon the individual, the popularity of Booker T. Washington's teachings, and the rise of the blues", but that at the same time, the blues retained "central elements of the communal musical style" (*Black Culture* 223-24).

Referring to Levine's thesis, John F. Callahan's *In the African-American Grain* argues that "call-and-response is especially well-suited to the

⁴⁸ Accounts of the Archaic Age and the emergence of tragedy such as Little's and Dodds's have now been complicated by more recent classical scholarship such as Robin Osborne's *Greece in the Making 1200-479 B.C.* (1996). Given that Dodds's *Greeks and the Irrational* was published in Berkeley in 1951, however, Morrison may well have encountered it (along with Little's 1942 publication) during her "minoring" years at Howard.

vernacular culture of an experimental democratic society” (16). Morrison might well take issue with Callahan’s optimistic reading of call-and-response as embodying and endorsing American ideals, and indeed deploys the form herself to opposite ends in her challenge to American individualism.⁴⁹ But his emphasis on the form’s specific political context, when considered with the fact that Greek tragedy was inextricable from the experimental Athenian democracy during which it flourished, strengthens the analogy between changing patterns of call-and-response in African-American culture and changing dramatic forms in Greece. It is an affinity that may also inform Ellison’s exploration of individualism, his various deployments of call-and-response and his engagement with classical tradition in *Invisible Man*. For it is surely more than a coincidence that Woodridge, the college professor who told the narrator that “our task is that of making ourselves individuals” is also the one who “made [him] read Greek plays” (*Invisible Man* 354, 40).

In “City Limits”, Morrison writes that “when a character defies village law or shows contempt for its values, it may be seen as a triumph to white readers, while blacks may see it as an outrage” (38). It is presumably the frequency with which she makes such observations that has led critics to assume her novels comprise a straightforward celebration of “village values”. As Marc Conner writes, most readers see the communities in Morrison’s novels as “nurturing, cohesive, and healing”, whereas they are actually “predatory, vampiric, sterile,

⁴⁹ Callahan writes, for example, that African-American “fiction of voice at once looks back to the culture of community among African peoples and African-American slaves and forward to that diverse democratic culture of individuals aspired to in this nation’s motto: *e pluribus unum*” (15). As an aside, it is interesting to note that the nation’s motto (taken from a Virgilian recipe for a salad) epitomizes the centrality of classical tradition in dominant American culture with which Morrison’s novels engage.

cowardly, threatening; and the individual must struggle desperately to survive in [their] midst” (“Sublime” 49). It is also true, however, that the author’s negative depiction of communities does not detract from her critique of isolation or individualism. Rather, in challenging the separation between the individual and the group that “Americanism” promotes, Morrison subjects the community as a whole to scrutiny. It is society as much as the individual that is to blame for the alienation that individualism entails.

With this in mind, while I begin by analysing the way central characters act towards their communities, I go on to demonstrate the way Morrison insists on the power, the flawedness and the ultimate vulnerability of communities as well. It is by revising the conventional role of the Greek chorus that she emphasizes the active, influential role of groups within her work. In *Beloved*, for example, the author deliberately obscures whether Sethe or her community are more responsible for events. And in *Paradise*, it is a group of men who perpetrate the crime. In this novel, the chorus has become a tragic protagonist in its own right.

Despite the abundance of published material addressing the relationship between the individual and the community in Morrison’s work, critics have paid little attention to the author’s engagement with Greek choric models.⁵⁰ Kathleen O’Shaughnessy’s essay, “The Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*”, for example, focuses on the “ritual elements of traditional African dance and song”, and alludes to classical tragedy only in passing, observing that “as in ancient Greek drama, the effect is one of heightened audience or reader

⁵⁰ As Conner observes, “It is far more difficult to find Morrison essays that do not mention the community than those that do” (74). Bessie Jones merely points out the existence of the chorus motif in *Solomon* (103); Carole Anne Taylor does discuss choric witnessing in *Beloved* (42).

participation” (125). As I go on to demonstrate (with reference to the opposing theories about individualism and the Greek chorus of Hegel and Nietzsche) Morrison’s deployment of choric conventions in *Song of Solomon* has a much more specific political efficacy than such a general statement would have us believe.⁵¹

One of the few common features of the Greek chorus in different tragedies (reflected in a rare moment of consensus among critics) is its anonymity. As Gould writes, “the hero has a name which is central to his identity”, while the chorus has “only a collective identity and a collective ‘name’” (223). In *Song of Solomon* Morrison configures the “old men” of Danville as just one such anonymous chorus (234). Indeed, the account of their reminiscing to Milkman comprises the most direct, least revisionary deployment of the classical model in her oeuvre. Identified only collectively, as “every old man in the town who remembered [Milkman’s] father or his grandfather” (235), the group create through memories and anecdotes a context which gives shape to Macon Sr.’s individuality. “They talked on and on”, Morrison writes, “the good times, the hard times, things that changed, things that stayed the same — and head and shoulders above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead” (235). The way the individual hero emerges from the communal telling accords strikingly with Hegel’s conception of the chorus as “fruitful soil” from which individuals “grow” like “flowers and towering trees do from their native soil” (Draper 32). And Morrison’s emphasis on Macon

⁵¹ Hegel and Nietzsche make a compelling pairing because, as Draper has argued, in their respective hypotheses about the role of the chorus in relation to group and individual identities, they are “completely at variance” with one another (32).

Sr.'s literal and metaphorical height chimes with Hegel's image of the "towering trees".⁵²

To the old men of Danville, Milkman's grandfather stands out because through "Lincoln's Heaven" he embodies the concept of the self-made, self-reliant man. And, paradoxically, it is the community's composite celebration of this character that strengthens Milkman's own resolve to act independently. At first, the men's account makes the protagonist aware of his lack of self-defining experience: "the more the old men talked [. . .] the more he missed something in his life" (234). But he finds a new sense of purpose and identity as he tells the groups about his father's achievements, and in the middle of "rattling off assets" he "wanted to get up right then and there" after the gold (236). Here his relationship to the community, like his grandfather's, exactly exemplifies Hegel's theory of the protagonist's separation from the chorus; by leaving for Circe's house the next day he epitomizes what Draper (glossing Hegel) calls "an individual detaching himself in his more intense consciousness and commitment from the surrounding mass of the Chorus" (Draper 32).

To some extent this scene represents an ideal view of individual/group interaction: the formerly isolated, rootless and paralysed Milkman finds motivation and self-definition through this encounter with his father's "native soil"; he now apparently understands the true meaning of "*people*" (229; italics in original). Yet the fact that he becomes increasingly proud as he becomes increasingly self-confident indicates Morrison's critical perspective on the process that forms her protagonist's ego. Initially Milkman "felt a glow" when

⁵² I disagree with Kathleen O' Shaughnessy, who argues that the scenes in Reverend Cooper's house comprise "the storyteller's circle, bringing back into the group the one who had been lost" (129). Milkman's separateness from this group is continually emphasized, and it is this very separateness that explains the old men's fascination with him.

listening to Reverend Cooper; then he “bragged” about his father; finally he “glittered in the light of [the men’s adoration] and grew fierce with pride” (231, 236). His is the *hubris* of the self-important individual whose fall is imminent.

The eponymous heroine of *Sula*, of course, epitomizes the individual whose individualism, or rejection of the community, makes her downfall inevitable. As Philip Page observes:

Unwilling to subsume her identity into the mold allowed by the black community and the dominant society, [Sula] creates her own self, which gains her at least freedom and self-satisfaction [. . .] but which leaves her isolated and incomplete. [. . .] A pioneer, she forges a new path, but like so many American heroes, she cannot be absorbed by the community. (“Shocked” 81)

Morrison’s most interesting deployment of a Greek choric paradigm in *Sula* is not, however in configuring the protagonist’s relationship to the group, but in a detailed depiction of the process of group formation, of how individuals forge a collective identity. Shadrack’s Suicide Day March of 1941, to which the people of the Bottom flock and which ends in the infamous tunnel disaster, has striking affinities with the kinds of Dionysiac ecstatic ritual described by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy* and by E.R. Dodds in *The Greeks and The Irrational*.⁵³

Nietzsche celebrates Bacchic ecstasy and, by extension, the dramatic chorus, for the fact that they allow the individual to lose himself within the group. “Singing and dancing, man becomes a member of a higher community”,

⁵³ Nussbaum writes that in his introduction to *The Bacchae* Dodds “developed with rigorous scholarship the best features of the Nietzschean reading” (Nussbaum xxviii). *The Greeks and the Irrational* is also indebted to the work of J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists (Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, F. M. Cornford, and A.B. Cook) who, as Ackerman observes, “valued *The Birth of Tragedy* highly” (101). Morrison is presumably familiar with Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890-1915) and the Ritualists’ work as well as with Dodds’s book.

he writes (19), while “the dithyrambic chorus is a chorus of people transformed, whose civic past and social status are completely forgotten” (43). Shadrack’s march has much in common with the kind of frenzy that Nietzsche — and in his turn, Dodds — describe. While the Dionysian and Corybantic rites involved an “‘orgiastic’ dance accompanied by the same kind of ‘orgiastic’ music [. . .] played on the flute and the kettledrum” (Dodds 78), Shadrack entices the Medallion townsfolk into a “curious disorder” by “singing his song, ringing his bell” (*Sula* 160, 159). “Aggressive and abandoned”, the community “danced” behind him “whooping like banshees” (*Sula* 160-61). And while Dodds describes “the Power of the Dance” as “highly infectious” (271-72), in Medallion the initial laughter of Dessie and Ivy was like “scarlet fever” in the way it “infected Carpenter’s Road” (159). The “initial group of about twenty people”, whom Morrison lists by name, becomes an unnamed “larger and larger crowd”, wrought to a “fever pitch of excitement and joy” (*Sula* 158-60).

Like the Nietzschean chorus, Shadrack’s frenzied followers experience through their “laughing, dancing, calling to one another” an escape from their individual identities (*Sula* 159). Nietzsche describes “Dionysiac excitement” as “the abandonment of individuality” (43), and Dodds describes Dionysus as “‘the Liberator’ — the god who [. . .] enables you for a short time to *stop being yourself*, and thereby sets you free”, and who can “lift” from you “the burden of individual responsibility” (76-77; italics in original). While in the Archaic Age Dionysus “ministered [. . .] to the anxieties characteristic of a guilt culture” (Dodds 76), in dancing behind Shadrack the Medallion townsfolk found “respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before” (*Sula* 160). In this

depiction of a group finding freedom through *shedding* personal responsibility and individuality, Morrison completely unravels the assumption underpinning the American Dream that self-determination, individualism, and freedom go hand-in-hand.

Nietzsche's choric theory blurs the distinction between the chorus on stage and the audience responding to that chorus in the same way that Morrison's conception of the chorus includes both the communities within her novels and her community of readers. Nietzsche writes, for example, that "the Greek man of culture felt himself annulled by the satyr chorus" (39), and that when in the Greek theatre "we are happy to be alive, not as individuals but as the single living thing, merged with [. . .] creative delight" (81). Morrison goes one stage further than Nietzsche, however, in that she also blurs the distinction between the protagonist and the chorus, or explores the possibility of characters moving freely between the two roles. There is no extant Greek tragedy in which a protagonist might suddenly become part of the chorus, or where a chorus member might suddenly become a protagonist. Even where the central character has much in common with the chorus — as does Hecuba with the Trojan women in *Hecuba*, or Ajax with his sailors in the play that bears his name — by definition the protagonists are unchangeably set apart from the group. In several of Morrison's novels, on the other hand, the central characters actively seek to merge into the collective identity of a chorus.

In *Song of Solomon* the young, isolated Milkman desperately craves acceptance by his peers in his Michigan home town. Early in the novel he is denied membership of a group when Feather refuses to serve him a beer and

throws him out of the pool hall (57). Next, more upset by what he learns about his mother and the origins of “Milkman” than by the murder of Emmett Till, he breaks up the communal storytelling in the barbershop by persuading Guitar to leave and go with him for a drink (83). But once he persuades his friend to join him in stealing Pilate’s gold, “he felt a self inside him emerge, a clean-lined definite self. A self that could join the chorus at Railroad Tommy’s with more than laughter. He could tell this” (184). Milkman’s perception that it is self-defining individual experiences that qualify him for membership of the group reverses Hegel’s theory of the central character “detaching himself” from the Chorus” (Draper 32). It is counter to the ideology of the American Dream, in which individual acts are a means to the isolated heroism that Lewis describes in *The American Adam*. And it supplements Nietzsche’s theory about collectivity as a desirable escapism for both chorus members and audience, in that it apparently offers the same opportunity to the protagonist. Whether Milkman ever does achieve acceptance by the group, however, remains debatable. While some critics agree with O’Shaughnessy that in Shalimar he sees “he is a member of a larger community” and that on Solomon’s Leap Pilate and Guitar represent “the closest circle of community” (130-31), others such as Marc Conner argue that the novel’s conclusion “leaves Milkman and his community as far apart as ever” (“Sublime” 58).

Less controversial is Denver’s relationship with the community towards the end of *Beloved*. It is arguable that she achieves the kind of acceptance by the group that Milkman attempts. Paradoxically, however, while he believes that it is his individual experiences that will make him a chorus member, and while Nietzsche argues that chorus membership allows for escape from

individual identity, Denver's integration into the community is the means by which she acquires a sense of self. She does not foresee this reward, however; when forced to seek outside help by the increasingly destructive lunacy of her mother and Beloved, she fears she will be "swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch" (243). To her, the loss of individuality that Nietzsche celebrates is a terrifying prospect. But, as Marc Conner points out, Mrs Jones's kind and helpful response to the desperate girl is an initiation into the community that actually "inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (*Beloved* 252). Conner writes:

As Denver gains aid from the community and looks for work to save her household, she finds a sense of identity forming within her for the first time: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). ("Sublime" 68)

Both in the notion of selfhood as a condition of group membership that Morrison explores in *Song of Solomon*, and in the notion of group membership as the condition of selfhood that she affirms in *Beloved*, the author refutes the dominant American paradigm described by Lewis as the "individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling" (*American Adam* 5).

The emphasis on community as a (potentially) beneficent force is reflected in Morrison's conception of the chorus as a positive moral power. Talking in a 1979 interview about the decline of community spirit in African-American life, she recalled how the people in her neighbourhood used to participate in the care of her grandfather, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Of his senile wanderings from home, she observed, "the town I grew up in used to respond to an event like [that] almost like a chorus. Those people

have a quality, a way of dealing with life that I value, and I write about it” (Taylor-Guthrie 58-59). This same understanding of the chorus as a collective agent for good underlines her description of Hagar’s isolation in *Song of Solomon*: the girl “needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mama, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her — and the humor with which to live it” (*Song* 307). Both descriptions emphasize an active role for the chorus or community that is central to the novels’ critique of individualism, and that simultaneously revises conventional perceptions of the choric role in Greek tragedy.

In her discussion of Greek tragic “form and performance”, P.E. Easterling writes that “one of the major functions of the chorus [. . .] is to act as a group of ‘built-in’ witnesses” (“Form” 163). In several novels, Morrison explores and problematizes the concept of the choric witness and the relationship between communal witnessing and individual isolation. For example, the communities in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are reprehensible for the fact that they see Pecola’s and Sula’s difficulties but do nothing to help. In *Tar Baby*, meanwhile, the function of witnessing and passing moral judgement is performed by the natural world. Butterflies and avocado trees separately respond to Jadine’s thoughts and behaviour, but by definition they are impotent (86, 104).⁵⁴ And in *Beloved*, Morrison depicts the community failing in their responsibility to witness, or to look out for those around them. In the ice-

⁵⁴ In her article, “Rootedness: The Ancestor As Foundation”, Morrison writes: In the books I have written [. . .] there has always been a choral note, [. . . for example] as extreme as I’ve gotten, all of nature thinking and feeling and watching and responding to the action going on in *Tar Baby*, so that they are in the story: the trees hurt, fish are afraid, clouds report, and the bees are alarmed. (341)

skating scene that I have already discussed, the author stresses the fact that there are no witnesses to the repeated falls of the needy Sethe, Denver and Beloved. With deliberate irony, Morrison uses the phrase “nobody saw them falling” as a refrain. That “nobody saw” is as significant as the fact of the falls, and the choric device draws attention to the absence of the chorus, the lack of community awareness of the trio’s plight (*Beloved* 174-75). While this failure to observe others’ suffering is bad enough, as *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* demonstrate, Morrison ultimately demands more of society than that it simply witness the downfalls of others. The community must act.

Classicists are divided on the extent to which the Greek chorus influences the events of a play. For example, whereas Peter Burian writes of “the convention that choruses do not intervene directly in the action” (“Myth” 198), C.M. Bowra describes the chorus of the *Suppliant Women* as “the central actor in the play” (122). As Goldhill’s observation that I have already quoted points out, there are no hard and fast rules because Attic tragedy was an experimental and always-developing form. There does appear to be some consensus, however, that in the progression from Aeschylan to Euripidean drama the chorus has a decreasingly active role. Aristotle, for example, declares that the chorus “should assume a share in the action, as happens in Sophocles but not in Euripides” (trans. Dorsch 57), while Little associates the Archaic era with “the dominant chorus” and the later fifth century with “the chorus in decline” (72).⁵⁵ Morrison’s novels — in particular *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved* and *Paradise* — reverse this tradition. They insist that the society to

⁵⁵ Nietzsche complains about the peripheral nature of the choruses in Euripides’s plays in *The Birth of Tragedy* (54-64).

which a protagonist should belong plays a direct part in shaping his or her life; in the author's words, "the chorus participates [. . .] by meddling in the action" (Taylor-Guthrie 101). The community carries some (if not all) responsibility for an individual's downfall, and even, in *Sula* and *Paradise*, falls itself.

In the closing pages of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia describes how the community ignores Pecola's suffering. "Grown up people looked away", she says, "[. . .] We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near" (*Bluest Eye* 162). Morrison makes clear, however, that this avoidance or neglect is itself an action; the failure to reach out to her is a crime. In describing the way the people of Lorain scapegoat the little girl, the author repeatedly uses active verbs in direct constructions: "we cleaned ourselves on her. [. . .] We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of her strength" (163). And in *Sula*, although the eponymous heroine rejects the community in a way Pecola could never be capable of, the community is configured as neither passive nor innocent. "[T]hey looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run" Morrison writes (*Sula* 113); "[t]hey began to band together against the devil in their midst" (*Sula* 117).⁵⁶

With *Beloved* the author depicts not just a community choosing to isolate the family of whom they disapprove, but also the catastrophic effects of that willed alienation. Stamp Paid realizes that it is people's resentment of Baby Suggs's proud largess — their "meanness" — that "let them stand aside, or not pay attention" and so not warn her that Schoolteacher had come to recapture Sethe (157). Morrison represents the community as quite literally failing in

⁵⁶ I have already quoted Philip Page's observation that "Sula cannot be absorbed by the community" ("Shocked" 81). The passive structure of this sentence obscures the fact that the community actively choose not to absorb Sula.

their choric role through the fact that when the protagonist is arrested, they refuse to sing. There should have been “some cape of sound [. . .] wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way” (*Beloved* 152). Instead, there is only “[h]umming. No words at all” (*Beloved* 152). As Marc Conner observes, “the sin in this novel is both individual and communal” (“Sublime” 65).

Morrison intensifies the sense of “communal sin”, and its role in individuals’ alienation, through stressing the separate identities of community members. In a radical departure from Greek choric anonymity the author gives individual names to several of those who are instrumental in Sethe’s downfall, and to those who turn their back on Sula.⁵⁷ While the community in *Beloved* is mostly given a collective identity — “nobody” (157), “the other colored women” (255), “the women” (261) — we nonetheless know that this group includes Ella, John and Janey. The effect of this specificity is to increase the sense of their responsibility for what takes place: “Not Ella, not John, not anybody ran down or to Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in” (157). And in *Sula*, the listed names of the townsfolk who follow Shadrack form a six-line sentence; in a typically Morrisonian pun, there is even an individual named “Everybody” (159). Through their “fall” in the collapsed tunnel, Morrison literalizes the sense that this community is a protagonist in its own right; it must face the consequences of its actions. In contrast to a Greek tragedy such as Euripides’s *Trojan Women*, in which, when

⁵⁷ Gould writes that the Greek chorus “articulates a collective, ‘anonymous’ experience and response to events” (222), and that whereas “the hero has a name which is central to his identity [. . .] the chorus, on the other hand [. . .] have only a collective identity and a collective ‘name’, if we can call it that” (222-23). In naming members of her choruses, Morrison differs from Ntozake Shange, who in *for colored girls* differentiates her chorus members only by the colour each is wearing, “lady in brown”, and so on (3).

the Greeks take each woman including the royal family for slaves “it is never made clear what will happen to each [chorus member] individually” (Easterling, “Form” 176), Morrison provides detailed information about the fates of her named community members. “Tar Baby, Dessie, Ivy, Valentine, the Herrod boys, some of Ajax’s younger brothers [. . .] all died there”, while “Mr Buckland Reed” and “Patsy and her two boys” survived (*Sula* 162).⁵⁸ While in *The Trojan Women* “the difference between chorus and actors is brought out very clearly” (Easterling, “Form” 176), Morrison’s specificity about the townsfolk has the opposite effect. This blurring of the distinction between chorus and protagonist is one of the many ways the author challenges the primacy of the solitary individual in American ideology.

Marc Conner is right to observe that *Beloved* “is the first of Morrison’s novels to present a true union between individual and community in its conclusion, in which both self and society are regenerated and revived” (“Sublime” 69). Indeed, the novel’s ending represents not just a “union” between the protagonist and the group, but even moments where any distinction between the two is erased.⁵⁹ The community who gather to exorcize Beloved deploy both prayer, in a call-and-response form, and song, “building voice upon voice” (258, 261). In contrast to their earlier failure to witness and refusal to sing, the “singing women” are now properly fulfilling their choric

⁵⁸ Of *The Trojan Women* Easterling observes: “At 292-93 the Chorus ask ‘What about me?’, but the herald has no reply” (“Form” 176). In *The Bacchae*, the fact that there are two distinct groups of maenads maintains a separation between chorus and actors; it is Agave and Semele, and not the chorus, who fall in destroying Pentheus.

⁵⁹ Conner quotes essays by David Lawrence and Susan Bowers that make a similar observation: “David Lawrence points out that the chant of the women ‘creates communal bonds rather than destroying them’”; and “as Bowers argues, ‘when Sethe is taken back to the clearing by the women’s song in her yard, it is a sign of both personal and community redemption’” (“Sublime” 69).

responsibilities (*Beloved* 261).⁶⁰ But Morrison never makes clear whether it is they or Sethe herself who finally cause Beloved to vanish. The ghost disappears as the women sing, but not until Sethe has proved her love by rushing to attack Mr Bodwin. Paul D “doesn’t care how It went or even why” (267), and the author refuses to clarify whether it was the group’s action, Sethe’s action or their combined action that banished it. Ultimately, therefore, the protagonist and the chorus are jointly responsible for the climactic event of the novel, and so can no longer be differentiated by those labels. This impulse to merge the individual within the group, or resistance to isolation, is reflected in the novel’s title. The name “Beloved” describes not just a central character, Sethe’s daughter, left “alone” at the novel’s close (262), but also the “beloved” of the preacher’s congregation (5), the chorus, the community of Morrison’s readers.⁶¹

Morrison’s exploration of individualism, however, cannot be understood simply as a straightforward desire for the reinstatement of the individual within the group, or the merging of the protagonist with the chorus. Both in *Paradise* and *Love* she highlights the potential dangers of the group mentality, and suggests that at times individuals are bound to detach themselves from those around them. In the most recent novel, Romen’s refusal to join with his friends in raping Pretty-Fay is what defines his heroism. Morrison depicts him somewhat arrogantly meditating on the superiority of his relations with Junior as compared with the herd-like behaviour of his peers, who “needed a chorus of

⁶⁰ Carole Anne Taylor writes of the exorcism scene: “Unlike the choric observers of Greek tragedy, this choric group acts and comes to bear witness in the manner of all such witnesses, that is, by learning to see their own complicity in what they have too easily judged as Other” (42).

⁶¹ By insisting on an active role for the chorus, Morrison demands an active role, an acceptance of responsibility, by her readers.

each other to back them up, make it real, help them turn down the trumpet screech in their own ears” (115). But at the same time she makes a serious point about the immorality of the collective Dionysiac frenzy in which Theo, Jamal and Freddie indulge, and suggests that it was their collectivity that made possible their crime.⁶²

The ease with which a group commits a crime, and the difficulty facing individuals who resist the communal impulse, is explored in more detail in *Paradise*. “*They shoot the white girl first*” (3; my italics); interestingly, the men who collectively slaughter the women at the Convent claim to do so in defence of the version of the American Dream on which Ruby is built. So in this novel, where (in an extension of the group downfall in *Sula*) the community or town itself is the protagonist that falls, Morrison complicates her own critique of American individualism. This plot focuses not on a solitary character who rejects or is rejected by the group, but on a whole community who proudly preserve their own isolation from the world at large, alienating the Convent women and anyone who passes through town in the process. And within that isolation, nine men acting as a group commit an outrage.

Morrison emphasizes the communal nature of the crime against the Convent women through a pun. Shocked at what he finds in the aftermath of the shooting, Pious asks, “You all massacred those women? For what?” (290). This phrasing plays on the fact that “you all” is commonly used to address a single person in colloquial American idiom, and thus draws attention to the way the nine men acted as one. When asked who had the guns, K.D. we replies “we all

⁶² Morrison also points out the confidence and altered moral perspective which belonging to a group confers in *Jazz*. Of the women’s flirtation with Joe Trace on their first meeting him in Alice Manfred’s apartment, the author writes, “[I]n a group such as this one, they could do with impunity what they were cautious about alone with any man, stranger or friend” (*Jazz* 71).

did”, but then unsuccessfully attempts to isolate “Uncle Steward” as the main perpetrator (291). The author insists on shared responsibility for the violence by identifying each participant by name even as she more frequently refers to them as “the men” (286).

Deacon and Steward are not so much protagonists as leaders of a chorus. In the crucial scene in which Lone overhears the nine men winding themselves up to violence at the Oven, she realizes that “the leadership is twinned” and that “the only voice not singing belonged to the one conducting the choir” (280). Morrison repeatedly draws attention to her conception of this group as a choir or chorus. During their convention at the Oven, their “voices rose”, and “one by one they began to speak” (274). The author creates the effect of group discussion by transliterating exactly what Lone hears without identifying speakers: “Remember how they scandalized the wedding? What you say? Uh huh and it was that very same day I caught them kissing”, and so on (275). And as with Romen’s former friends in *Love*, it is the camaraderie that gives the men their resolve. “Like boot camp recruits, like invaders preparing for slaughter, they were there to rave, to heat the blood” (280). When they go to Sargeant’s shed to eat steaks and drink laced coffee, the atmosphere is “braced and companionable”, like that of sportsmen before a game, but also like that of a lynch mob (282).

Morrison celebrates Lone’s realization that she must act independently and resist the impulses of the group through the obvious implications of the character’s name, “Lone”. The woman’s individuality at this moment contrasts with her behaviour at the school nativity play, where she is the most choric-like and complicit audience member. There, her testifying or responses to the

actors' calls reinforce the ideology of the play (211). But now she realizes she must "stop [. . .] ignoring what was going on and letting evil have its way" (273). In an inversion of the responsibilities incumbent on the community with regard to the individual in other novels, here the solitary individual, Lone, knows that God "wanted her to witness" the men's meeting, and also "to do something about it" (274). Morrison thereby highlights a potential irony of the national ideology of individualism: the group commits a crime in defence of the self-serving exceptionalist project that is "Ruby", while the individual acts alone in the interests of society at large. Such complexity is typical of the nuanced critique of self-reliance that the author's deployment of choric models enables throughout the oeuvre.

I.v An Interest in Survival: Tragic and Anti-Tragic Modes

In concluding this discussion of Morrison's strategic interactions with the tragic mode, I focus on the increasing ambivalence about Aristotelian calamitousness that characterizes the development in her novels from *The Bluest Eye* to *Love*. Here I examine the different ways in which the author avoids reinscribing the American Dream, and I argue that the later novels' simultaneous representation and rejection of a catastrophic perspective is one of her most successful means to this end. The fact that she at once confronts and looks beyond calamity ensures that she eschews the political pitfalls — or, specifically, the propensity to reinforce dominant cultural ideology — of both literature that overtly protests and literature that does not.

Morrison's novels obviously do not emerge from the "Contentment Tradition of the O-lovely-Negro school of American fiction" that Langston Hughes contemptuously delineates ("To Negro Writers" 125). But despite their recurring concern with evil, suffering and outrage, neither do they belong to what Hurston calls "the sobbing school of Negrohood" (115). They do not function like conventional protest novels; they do not operate in the way that James Baldwin condemns, as "a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 16). And nor do they insist on what Bercovitch, in his analysis of canonical texts by white men, calls "the cosmic import of the American Way" (194). Even in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, both of which comprise the bleakest and most consistently tragic vision of the oeuvre, Morrison ensures that readers' pity and anger are not motivated by individuals' failure to achieve the American Dream, but by the inadequacies and injustices inherent in dominant ideology itself.

In pointing out that political change depends not on individuals' progression within society, but on the actual transformation of that society, Baldwin reminds us in his critique of protest novels that "the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality", and that "what the rejected desire is an elevation of status, acceptance, within the present community" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 17). Of all Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* has the most in common with *Native Son* or *The Street*. Cholly's rape of his own daughter — arguably an act more outrageous than Bigger's suffocation of Mary or Lutie's battering of Boots —

does appear to be motivated in part by anger at his lack of acceptance and status within society.⁶³ Petry describes Lutie's attack on Boots as driven by "a lifetime of pent-up resentment" (430); the protagonist loses control to a "deepening stream of rage that had fed on the hate, the frustration, the resentment she had toward the pattern her life had followed" (428). Morrison's outlining of Cholly's past and present suggest a similar accumulated anger at unrelenting rejection, poverty and marginality.

But at the same time, the author suggests further reasons for the man's behaviour which mark the event's divergence from Petry's precedent and comprise an in-built critique of the system within which the character is failing. She writes that just before his assault, Cholly feels "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (127). His guilt is provoked by the fact that his daughter looks "whipped"; "she was a child — unburdened — why wasn't she happy?" (127). The author has already explained to the reader the many reasons why Pecola isn't happy: they include her own desperate desire for mainstream acceptance and the misery her mother causes her by rejecting her in favour of the worlds of the Dreamland Theater and of her white employer (95, 99). Whereas in *The Street* Lutie is enraged by the impossibility of her achieving the Dream, in *The Bluest Eye* Cholly is as much provoked by the damage that the Dream's overbearing and insidious promise does to those around him. The novel thus

⁶³ Bigger and Lutie both kill their victims but both to some degree act in self-defence and in response to obvious provocation, unlike Cholly, whose attack is against his helpless daughter. Dalsgard glosses Thomas Byers's reading of the ending of *The Bluest Eye* as one that reinscribes exceptionalism:

Using the form of the jeremiad, [. . .] Morrison writes from the position of a black outsider who blames the predominantly white nation for its failure to extend its exceptionalist promises to its black population, and by forging her critique in this way, she indirectly reaffirms the exceptionalist narrative. (Dalsgard 236)

But other features of the novel mitigate or undermine this effect.

calls for the transformation of society, or of dominant ideology, rather than for Cholly's progression within it.

A second in-built critique of mainstream American culture in *The Bluest Eye* occurs through Claudia. Madonne Miner argues that she “cannot read *The Bluest Eye* as tragedy” because this character’s enduring presence attests to survival (98). My own opinion, however, accords with that of Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, who points out that this narrator “is a survivor in the same sense as the witness who tells Job what he has lost” and that “there is no affirmation of life in this survival” (33-35). Unlike Sethe, whose survival at the end of *Beloved* does indicate a triumph over adversity and an important optimism, Claudia is a peripheral figure throughout the novel who records rather than shares in Pecola’s suffering. Her elegiac observations — for example that the outcast girl “spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down” — operate as a choric lament; they enhance rather than diminish the tragedy (162).⁶⁴ But however apparently impotent, the persistent critical voice of this narrator who destroys a white doll and prefers Jane Withers to Shirley Temple repeatedly highlights the possibility of alternatives to the American Dream (13, 15). While the deconstruction of the primer shatters the mythology of American happiness, Claudia’s observations comprise an unrelenting demand for the reconfiguration of American society.

While Sula’s fate is not as dreadful as Pecola’s, the ending of the novel to which she gives her name is similarly pessimistic. The Bottom is in a state of collapse, Sula is long-since dead, and Nel, realizing too late the value of their

⁶⁴ Morrison describes the “I” narrator of *The Bluest Eye* as comprising “a choral note” (“Rootedness” 341).

friendship, feels apparently infinite “circles and circles of sorrow” (174). This pattern of inescapable misery recalls the “series of circles that flowed into each other” that Lutie Johnson traces on the train window at the end of *The Street* (435). But Morrison’s novel does avoid reinscribing the ideology of the American Dream because Sula wilfully rejects various aspects of it. Unlike Lutie, or for that matter Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* or Roth’s *Levovs*, she does not seek elevation or acceptance within society; instead she deliberately turns her back on it. Her fall is as much due to the community’s resentment of her non-conformity, and their consequent scapegoating, as it is to her refusal to conform. The community’s literal fall into the tunnel embodies Morrison’s implication that society itself must be broken down.

The ambiguous endings of *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, meanwhile, make it impossible to classify the novels either as tragic or as non-tragic, and their political efficacy lies to a great extent in this generic indeterminacy. While both novels contain pain and suffering that cannot be erased — the deaths of Hagar and Pilate, for example, Son’s miserable past, or the collapse of Valerian’s household — both Milkman’s flight and Son’s running into the hills might end in either disaster or triumph.⁶⁵ In forgoing closure these works avoid either protesting or celebrating the African-American condition. While Zora Neale Hurston defends her position on the grounds that she is “off to a flying start, and [. . .] must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep” (“How it Feels” 115), Morrison takes plenty of time to “look behind and weep”, but then gives her protagonists flying starts at the novels’ endings. If, as Catherine

⁶⁵ In her recent Foreword to *Song of Solomon*, Morrison writes, “Unlike most mythical flights, which clearly imply triumph, in the attempt if not the success, Solomon’s escape, the insurance man’s jump, and Milkman’s leap are ambiguous, disturbing” (xii).

Belsey argues, it is “the movement [. . .] towards closure” that “ensures the reinstatement of order” (*Critical Practice* 69), then in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* eschewing closure is a way to avoid the reinstatement of the order, or of the ideology of the American Dream, that Milkman and Son have negotiated throughout the novels.

There is, however, political risk inherent in postmodern ambiguity and open-endedness, in that by definition it prevents unambiguous, unequivocal protest.⁶⁶ A representation of slavery that allows for multiple interpretations of the institution, for example, would obviously be problematic. This perhaps explains why *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* are characterized not so much by an indeterminate mood or perspective but by the co-existence of the tragic and the anti-tragic, or the combination of protest and affirmation. Each of these novels comprises an in-depth exploration of the African-American response to oppression and trauma in different historical contexts, yet each at the same time ends by insisting on the possibility of a better future. In the closing pages of *Beloved*, Paul D encourages Sethe to look forward to “some kind of tomorrow” (273), while Denver’s new-found independence and resumed education represent optimism about the next generation.⁶⁷ In *Jazz*, the narrator is surprised to discover a reconciliation between Joe and Violet, a restoration of their “public love” (229), and the existence of a mutually beneficial relationship

⁶⁶ For a summary of scholarly debate on the issue of African-American writing and postmodernism see Ferguson 155-56.

⁶⁷ On the optimism of the ending of *Beloved* see Conner, “Sublime”, Bowers, and Hogan. I discuss the way this anti-tragic vision challenges dominant cultural versions of the history of the South as tragedy in Part II. It is interesting to note that in her recent libretto for the opera *Margaret Garner* (2005), Morrison alters historical fact to create a catastrophic ending for both Robert (who is lynched on-stage) and Margaret (who hangs herself) (*Margaret Garner*). Is it the conservatism of the operatic genre that dictates her eschewal of the emphasis on survival that characterizes her later novels?

between the couple and Felice. And the redemption in *Paradise* is both metaphysical and worldly. The Convent women enjoy a miraculous resurrection, but in their new lives they attain not the clichéd versions of the Dream that some of them formerly sought (epitomized by Mavis's mission to get to California [32], or Gigi's search for a town called "Wish" [64]), but various forms of reconciliation with their pasts. Meanwhile, through the women's lack of interest in revenge on their killers and through Deacon's repentance the author makes it clear that "God had given Ruby a second chance" (297). The overt Christian ethos of the ending — most explicit in the "pietà-like tableau" formed by Piedade and Consolata (Dalsgard 244) — sets the very non-Christian aspects of the American Dream, such as the individualism and material ambition that have motivated the Morgan brothers, in striking relief.⁶⁸

It is arguable that it is the anti-tragic endings of *Jazz* and *Paradise* that ultimately prevent the novels from reinscribing ideologies of progress and ascendancy, even while their tragic elements constitute a central challenge to that mythology. Joe and Violet do not find the "perfect" life they once dreamed of, but instead find contentment without it (112). This denies the reader the possibility of lamenting their failure to achieve the Dream; instead, the inadequacies of the ideology remain in view. Meanwhile, to compare the endings of *Paradise* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), as Jill Jones does, is to see the contrasting perspectives on the American creed that Morrison's anti-tragic and Faulkner's tragic renderings of events create. The apocalyptic ending of

⁶⁸ Dalsgard discusses at length the ways in which *Paradise* "destabilizes the exceptionalist paradigm at a very basic level" (242-46).

Faulkner's novel (in which the Sutpen dynasty is destroyed and the house burns to the ground) imbues Thomas Sutpen's failure to realize his dream with dramatic significance that dignifies the Dream itself. Morrison, on the other hand, does not dwell on a sense of loss at all; she eschews the tones of elegy or tragedy. The final passages about Ruby (mostly expressed through the eyes of Richard Misner) have a somewhat surprising moderation and balanced realism about them which contrasts with the elevated style of the preceding chapters. For example, the author writes, "unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to [Misner] was an unnecessary failure" (306). The restrained, even pedestrian phrase "unnecessary failure" punctures the grandiosity preceding it, and does not allow any indulgent lament for unrealized dreams.

The ending of *Paradise* frustrates the literary predilection for calamity that Morrison explores in *Jazz*. The narrator's admission that she expected the Trace household to collapse constitutes a metafictional analysis of the nature of the tragic that is also present in *Song of Solomon*, in the final novel in the trilogy, and in *Love*. In the early pages of *Jazz*, the narrator prepares us for a catastrophic ending by observing of the Joe-Violet-Felice trio that "what turned out different was who shot whom" (6). When it transpires that no one shoots anyone, the narrator meditates on the disturbing nature of her own expectations. "I was so sure one would kill the other", she confesses, "I waited for it to happen so I could describe it" (220). Although it is not possible to conflate Morrison with this created voice, it is illuminating to interpret this self-examination as an authorial comment on the preoccupation with suffering and

violence that characterizes both Morrison's oeuvre and the literary traditions from which it emerges.

"Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it", says the narrator of *Jazz*. "What would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder?" (219). These observations express an uneasiness about watching and configuring the calamitous or the tragic, suggesting there is something perverse or self-perpetuating about it. And the unexpected non-calamitous ending of *Jazz* together with its narrative self-reflectiveness signpost the move towards the tentatively optimistic endings that the later works enact. As the narrator says, "I started out believing that life [. . .] had gone awry with humans because flesh, pinioned by misery, hangs on to it with pleasure. [. . .] I don't believe that anymore" (227-28). Morrison's later novels do not flinch from portraying misery, but they do not hang on to it with pleasure in the way Hurston might argue that the "sobbing school" does.

In *Song of Solomon* Milkman is critical of the way Guitar and his friends define themselves by the suffering they have endured. "Who would they be if they couldn't describe the insults, violence, and oppression that their lives (and the television news) were made up of?", he asks himself (107). This perspective has something in common with Baldwin's critique of protest novels. I am not suggesting that the apathetic Milkman has any affinity with the politically engaged Baldwin, but given Morrison's critical take on Guitar and his avenging *Seven Days*, the comment does have some bearing on her negotiations of the tragic-versus-non-tragic dilemma. For while she makes a point of presenting graphic violence, and never trivializes the realities of black experience in the way that Hughes condemns, her writing shares Ralph

Ellison's awareness of "the ease with which [the nation's] deepest experience of tragedy could be converted into blackface farce" (Ellison, Introduction xvi). Baldwin might argue that this is the inevitable fate of *Native Son*; he describes that work as "locked [. . .] in a deadly timeless battle" with sentimental depictions of black history such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852; "Everybody's Protest Novel" 18). In combining moments of restoration, redemption and reconciliation with the tragic vision in her novels, Morrison avoids the potential for farce that the protest novels risk.

Baldwin depicts the interaction between *Native Son* and Stowe's novel as an Elizabethan or Jacobean melodrama, a revenge tragedy in which destruction is total: "black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning [. . .] so that they go down in the pit together" (18). The critic's own style here parodies the sensationalism that he condemns in both Wright's and Stowe's novels. In *Love*, Morrison pre-empts accusations that her writing is melodramatic by simultaneously deploying and parodying that genre. For example, L complains about the theatrical way people live their lives, "putting everything they feel onstage just to prove they can think up things too: handsome scary things like fights to the death, adultery, setting sheets afire" (63). While other characters behave melodramatically throughout, L's calm detachment critiques their melodrama. The novel's parodic engagement with gothic conventions is a refutation both to Poe and to Wright's belief that if Poe were alive in the Twentieth Century "he would not have to invent horror, horror

would invent him” (“Bigger” 462).⁶⁹ And while May is described in the vengeful guise of Hamlet’s father: “her ghost, [. . .] helmeted and holstered, was alive and gaining strength” (83), L wryly anticipates Heed and Christine destroying each other in their own Senecan tragedy: “*one vomiting on the steps still holding the knife that cut the throat of the one that fed her the poison*” (10). As it turns out, Heed’s undignified fall through the attic doorway momentarily lowers the tone from melodrama to farce. But dignity is immediately restored by the sincere reconciliation between the two women. By combining a range of genres — tragedy, melodrama, farce, comedy — the novel occupies a middle ground between “protest” or tragic writing that slides too easily into farce, and affirmative or non-tragic writing that might distort the reality of suffering in black experience.⁷⁰

The burlesque elements of *Love* are like the “ironic, down-home voice” that Ellison likens to “a honky-tonk trumpet blasting through a performance, say, of Britten’s *War Requiem*” in his introduction to *Invisible Man* (xv).⁷¹ The male author recalls asking himself, “given the persistence of racial violence and the unavailability of legal protection [. . .] what else was there to sustain our will to persevere but laughter?” (Introduction xv). Morrison likewise asserts the

⁶⁹ I return to Morrison’s dialogue with Poe both in *Love* and in *Playing in the Dark* in Part II.

⁷⁰ Carole Anne Taylor writes that “[l]iterary works negotiating plural rather than unitary selves, as well as diversely positioned and equally plural readers, tend to move in and out of tragic and comic modes” (4). There is of course nothing new in the idea of tragedy’s proximity to comedy, or of the paradoxical compatibility of the two genres. In the epilogue to his *Symposium* Plato records Aristodemus’s recollections of Socrates’s claim that “knowing how to compose comedies and knowing how to compose tragedies must combine in a single person and that a professional tragic playwright was also a professional comic playwright” (Plato 71).

⁷¹ The ironies and paradoxes inherent in the disparity between American myths and realities can give rise to a sense of the “absurd” as an alternative to the “tragic”. In *Invisible Man* the narrator says of the race riot:

I recognized the absurdity of the whole night. [. . .] I had no longer to run from or for the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their [. . .] refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. [. . .] And I knew that it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others. (559)

role of the comic in endurance and survival. For example, in *Song of Solomon* the news of Emmett Till's death provokes the men in the barbershop to rehearse the suffering they have each endured. "A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then, uproariously" (82). And in *Jazz*, Violet suddenly sees the humorous side to her melodramatic intervention at Dorcas's funeral: "The sight of herself trying to do something bluesy, something hep, fumbling the knife, too late anyway . . . She laughed till she coughed and Alice had to make them both a cup of settling tea" (114). Both in depicting the restorative powers of laughter for her characters, then, as in the scenes quoted here, and in appealing to her readers' sense of humour and irony, the author refuses a wholly tragic perspective.⁷²

It is in her deployment of co-existent tragic and anti-tragic modes, or her dual emphasis on suffering and survival, that one of the many affinities lies between Morrison's writing and both blues and jazz. Ralph Ellison writes that "the blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition" ("Blues People" 249), while the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* defines jazz as combining "the deep sea blue tragic sense of life" with "a strong sense of possibility and humor" (56). Both descriptions might be readily applied to Morrison's work. Discussing her novels with Nellie McKay in 1983, she says that she is "interested in survival — who survives and

⁷² In the chapter in *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* entitled "Black Laughter", Lawrence Levine writes of laughter "as a compensating mechanism which enabled blacks to confront oppression and hardship" (299). In *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) Kenneth Burke writes of the value of comedy and the dangers of tragedy: "Mankind's only hope is a cult of comedy. (The cult of tragedy is too eager to help out with the holocaust. And in the last analysis, it is too pretentious to allow for a proper recognition of our animality)" (20).

who does not, and why” (Taylor-Guthrie 145). Given the realities of black history, survival is surely not just something that *interests* her; it is also a process in which she — and African-Americans generally — *have an interest* or stake. This explains her final rejection of the tragic mode. For while Lutie Johnson flees to Chicago knowing it will “swallow her up” (*The Street* 434), and Bigger’s view of his imminent execution is that “it seems somehow natural like” (*Native Son* 358), Morrison’s later novels insist on the survival of their protagonists, and thus on the possibility of a future.⁷³

Lutie inhabits “a walled enclosure from which there is no escape” (430), while *Native Son* ends with “the ring of steel against steel as a far [prison] door clanged shut” (430). By contrast, as Morrison says, she “[doesn’t] shut doors at the end of books. There is a resolution of a sort but there are always possibilities - choices” (Taylor-Guthrie 177). The author’s commitment to a future that does not repeat the past is symbolized by Anna Flood and Richard Misner’s vision (towards the end of *Paradise*) of the door and window at the Convent. “Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side?”, Anna wonders (305). Her musings transform the tragic vision both of the permanently-closed doors that resonate in *Native Son* and *The Street*, and of the window through which Clare falls to her death in *Passing*.

⁷³ On the issue of survival, it is interesting to bear in mind Barbara Smith’s criticizing of the pessimistic endings of Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* for their “persistent message that survival is hardly possible. I do not think we simply want ‘happy endings’ [. . .] but an indication of the spirits of survival and resistance which had made the continuance of Black Lesbian and gay life possible through the ages” (B. Smith 231). Ellison’s *Invisible Man* similarly recognises the importance of survival: “Whoever else I was, I was no Samson. I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction” (243).

Invested with a similar sense of expectation is Romen's decision not to abandon Heed and Christine at the end of *Love*. Motivated by an instinctive goodness — the “something rogue” that the narrator comes to recognize in *Jazz* (228) — the young protagonist finally rescues the ancestor figures. While Heed is dead, Christine survives, and Romen in turn has survived the testing of his moral fortitude. The conflicted mood of this novel's ending, epitomizing the author's developing negotiations of calamitous tragic vision, is exactly expressed by the closing word spoken by L. As both verb and expletive, it encapsulates a potential-filled moral and emotional ambivalence: “hum” (*Love* 202).

“How curious a land this is!”, wrote W.E.B. Du Bois of Georgia in 1903. “[H]ow full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, [. . .] shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!” (*Souls* 75). The previously untold stories that Morrison's novels comprise make a similar assessment of the United States as a whole. In this first part of my thesis, I have demonstrated that the author's oeuvre-wide repudiation of the Dream makes frequent recourse to the vision and the conventions of classical tragedy. At the same time, I have shown that her revisionary perspective on the paradigms of the tragic downfall, the tragic hero and the tragic chorus are as central to her refutation of the nation's flawed ideologies of success, of freedom and of individualism as they are to her configurations of America's “future promise”.

Part II Classic Constructions of American History

II.i Representative Men or Foundational Ancestors?

In *Love*, a portrait of Bill Cosey dominates the house in Monarch Street as his posthumous presence dominates the lives of the surviving characters. A eulogizing Heed tells Junior, “That’s him. It was painted from a snapshot, so it’s exactly like him. What you see there is a wonderful man” (26). The widow’s apotheosis of her husband — a character who functions in many ways as an allegory of America itself — can be read as a microcosm of the predilection for hero worship that has characterized the nation’s historiography since its inception.

“It is natural to believe in great men”, writes Emerson in the introductory essay to his collection, *Representative Men* (1850). He continues, “All mythology opens with demigods” (3). Indebted in their conception to Plutarch’s *Lives*, the subsequent six studies of European men who have “a pictorial or representative quality”, and who are “representative; first, of things, and, secondly, of ideas” both reflect and prescribe the nature of conventional American hagiography (6).¹ As Clive Bush, Garry Wills and many others have argued, both the cults of heroism that define mainstream American history and the traditions of portraiture and statuary that underpin them reflect the self-

¹ *Representative Men* comprises lectures delivered in Boston and in England between 1845 and 1847; the six subjects are Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon and Goethe. “We cannot read Plutarch without a tingling of the blood”, Emerson writes in the introductory piece, “The Uses of Great Men” (9). Meyer Reinhold documents the fact that Emerson “admired, utilized, and exploited Plutarch [. . .] throughout his entire career”: “It was to Plutarch that Emerson owed the revival of the cult of the moral essay, [. . .] his conception of the hero as moral exemplar, [. . .] and not least his anecdotal and apothegmatic style and his assimilation of American and Plutarchan heroes” (259-60).

conscious classicism of the national dominant culture.² In Bush's words on the Early Republic, "the neo-classical marriage of art with the service of the state goes back to an ultimately Roman civic ideal [. . .] that statues of state heroes might induce morality" (27).

The political implications of conceptions of heroism, of who is selected as a hero, and of the means by which the appointed few are represented are a profound concern in Toni Morrison's novels. I begin my study of her reformulations of American history by analysing her engagement with dominant heroic traditions. This is because it is an engagement which epitomizes her interest in the wider role classical tradition has played in determining both the actual events that have shaped the nation and the representations of those events. The novels' exposure of the ideological uses to which Greece and Rome have been put in the making of America's past — in narratives of the country's "discovery" and colonization, of the founding of the new nation, and of the processes of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, black urbanization and the Civil Rights Movement — is the subject of this second section as a whole.

In introducing the study of pre- and post-revolutionary America's official portrait painting with which he begins *The Dream of Reason* (1977), Bush discusses the irony that a nation so proud of its democratic principles is nonetheless characterized by "the continuance [. . .] of the politicopsychological

² See Bush, "The Hero as Representative" in *The Dream of Reason* (19-57); Wills, "Fame" in *Cincinnatus* (109-32), Richard 53-64, and Reinhold 175. According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* Roman portraiture "was used to exemplify noble behaviour" (Pryce); so were neoclassical-style representations in the early American Republic.

phenomenon of hero worship” (19). He quotes John Quincy Adams, who once wrote that “Democracy has no monuments. It strikes no medals. It bears the head of no man on a coin. Its very essence is iconoclastic” (19). To bear in mind that Morrison’s Ruby is defined by the monument that is the Oven, that the town in *Sula* is called “Medallion” and that in *Tar Baby* Valerian’s profile is repeatedly described as “head-of-a-coin” is to see immediately the divergence between the America that this author depicts and the egalitarian ideal that Adams expresses (*Tar Baby* 203, 222). In this first section I demonstrate the way that *Love* and *Song of Solomon* parody the nation’s classically-informed practice of creating and revering heroes. I then illustrate Morrison’s exploration of the insidious influence that dominant cultural role models can exert on those she describes as “peripheral” (Taylor-Guthrie 88). I argue that her own conception of heroism, emerging as it does from African-American tradition, is ideologically at odds with the classically-derived, highly individualistic model of the mainstream American hero. Her understanding of what it means to be “representative”, and of the function of “representativeness”, is the exact opposite to that of Emerson. Her novels urge an encounter with the past that comprises reverence for and connection with an ancestor figure rather than the worship of externally-imposed heroes.³

The value that *Love*’s Heed places on the fact that Cosey’s portrait was “painted from a snapshot” and is “exactly like him” recalls the specific aesthetic style of Roman portraiture (*Love* 26). This style, according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, is “especially noted for its verism, the meticulous

³ The significance of the ancestor figure in Morrison’s fiction (and as expressed by her essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor As Foundation”) has of course been amply addressed by critics. My aim is not to rehearse their points but to consider the “ancestor” as a specific alternative to the “hero”.

recording of facial characteristics including such unflattering features as wrinkles, warts, and moles” (Pryce). It is fair to assume of a novel in which the author names her living protagonist “Romen” that this affinity is more than a coincidence. The portrait obsesses June, who talks to it as if it were the living presence of her “Good Man”, it appals her lover, and it even gives its name, “Portrait”, to the first part of the book (118, 179, 11). The way the painting glorifies a man whom the novel reveals to be deeply flawed irreverently reflects the deceptive nature of national political portraiture: as Bush points out, historically this was a euphemistic practice typified by representations of George Washington that obscure his identity as an “aristocratic land-owner, deist and slave-owner” (42). Morrison may well be signifying on Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in which “a large portrait of Ezra Mannon himself” hangs alongside paintings of Washington, Hamilton and Marshall in the patriarchal study (51). The surviving cast live in the shadow of Mannon’s life and portrait as the characters in *Love* do in that of Cosey.⁴

Bill Cosey, whose very name could be sounded as *cosi*, meaning “like this” or “thus” in Italian, is Morrison’s mock-heroic configuration of the “representative man”. He is the town of Silk’s version of what Bush calls “a visual incitement to public virtue and public honour” in which “the virtuous statesman’s life becomes destiny” (30, 28). The resort owner is described as “the county’s role model” (37), and as one whose “life’s work” the women who

⁴ Characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* talk to the portrait of Ezra Mannon as June does to Cosey’s in *Love*; see O’Neill 63-65 and 242. The Mannon house is also full of portraits of other dead ancestors who exert a powerful influence over the living characters; see O’Neill 131 or 225. It is interesting to compare the headings of the parts of *Love* that describe various roles of Cosey — “Portrait”, “Benefactor”, “Guardian”, “Father” — with Bush’s observation, in relation to his analysis of representations of George Washington, that “at the root of the interest in public character is the imposed psychological need for the perfect father” (43).

survive him turn into a “cautionary lesson in black history” (201). He is the “idol” of Vida Gibbons (148); she feels “[p]roud of his finesse, his money, the example he set that goaded them into thinking with patience and savvy they could do it too” (42). And in the town at large, “all felt a tick of entitlement, of longing turned to belonging in the vicinity of the fabulous, successful resort controlled by one of their own” (42). The tone of such sentences recalls the way the old men of Danville revere the memory of Macon Sr. and his farm in *Song of Solomon*: a “farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon” (235). Macon Sr., “the farmer they wanted to be”, is the earlier novel’s own apotheosized hero (235). As she later does in *Love*, through the mythical accounts of that character’s life and achievements Morrison indirectly lampoons the classicism of dominant cultural historiography and directly exposes the final inapplicability of that practice to African-American reality.

When Milkman’s father casts his mind back to the farm where he grew up, he recalls with fondness the livestock and their names: the horse, “President Lincoln; her foal, Mary Todd; Ulysses S. Grant, their cow; General Lee, their hog” (*Song* 53). In having Macon Sr. call the farm “Lincoln’s Heaven” because “Lincoln was a good plow before he was President” (51), Morrison parodies not just the universal esteem in which the assassinated statesman was held but also the idealized pastoral tradition propagated by Thomas Jefferson, a president who liked to associate himself with the plough even while in office. As many cultural historians have observed, Jefferson’s pastoralism was in self-conscious imitation of classical models; Monticello embodied his “vision of the plantation

as Roman villa” (Simpson 32).⁵ An amusing illustration of his enthusiasm for every aspect of classical tradition is the fact “he named his horses Tarquin, Diomedes, Castor, Celer and Arcturus” (Richard 48). Through Macon Sr.’s naming his horse, cow, and pig after American heroes, Morrison specifically mocks Jefferson’s reverence for classical heroes, and generally mocks the dominant culture’s attempt to establish analogies or continuities between heroes of the Greek and Roman past and those of America’s unfolding history.

From any perspective, there is a striking paradox inherent in the fact that Thomas Jefferson “set out systematically to create a pantheon of heroes”, even erecting busts by the neoclassicist sculptor, Houdon, of Washington, Franklin, Lafayette and John Paul Jones in his Doric-style “tea-room” (Wills 110-11); or in the fact that in his *Representative Men* Emerson asserts that “every novel is a debtor to Homer” (8); or that in nineteenth-century Midwestern school textbooks, “from Zeus’s thunderbolt, to Franklin’s catching of electricity from the lightning storm in the sky, to Bell’s making the iron talk, was an easy, logical progress of heroes” (Raban, *Bad Land* 171). For in its attempts to prove its cultural independence from Europe, American dominant culture has repeatedly relied on Europe’s intellectual heritage. But from the perspective of African-American history, the national obsession with creating and revering heroes after the classical style is replete with specific bitter ironies, and it is with these that Toni Morrison is concerned. Macon Sr. may have called his horse after Lincoln “as a joke” (52), but given that he is soon to be shot dead and robbed of his land, the “joke” is ultimately at his own expense. What

⁵ On Jeffersonian pastoralism see Marx 73-74, Simpson 24-32, Richard 159-64. I discuss Morrison’s parodic relationship with Jeffersonian pastoralism at greater length later in this part.

tangible good has Lincoln's life brought to the Dead family, the author asks, that can justify their reverence for him? Similarly, does the cult surrounding the memory of Macon Sr. ultimately empower or oppress the people of Danville, Pennsylvania? And given that Cosey's Resort ultimately fails and that its founder leaves nothing but a collection of discontented women behind him, what has Heed achieved through enshrining him in a classical-style portrait?

It is an obvious but nonetheless important point that a nation's selection of its heroes is a politically-charged business. This is particularly true of the ever self-aware United States, where, as Wills observes, the panegyrist biographer Mason Locke Weems was not atypical in his "certitude that the description of a hero could *produce* heroes" (110; italics in original). A recurring theme in Morrison's novels is the dangers posed by cult figures who are in reality either irrelevant or inappropriate to the individuals they impress. Pecola's obsession with Shirley Temple, for example, is a central part of her self-destructive subscription to white versions of beauty (*Bluest Eye* 16), while the fact that the misguided Milkman feels "closer" to F.D.R. "than to his own father" is an important detail in the author's widespread mock-heroic conception of her protagonist (*Song* 63). The power of dominant mythology is such that characters genuinely believe in the promises apparently held out by the heroes whom they aspire to join, just as in Petry's *The Street* the initially optimistic Lutie Johnston "went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she" (64). As Ellison's *Invisible Man* wonders of the "bronze statue" of the Booker T.-like figure removing the veil from the slave's eyes on the campus of his *alma mater*,

Morrison repeatedly asks whether pantheons of heroes finally effect “a revelation or a more efficient blinding” (*Invisible Man* 36).⁶

While the national historiographical impulse seeks to establish analogies between American individuals and classical forebears, Morrison delights in disrupting this process. For example, Sula labours under the misconception that her beloved Albert Jacks is in fact named “Ajax” (135); she mistakenly views him as a “magnificent presence”, as a Homeric or Sophoclean hero rather than as the imperfect man that he is (134).⁷ But Morrison does not blame Albert Jacks for not being Ajax, but rather exposes the eponymous character for her partially-sighted longing for a mythological hero.⁸ In a similar vein, a central dilemma of *Love* is whether we err more in our failure to be heroic or in our need for heroism in those around us. L is the only character to recognize that the mythologized Bill Cosey “*didn’t have an S stitched on shirt and he didn’t own a pitchfork. He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love*” (200; italics in original). This novel’s parody of dominant heroic

⁶ Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is less naïve than Milkman or Lutie, in that he approaches the culture of American heroism with a savage irony: “I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin” (*Invisible Man* 7).

⁷ The fact that his actual name is Albert Jacks does not so much suggest a weakness on the man’s part, as Philip Page suggests, (“at the first sign of possessiveness on Sula’s part, he takes to the air, and his identity is correspondingly deflated from the heroic Ajax to the mundane Albert Jacks” [Page, “Shocked” 72]), as it indicates the extent of Sula’s misperception about him. Gillespie and Kubitschek point out that readers are prone to the same mythologizing tendency as Sula herself:

In a crucial scene, Sula discovers from his driver’s license that the man whose name she has always heard as “Ajax” is in fact named “A. Jacks”. [. . .] Morrison often depicts the interaction of myth with quotidian reality, and in *The Bluest Eye* the myth is specifically Greek. The mythological implications of “Ajax”, however, seem a poor fit with this character, who does not resemble either of *The Iliad*’s two Ajaxes. Barring the discovery of another Ajax to offer enriching characterization, then, the critics’ preference for “Ajax” ignores Sula’s discovery. (Gillespie 88)

⁸ At such moments, the author’s perspective on classical heroism runs directly counter to that expressed in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985). In its examination of the postmodern condition, DeLillo’s novel repeatedly articulates a simultaneously ironic and sincere nostalgia for the supposed grandeur and orderliness of the ancient world. Jack Gladney wishfully constructs analogies between contemporary events and classical times; at the novel’s close his reverence for the tabloids’ “cults of the famous and the dead” epitomizes his attempt to establish continuity between the mythological past and the postmodern present (326).

tradition extends to geographical details: the streets of Silk have “epic-movie names” and are “named for heroes” (40, 93). In including the detail that Maceo’s Pizzeria (home of the rapist, Theo) is on “Gladiator” street, she invokes the violent film of that name, set in Ancient Rome, which recently achieved mass acclaim (*Love* 86). Morrison is as contemptuous of the ideology perpetrated by “classic” American movies that depend on a stereotyped vision of the classical world as she is of Romen’s belief, on the brink of raping Pretty-Fay, that “he was about to become the Romen he’d always known he was” (47).

A consideration of the changing perceptions of the heroic within African-American culture provides an important context for Morrison’s critique of the concept. In his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine points out that before Emancipation “secular slave heroes operated by eroding and nullifying the powers of the strong; by reducing the powerful to their own level”, whereas “white folklore heroes triumphed through an expansion of the self — by inflating the individual rather than deflating the antagonistic forces he faced” (400). The postbellum process of creating black “Gargantuan figures” was dependent on “the growth of a more pronounced Western orientation, the decline of the sacred universe, and the growth of the individualist ethos among black Americans” (401). Levine’s definition of the conventional white hero as an inflated individual has much in common with conventional definitions of classical heroism such as that expressed by the Classicist C.M. Bowra. Bowra declares that Heracles merits the label “hero” because “he stands above and beyond human standards and embodies a terrific force which brings him close to the gods” (119).

Given the anxiety in Morrison's novels about the American culture of individualism, her own scepticism about self-aggrandizing notions of the heroic comes as no surprise. It is interesting to compare observations she makes in her "Rootedness" essay on the changing nature of autobiography with Levine's analysis. She writes:

The autobiographical form is classic in [. . .] Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, 'my single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe'. [. . .] The contemporary autobiography tends to be 'how I got over—look at me—alone—let me show you how I did it.' It is inimical [. . .] to some of the characteristics of Black artistic expression and influence. ("Rootedness" 340-41)

Whereas Levine simply charts the changes in perceptions of heroism, Morrison is explicitly critical of them.

At the centre of the novelist's revision of dominant cultural versions of the heroic is the fact that her understanding of the term "representative" is directly at odds with Emerson's classically-influenced use of the same term. The nineteenth-century essayist values "great men" because they possess a distinctive quality or ideal that *can be* represented; this is an ideal that sets them apart from the rest of humanity, like Bowra's Heracles. But when Morrison uses the same term, for example when she praises classic black autobiography for depicting "a balanced life" that "is both solitary and representative" ("Rootedness" 340), she values not that which sets a character apart from the group but that which he or she shares with it. And Levine understands the word in exactly this way when he explains the popularity of the black folkloric hero,

John Henry. “John Henry’s epic contest is never purely individual. He is a representative figure whose life is symbolic of the struggle of worker against machine, [. . .] the lowly against the powerful, black against white”, he writes (427). The steel driver’s heroic appeal rests on the fact that despite his many triumphs over adversity he is still like everybody else, whereas *Love*’s Bill Cosey is glorified in word and paint for the qualities that make him different from everybody else.

There is a paradoxical element to Levine’s claim for John Henry, or to Morrison’s demand that black heroes be both “solitary and representative” (“Rootedness” 341). The novelist appears freely to acknowledge this paradox in her Afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, where she writes that in her account of Pecola’s life she “chose a unique situation, not a representative one. [. . .] But singular as Pecola’s life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls” (169).⁹ This apparent conflict between distinctiveness and representativeness is resolved in the novels in ways which simultaneously revise definitions of the heroic as “unique”. For example, the author for the most part eschews plots centring on a single protagonist; it is not possible to isolate a dominating “hero” in *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby*, the trilogy or *Love*. And even where there is a clear central character — Milkman in *Song of*

⁹ Morrison expresses the paradox similarly in a 1980 interview: “The impetus for writing *The Bluest Eye* in the first place was to write a book about a kind of person who was never in literature anywhere. [. . .] So I wanted to write a book that — if a child ever picked it up — would look representational” (Taylor-Guthrie 89). The potential for conflict between singularity and representativeness (as Levine and Morrison define it) is clearly a fraught subject in African-American literary history: Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is no sooner labelled “a young hero of the people” than the Brotherhood plot to bring him down on the grounds that he has become an egotistical traitor to the cause (*Invisible Man* 302). And several decades earlier, George S. Schuyler’s “Instructions for Contributors” to the “Negro press” make the nonsensical demand that while “the heroine should always be beautiful and desirable” and “the hero should be of the he-man type”, nonetheless “these characters must [. . .] be just ordinary folks such as the reader has met” (Gates, *Signifying* 179).

Solomon for example — she avoids naming her novel after that character and thus diverges from the convention of Greek tragedy's *Ajax*, *Hecuba*, *Medea* and so on.¹⁰ Even more significant is the fact that, unlike *The Oresteia* or *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Morrison's trilogy does not focus on the destiny of successive generations in a single family. Instead, in asserting that accounts of the apparently disparate lives of Sethe and her family, the Traces, and the Founding Fathers of Ruby nonetheless constitute a whole, the author emphasizes collective rather than individual experience. The characters' life stories are at once distinctive and part of a shared history or a communal inheritance.

In arguing that Morrison redefines "heroism" I am not, of course, suggesting that she does not value the virtues that are conventionally termed "heroic" such as courage and endurance; many of her characterizations prove that the opposite is true. But the fact that her assessment of valuable and "inimical" forms of autobiography is part of the well-known essay stressing the importance of "the ancestor as foundation" sheds light on the way her novels valorize reverence for and connectedness with the "ancestor" — a localized representative of the past such as Pilate or Baby Suggs — instead of an abstract worship of hegemonically-imposed heroes. The impulse in her work that transforms history from a paean to the deeds of great men, or a mythology of demigods' exploits, to a quest and respect for ancestral experience and knowledge, encapsulates her revisionary perspective on the classically-influenced phenomenon that is American historiography as a whole.

¹⁰ *Sula* is the obvious exception to this rule; interestingly, it is the novel most explicitly concerned with notions of heroic individualism. The title *Beloved* of course refers to the character Beloved but is also a collective title, referring to a preacher's congregation and the community of Morrison's readers.

In *Paradise*, Richard Misner expresses a frustration for the Founding Fathers' obsessive mythologizing of their glorious history which expresses Morrison's critique of the tendencies of the dominant culture itself. The minister is tired of his people reminiscing "[a]s though past heroism was enough of a future to look for. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates" (161); likewise Morrison expresses disaffection for the building of monuments, the striking of medals, and the representation of heroes' heads on coins. Her novels' perspective on national heroic mythology recalls the closing lines of Robert Hayden's sonnet "Frederick Douglass", in which the poet urges that his hero be "remembered" not through America's traditional neoclassical gestures, but through actual political change:

Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,

Not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,

But with the lives grown out of his life, the lives

Fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing. (Hayden 62)

As I demonstrate in the following discussion, it is through a revisionary, anti-hagiographic deployment of classical myth, legend and cultural practice that Morrison subjects the defining themes of America's history — its early settlement, its independent nationhood, its system of slavery and ensuing Civil War, and its black population's continuing struggle for civil rights — to a radical process of "rememory".¹¹

¹¹ The now well-known term "rememory" was first coined, as both a noun and verb, by Morrison in *Beloved*, for example where Denver says, "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (36), or where Sethe asks Beloved, "You rememory me?" (215). It has since become a common critical term used to describe the novelist's processes of re-presenting the past.

II.ii “Discovery” and Early Settlement

In her essay, “The Fabulous World of Toni Morrison: *Tar Baby*”, Eleanor Traylor expounds the various classical connotations of the name “Valerian”. “A farmer”, Valerian “was Roman emperor from A.D. 253-260”; the name “derives from the Latin proper noun Valerius, the name of a Roman clan”; and a related verb is “*valeo*”, which can mean both “I am strong” and “I bid farewell” (138). The critic also points out that the Isle des Chevaliers is a “highly symbolic setting (a virgin world raped by the machinations of man)” (138). But she neither asserts nor analyses the important connection between Valerian’s associations with Ancient Rome and his colonialist act of buying and settling “an island in the Caribbean for almost nothing” (*Tar Baby* 50). The examination of the role of classical tradition in motivating, justifying and glorifying European “discovery” and conquest of the “New World” that Morrison begins in *Tar Baby* and expands upon in *Love* forms a crucial part of her revision of American history, but until now it has been ignored by scholarship.

The fact that Morrison locates *Tar Baby* in the region where Columbus first encountered what he called the “West Indies”, and sets *Love* on the coast that was explored by De Soto and Ponce de León (and later settled by Walter Raleigh and John Smith) indicates her continuing interest in mythologized versions of the nation’s origins.¹² While the wealthy industrialist Valerian

¹² Several reviews of *Love* — for example Kakutani’s in the *New York Times* — perceive an affinity between the new novel and *Tar Baby*, but none specifically mentions the works’ shared interest in processes of colonization.

clearly embodies the fulfilment of the American dreams of prosperity and power, the affinity between Cosey's life story and narratives of national identity is even stronger. Given the fact that he creates a "fabulous, successful resort" described as a "paradise" and as a "fairytale that lived on even after the hotel was dependent for its life on the people it once excluded" (42), the character demands to be read as an allegorical representation of America itself. His marriage to the child-bride Heed is an exaggerated (and racially transposed) version of Valerian's union with Margaret; Margaret, though describing herself as a "child bride", is at seventeen some six years older on her wedding day than is Cosey's wife on hers (*Tar Baby* 23). Morrison associates Heed less explicitly with the American landscape or wilderness than she does her forerunner, who when Valerian first notices her (appearing on a float with a polar bear) is marketed as "the Principal Beauty of Maine" (*Tar Baby* 33, 14). But the fact that the girl in the later novel comes from an area known as "the Settlement" suggests that on one level she does represent the colonized land (*Love* 53). Cosey's relationship with Heed is a parodic version of the configuration of America as an innocent virgin despoiled by the all-conquering hero that is something of a refrain in the national literature.

Numerous critics have documented the omnipresence of this configuration in America's self-defining mythology; many also share Morrison's interest in the various uses to which classical tradition has been put in constructing paradigms of New World conquest. In *The Lay of the Land* (1975), for example, Annette Kolodny infers from her analyses of discovery narratives, Crèvecoeur, Cooper and Fitzgerald (among others) that "the single dominating metaphor" of "the land as woman" comprises both "the regressive

pull of maternal containment” and “the seductive invitation to sexual assertion” (6, 67). Meanwhile, Louise Westling’s *The Green Breast of the New World* (1996) adopts a more ecocritical approach to what she calls “the strange combination of eroticism and misogyny” that characterizes narratives of America’s creation (5).¹³ While neither woman focuses primarily on the influence of the classics, both do discuss the role of the pastoral tradition in shaping attitudes to the colonizing process. In addition, although not particularly concerned by the gender politics of their subject matter, Martin Snyder’s 1976 essay, “The Hero in the Garden: Classical Contributions to the Early Images of America” and John Shields’s *American Aeneas* provide detailed analyses of the engagement with Virgilian and Ovidian representations of the Golden Age that typified the “New World promotional literature” (Shields 26).¹⁴

While these male critics’ discussion of Peter Martyr, Richard Hakluyt, George Chapman and others makes little of what Nina Baym has called “the sexual definition” of American experience (225), it is perhaps more surprising that Kolodny’s and Westling’s studies do not address more directly the specific

¹³ In her recent doctoral thesis, “Shuttles in the Rocking Loom of History”, Jenny Terry demonstrates that Morrison interrogates the same constructions of the American male in relation to the American landscape in *Song of Solomon* (Terry 53-54).

¹⁴ See Kolodny 4-22 for her discussion of the role of pastoralism in colonization. She writes that “a uniquely American pastoral vocabulary” involves a “yearning to know and to respond to the landscape as feminine” (8). Westling observes (with some tautology):

When the Europeans first encountered the immense new continents of North and South America, they naturally projected familiar expectations upon what they saw before them: mythical conceptions of the Golden World from Hesiod, Edenic visions from Judeo-Christian culture, pastoral expectations from the Classics. (33)

On the echoes of depictions of the Golden Age in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Virgil’s *Eclogues* in accounts of the Americas, Martin Snyder quotes, for example, Peter Martyr’s description of the inhabitants of the New World: “they seeme to live in that golden worlde of which olde writers speake so much” (151). According to Kolodny, in their narrative of 1584 Arthur Barlowe and Philip Amadas describe the natives they encounter as those “such as live after the manner of the golden age” (10). For Shields’s discussion of the classicism of discovery narratives see *American Aeneas* 3-8. For a discussion of pastoral influences on accounts of Daniel Boone’s settlement of Kentucky, see Slotkin, *Regeneration* 269-94.

configuration of colonization as rape. Kolodny does observe at the outset that early explorers repeatedly described the “maydenhead” or “Virgin Beauties” of the “new” continent, and ends with the warning that “we can no longer afford to keep turning ‘America the Beautiful’ into ‘*America the Raped*’” (12, 148; italics in original). But neither she nor Westling make any mention of works such as William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* (1925), to which notions of America’s discovery as a heroic rape are pivotal, or of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), which parodies the same paradigm. My concern here is to show that Morrison’s *Love* comprises new perspectives on the literary and critical traditions that precede it; it does so both by redirecting our attention to the centrality of rape in conceptions of America’s origins and by highlighting the influence of Roman tradition on these acts and representations of conquest.

It is not just through Cosey’s quasi-paedophilic relationship with Heed that the author engages with classic depictions of colonization. The whole work is unified by acts of rape and anxiety about rape. Early in the novel we encounter the graphically-described gang rape of Pretty-Fay, brought to an end only by Romen’s apparently inexplicable decision to rescue the girl instead of joining in. Later we find out that the Administrator of June’s “Correctional” molested her, and also that the collapse of Christine’s relationship with a Civil Rights agitator, Fruit, was precipitated by his failure to react appropriately when “somebody raped one of the student volunteers” (178). Interestingly, in a post-publication interview on BBC Radio 4’s *Start the Week*, Morrison stated that the image of the tied-down hands of the violated Pretty-Fay was her starting

point in writing the novel.¹⁵ And in the same interview, she made an observation about conventional literary treatments of rape that gives crucial weight to my argument about her concern with classicism in *Love*.

In response to a question about the way she makes terrible events beautiful, the author said the following:

I've read rape scenes all my life — but they always seemed to have no shame. [. . .] There was this male pride attached to it, in the language.

[My writing] took it out of the realm of the fake, sensational romanticism in which rape is always played. We all say 'Oh my God, rape', but when you look at the language, it's the language of pride.

There is something about it, from the rape of Lucretia all the way on — so I just wanted to sabotage all of that. (*Start the Week*)

These observations followed a reference to Cholly's assault on Pecola, but given that most of the programme was devoted to a discussion of *Love*, I think it is fair to assume Morrison had her last novel in mind as well as the first. My question is, why does she make specific mention of the Lucretia legend here? If she wanted an example of the oldest or earliest act of rape in classical tradition, she would surely have mined Greek instead of Roman lore. Instead, she cites the quasi-historical story of the rape committed by the son of the last king of Rome. My conviction is that her allusion to the Lucretia story sheds important light on *Love*'s exploration of the multiple roles played by classicism in the colonization of America. Morrison indisputably infuses the new novel with a

¹⁵ Illustrating her creative process, Morrison said, "the little white-mitten hands in *Love* – that was the first thing I saw" (*Start the Week*). It is essential to state at this point that in exploring the symbolic meanings of the rapes in *Love*, I am not implying that they are not important or meaningful on a literal level. Morrison is of course concerned with the politics of actual rape; to suggest that her accounts are merely allusions or allegories would in fact be to replicate the misogynist practices of the very writers whom she seeks to counter.

general “Romanness”, for example through the fact that “Gibbons”, the surname of Romen’s grandparents, connotes the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1766-88).¹⁶ And to bear in mind the author’s interest in the Lucretia legend is to see that her description of her young protagonist on the verge of participating in the gang rape connotes not just a classic *conquistador* but also a Tarquin: “his belt unbuckled, anticipation ripe, he was about to become the Romen he’d always known he was: chiseled, dangerous, loose” (46).

In *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (1982), Ian Donaldson elucidates the various associations between the Lucretia story and Roman politics.¹⁷ The assaulted noblewoman functions on one level as a symbol of an annexed territory: she is “the figure of violated Rome”, and “the rape epitomizes the wider tyranny of the Tarquins” (9). “If Rome is like Lucretia, Lucretia is also like Rome and her neighbouring cities”, Donaldson continues. “Tarquin lays siege to her in much the same spirit as he besieges Ardea” (9). Thus there exists a compelling analogy between Lucretia’s symbolic role and the conception of America as a despoiled young girl that Morrison parodies through Heed.

There is also a literary precedent for the association of Lucretia with American colonization. Donaldson observes that the “correspondences” between Tarquin’s rape and his family’s aggressive foreign policies “become

¹⁶ We can assume from the account of Soaphead Church’s reading in *The Bluest Eye* that Morrison has read Gibbon: Soaphead “noticed Gibbon’s acidity, but not his tolerance” (134).

¹⁷ Regrettably for my project, for the most part Donaldson limits his study of the recurring representations of the Lucretia myth to European literature and culture. The only consideration he gives to the story’s significance in America is in regard to the appeal in that country of the role played by Lucius Junius Brutus in bringing about the Roman republic following Tarquin’s rape (103-18). I discuss this further at the start of II.iii, “The Colonies and the New Nation”.

particularly prominent in Shakespeare's version of the story" (9), and quotes the Elizabethan's description of the victim's naked body: "Her breasts, like ivory globes circled with blue, / A pair of maiden worlds unconquered" (Donaldson 117). The scholar does not suggest that Shakespeare is comparing Lucretia specifically to the "maiden world" of sixteenth-century America, but given the excitement surrounding the settlement of the new continent at the time of Shakespeare's writing, such an interpretation seems justified. In turn, Morrison's association between Romen and Tarquin (together with the implied affinities between Pretty-Fay, Heed, Lucretia and the American continent) exemplifies the palimpsest-like writing that is a feature of all her novels. It is this that enables her simultaneously to disrupt both the dominant myths of America's past and the ways in which those myths are constructed.

Morrison claims that her writing "took [rape] out of the fake, sensational romanticism in which [it] is always played" (*Start the Week*). Analysis of both *Tar Baby* and *Love* reveals a corresponding interest in taking accounts of the colonization of the Americas out of the fake romantic pastoralism in which it is so often played. While Todorov observes that the chivalric romances were "the conquistadors' favourite reading" (129), and Slotkin notes that Dryden's plays about the conquest of Mexico combine "the terms and conventions of Augustan tragic drama" with those of "the chivalric romance and the arcadian myth" (*Regeneration* 239), Morrison has Heed observe of her father's attitude to her marriage to Cosey, "Daddy knew a true romance when he saw it" (62). Given that L informs us the girl's parents were glad to be rid of her "*for who knew how much money changed hands*", Heed's version of events stands as an ironic

exposure of the insidious capacity of “romance” to disguise both individual and historical realities (138; italics in original).

In *Tar Baby* the author portrays Valerian’s posed pastoralism in a similarly unsympathetic light. Having destroyed the natural surroundings in order to settle the island and build his house, the industrialist spends his time in his greenhouse, where he lovingly cultivates hydrangeas and “Magnum Rex peonies” (10). Through this character whose name recalls a farmer who was emperor of Rome (Traylor 138), the author satirizes the tradition of engaging the conventions of classical pastoralism in accounts of a process that involved indiscriminate destruction of the natural world.

The canonical texts associated with the colony at Jamestown, Virginia comprise an especially striking example of settlers and historians deploying the classics to justify and dignify the act of transforming the wilderness into settled territory. “The *Agricola* of Tacitus stands behind the encomium upon Captain John Smith, entitled *The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia*” (1612), observes M. E. Bradford (7), while Shields notes that Smith, describing his own project in his *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624), writes that “he *Vulcan* like did forge a true plantation” (xl; italics in original). And given the engagement with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that exists throughout Morrison’s novels, it is of particular relevance to this study that George Sandys translated the Roman poem “during the time that he served as treasurer to John Smith’s Virginia Company” (Shields 9). According to Richard Beale Davis, Sandys’s dedication of the 1626 edition to King Charles I describes the work as “*Sprung from the Stocke of the ancient Romanes, but bred in the New-world*” (*Poet-Adventurer* 203). The 1632 edition, furthermore, is replete with commentaries

that directly connect Ovid's writing with the colonizer's experiences in Virginia.¹⁸ As Shields observes, the seventeenth-century writer "transforms his translation into something distinctly American when he explains Ovid's text in terms of the American (Virginian) environs" (37).

In Shields's opinion, the fact that Sandys was actually living and working in the new Virginia colony while translating "a major part" of the Latin poem "serves as a compelling and attractive metaphor for what actually was occurring as a result of European intervention in the New World" (71). The critic also draws attention to (but does not analyse) the fact that Sandys entitled his editions *Metamorphosis* rather than *Metamorphoses* (10); presumably, through insisting on the singular form the translator wished to emphasize the notion of Virginia's settlement as a kind of miraculous transformation. Such a myth of origins is indeed "compelling and attractive" (Shields 71), but to represent the annexation of the Americas as a magical, natural or divinely-ordained process akin to the processes with which Ovid is concerned is to obscure political reality.¹⁹ *Tar Baby* both draws attention to and counteracts such ideologically-motivated classicism.

Martin Snyder has observed that many details from the account of the Golden Age in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* "were echoed in early accounts of America" (148). The description of "the Ages of Mankind" in that poem

¹⁸ It is not impossible that Morrison is familiar with George Sandys's 1632 *Metamorphosis* since it was republished by Garland in New York in 1976.

¹⁹ Politically-engaged analysis of the role of *The Metamorphoses* in the colonization of America is conspicuous by its absence. For example, neither of the contributors to Charles Martindale's *Ovid Renewed* (1988) who discuss George Sandys's translation take adequate account of the cultural implications of that text in its American context: in "Ovid and the Elizabethans" Laurence Lerner discusses Sandys but makes no mention of his role in the Virginia company (121-22), while in "Daedalus and Icarus from the Renaissance to the Present Day" Niall Rudd writes only that "it is pleasant to recall that the earliest piece of English verse written on the North American continent was a translation of Ovid" (38).

immediately follows that of “The Creation”, in which “whatever god it was” transformed “Chaos” into a kind of paradise (*Met.* I.1-114). By contrast, the first description of the Isle des Chevaliers in *Tar Baby* — in its account of the way human settlement destroyed the natural environment — comprises a kind of creation myth in reverse. As part of what Morrison calls “the end of the world”, the river on the island “crested, then lost its course, then finally its head. [. . . It] ran every which way [. . .] until exhausted, ill and grieving, it slowed to a stop just twenty leagues short of the sea” (*Tar Baby* 7). This depiction of the waterway’s fate exactly inverts the way in *Metamorphoses* the Creator “rivers hemmed in winding banks to flow, / Which [. . .] sometimes [. . .] reach the sea / And [. . .] / With new-found freedom beat upon the shores” (I.40-44). Similarly, while Ovid’s god “bade [. . .] the forest trees / Don their green leaves” (I.46-47), in Morrison’s novel “the men had gnawed through the daisy trees until, wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground” (*Tar Baby* 8). Morrison’s revision of the classical creation myth leaves no doubt that the colonization of the Americas was less a process of miraculous metamorphosis than an act of deliberate and destructive domination.²⁰

Two notorious rapes in *The Metamorphoses* are Tereus’s of Philomela (to which Shakespeare refers in both *The Rape of Lucrece* and the “Roman” play, *Titus Andronicus*), and Pluto’s of Proserpina. Several critics — including myself in the earlier pages of this thesis — have discussed *The Bluest Eye*’s

²⁰ In “Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*: Re-figuring the Colonizer’s Aesthetics”, Malin Lavon Walther argues that “Morrison places the tar-baby text in corrective counterpoint to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*”, and that the novel thereby “confronts idealist readings of *The Tempest* in which the play functions as a tool in legitimating the Western discourse of power” (137-38).

engagement with the myths of Philomela and of Proserpina or Kora in its depiction of Pecola's fate. Given that *Love* shares with Morrison's first novel the thematic concern with rape, it is unsurprising that the author also returns to the Kora paradigm in the most recent work. While in *The Bluest Eye* she never mentions her mythological types by name, in *Love* she makes a crucial punning allusion. May writes to Christine (about the activities of the Congress of Racial Equality) that "CORE is sitting-in in Chicago" (96); in her ignorance, Christine asks, "Who was she, this Cora?" (96).²¹ The way the young woman turns "CORE" into "Cora" reflects the way the Greek "Kore" becomes the anglicized "Kora", thus intensifying the classical resonances of the sexual violence in the novel. The homophonic wordplay also brings to mind William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920) – a work by an author whose prose as a whole epitomizes the kind of "male pride" in writing about rape and about the discovery and conquest of America that Morrison sets out to "sabotage" in *Love (Start the Week)*.²²

The fact that the African-American writer selects a quotation from Williams's "Adam" as an epigraph to the third chapter of *Playing in the Dark* suggests both her familiarity with and her antagonism towards his work (63).

Love comprises a revisionary perspective on the male author akin to the

But no critic has considered Morrison's deployment of the role of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in American colonization.

²¹ Morrison may be signposting such an interpretation through the detail that "it was as though May wrote in code" (*Love* 96). The Demeter/Kore myth is an apt frame of reference for May and Christine's relationship not least because, as Hirsch points out, "the Homeric 'Hymn to Demeter' is [. . .] not only the story of intense mother-daughter attachment and separation, but also the story of both the mother's and the daughter's reactions and responses" (34-35).

²² There are of course several "Coras" in African-American literature to whom Morrison may simultaneously be alluding. These include the desperately downtrodden but morally courageous eponymous heroine of Langston Hughes's short story, "Cora Unashamed" (1934), and the Cora in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a "mulatto woman" with whom Kabnis indulges in a night of sexual frolics (1161). Neither of these figures illuminate *Love*'s thematic concern with rape, however, in the way that the Greek Kore and Williams's *Kora in Hell* do.

dialogue that certain passages in the Morrisonian oeuvre establish with Eugene O'Neill or Ezra Pound; this intertextuality exemplifies the novelist's engagement with classic American writers who themselves deploy classical tradition.²³ Williams's attempt (in *Kora*) to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable ancient world and modern America — “Herakles rowing boats on Berry's Creek! Zeus is a country doctor without a taste for coin-jingling” (60) — would of course be of interest to Morrison. And to some extent he and she share a desire to undermine the conservative role that the dominant culture has demanded of classicism. “Of course history is an attempt to make the past seem stable and of course it's all a lie”, declares Williams. “Nero must mean Nero or the game's up” (*Kora* 41). But *Kora in Hell's* unifying premise — an association between the raped goddess and the poetic imagination, America, and even Williams himself — encapsulates much that Morrison's most recent novel sets out to counter.

As in *In the American Grain*, rape is the structuring motif of *Kora*, and in both works it is somehow at once necessary and glorious. The *Improvisations* are punctuated by allusions to sexual violence and its victims that are cheerfully glib in tone: “(Oh quarrel whether 'twas Pope Clement raped Persephone or—did the devil wear a mitre in that year?)” (41), or, “Think of some lady better than Rackham draws them: [. . .] some Lucretia out of the Vatican turned

²³ The blatant “Africanism” of certain passages in Williams's work — such as his “The Advent of the Slaves” chapter in *In the American Grain* — makes him a prime target for Morrison (*Grain* 208-11). The excerpt from Williams's “Adam” which Morrison quotes in *Playing in the Dark* reads:

But there was
a special hell besides
where black women lie waiting
for a boy— (*Playing* 61).

Carmelite” (42). Of particular relevance to *Love* and its group assault of Pretty-Fay is the fact that Williams writes excitedly about a gang rape:

The ground lifts and out sally the heroes of Sophokles, of Aeschylus. They go seeping down into our hearts, [. . .] down—to a saloon back of the rail-road where they have that girl, you know, the one that should have been Venus by the lust that’s in her. They’ve got her down there among the railroad men. [. . .] Up to jail—or call it down to Limbo—the Chief of Police our Pluto. [. . .] *When they came to question the girl before the local judge it was discovered that there were seventeen men more or less involved, so that there was nothing to do but to declare the child a common bastard and send the girl about her business.* (*Kora* 60-61; italics in original)

In this passage, the abrupt shift from the formal tenor of the first two sentences to the colloquialism beginning with “to a saloon back of the rail-road” suggests that the author finds something distinctively “American”, something that helps him find his idiom, about the gang rape. The episode comprises an extreme example of the “rape scene” that “seems to have no shame” about which Morrison complained on Radio 4 (*Start the Week*), and it epitomizes the fusion of classicism, Americanism and sexual violence that is parodied in *Love*.

The representation of the colonization of America as a sexual act — a tradition within which Morrison ironically inscribes Bill Cosey — is more explicit in *In the American Grain* than in *Kora in Hell*. In his chapter on Christopher Columbus, Williams describes the discovered land as a “ravished” flower (*Grain* 7), while he later depicts Walter Raleigh “plunging his lust into the body of a new world” (59). The section on De Soto comprises the most

extreme depiction of the land as female; here Florida is personified as an alluring seductress, “She”, who ensnares the Spaniards in her “caresses” and the “onwash of [her] passion” (50, 53). Is it just a coincidence that in *Love*, a novel set in Florida in which L refers explicitly to the conquering Spaniards naming part of the shore “Sucra” (8), the car that the school principal abandons at the Settlement is a “DeSoto”? (54).

Williams sums up *Grain*'s organizing principle in the chapter on Edgar Allan Poe, where (in an ambitious conflation of a literary conqueror with a literal one) he asserts, “One is forced on the conception of the New World as a woman. Poe was a new De Soto” (220).²⁴ Both the passive construct, “one is forced”, and the claim that Poe made an “immaculate attack” on the body of America typify the way the dominant culture at once glorifies the notion of American settlement as rape while insisting that colonization was a guiltless, impersonal process of metamorphosis rather than an outrageous violation (*Grain* 220). This doubleness reappears in *Love* in the apparent contradiction between Romen's heroic conception of the attack on Pretty-Fay (and on sexual predatoriness in general) and Cosey's insistence on the innocence of his behaviour towards Heed.²⁵ And a final affinity between *Love* and *Kora in Hell* is the fact that the author of the second work here declares his preference for the Romans over the Greeks. “The ferment was always richer in Rome”, Williams

²⁴ Both Edgar Allan Poe's real-life marriage to the thirteen-year old Virginia Clemm and many of his short stories resonate in the plot and the gothic melodrama of *Love*. Morrison explicitly takes Poe to task for his “Africanism” in *Playing in the Dark* (31-54).

²⁵ In addition to their widespread celebration of rape, Williams's prose works are punctuated by an interest in Cosey-and-Heed-style relationships. “Marry in middle life and take the young thing home”, advocates *Kora in Hell* (39), while *The Great American Novel* mocks a community's moral outrage: “What do you think! He has left his wife, and a child in the high school has been ill a week, weeping her eyes out and murmuring his name. Is it not terrible?” (180).

writes. “[T]he dispersive explosion was always nearer, the influence carried further and remained hot longer” (12). His implication is that Rome has had greater influence on America than has Greece, and he thereby subscribes fully to the belief in an analogy between his country and the ancient imperial power that Morrison takes to task through the Romanness of Romen and his world.

Ultimately, however, Morrison makes the young protagonist of *Love* a counterpoint to the tradition in which Williams writes by both associating and disassociating her character from that genealogy. In refusing to join in the gang rape, Romen (in spite of himself) sets himself apart from the prototypical classic and American hero. On the verge of participating, he believes he is about to fulfil the ideal of glorious manhood, and in rescuing the girl he feels in his shame that “it was the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiseled, dangerous one” (49). Through sadistic sex with June he thinks that he has redeemed himself from his earlier humiliation, but at his moment of *anagnorisis* that precedes his rescuing of Christine and Heed, he realizes that “the old Romen, the sniveling one who couldn’t help untying shoelaces from an unwilling girl’s wrists, was hipper than the one who couldn’t help flinging a girl around an attic” (195). Thus the real Romen does indeed “sabotage” the all-conquering, sexually predatory American archetype, and Morrison is successful in her aim to “sabotage” the “male pride” in conventional representations of rape (*Start the Week*).

Even Bill Cosey himself finally functions both to critique and transform the paradigm of heroic sexual violence. For while he is unquestionably a morally problematic figure, in that (among other transgressions) he fondles the unmarried Heed’s breast and masturbates in Christine’s bedroom, Morrison

implies that he does not in fact rape Heed. In old age, his widow recalls with pleasure that on her wedding night there had been “[n]o penetration. No Blood”, and that instead Cosey had lovingly bathed her (77). So, while in *Paradise* the author allows the possibility of a better future by giving the men of Ruby the chance to redeem themselves, in *Love* she achieves the same effect by finally saving her protagonists from committing the classic, classically-associated crimes. The positioning of Romen and Cosey at once within and without the tradition of glorious rape — one of America’s most entrenched self-defining paradigms — is a crucial means by which she fulfils in her own fiction the aims of her critical practice: “to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest” (*Playing* 3).

II.iii The Colonies and The New Nation

In his analysis of the various political implications of the Lucretia legend, Ian Donaldson highlights the symbolic importance that the role of Lucius Junius Brutus has come to hold (103-18). In shifting the tale’s focus onto the part played by this man — who incited his companions to the avenging deposition of the Tarquins and who became one of the first two consuls of the ensuing Republic — “the story takes on a different aspect, emerging as a powerful myth of revolution” (Donaldson 104). It is unsurprising, therefore, that this “Brutus the First”, as the playwright Vittorio Alfieri named him, appealed widely to

revolutionary Americans; Alfieri dedicated his play *Bruto Primo* to George Washington in 1789 (Donaldson 109).²⁶

Donaldson points out an affinity between the symbolic importance of Brutus the First and that of the republican martyr, Cato, who committed suicide rather than submit to the rule of Julius Caesar (147). As many scholars of early American classicism observe, Joseph Addison's play of 1713, *Cato*, was held in great esteem during the American Revolutionary and early Republican eras. The play appealed to American audiences as a "mirror of their struggles against tyranny" (Winterer 25).²⁷ The Founding Fathers' identification with political heroes of the ancient world is symptomatic of the unwavering belief in their project's analogical relationship to both the Athenian Democracy and the Roman Republic that many scholars have documented.²⁸ Just as in *Love* Morrison examines the role of classicism in the history of America's discovery and conquest, in *Paradise* she explores the ideological implications of the new nation's claim to Greek and Roman precedents. The fact that she names one of Ruby's nine original families "Cato" exemplifies this concern and epitomizes her method. Through Patricia Cato, who burns the family trees, through Billie

²⁶ Lucius Junius Brutus is known as "Brutus I" in order to distinguish him from the later Marcus Junius Brutus, co-assassin with Cassius of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. As I have already indicated, Donaldson confines the majority of his study to a consideration of the significance of the Lucretia legend in Europe rather than America. For example, he discusses at some length the success of the 1790 revival, in France, of Voltaire's 1730 play *Brutus* (108). But Donaldson does include the detail that in dedicating his *Bruto Primo* to George Washington, Vittorio Alfieri wrote that "the name of the deliverer of America alone can stand in the title-page of the tragedy of the deliverer of Rome" (109). Carl Richard attests to the appeal that Brutus held to both Samuel Adams (99) and John Adams (65-66); for example, in 1771 Samuel Adams raised "the independent spirit of [Lucius] Brutus, who, to his immortal honour, expelled the proud Tarquin of Rome" (99).

²⁷ Winterer writes, "[*Cato*] was even performed by George Washington's soldiers at Valley Forge in the long winter of 1777-78" (*Culture* 25). For other discussions of *Cato* see Richard 58 and Shields 174-93. Garry Wills discusses the significance of both Voltaire's *Brutus* and Addison's *Cato* (125).

²⁸ Carl Richard writes, "The founders' principal Roman heroes were Cato the younger, Brutus, Cassius, and Cicero, statesmen who had sacrificed their lives in unsuccessful attempts to save the Republic in its expiring moments" (57).

Delia, who leaves town altogether, and through the fact that Catos are no longer represented in the school nativity play, the author exposes the disparity between reality and both the Ruben and the national Founders' aspirations.

In *Paradise* Morrison combines classically-named characters (Juvenal, Cato, Pallas, Seneca, Apollo) with those bearing traditional Puritan names (Wisdom, Able, Pious) and with those named for the Revolutionary heroes (Jefferson, James, Thomas). Besides illuminating the author's exploration of the new nation's identification with Greece and Rome, in this section I also briefly highlight her interest in the self-conscious classicism of the later Puritans. And at the end of this discussion I analyse the analogy she both constructs and deconstructs — in *Tar Baby* and in *Love* as well as in *Paradise* — between more recent dominant American culture and Imperial Rome.

While several critics have discussed the obvious analogies between Ruby and the Puritan settlements, none has drawn attention to Morrison's interest in the Puritan recourse to Roman culture.²⁹ This may be because the Puritans' classicism, and in particular that of their greatest myth-maker, Cotton Mather, is not part of the common knowledge or lore that surrounds them. Richard Slotkin exemplifies the conventional wisdom in suggesting that the epic poet Roger Wolcott was exceptional for "ignoring Cotton Mather's strictures against the use of pagan mythologies" (*Regeneration* 206); the critic does not, however, comment on the irony that Mather's own work is infused with "pagan" history and mythology. Conversely, building on the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, John Shields points out that while the author of *Magnolia*

²⁹ Key essays exploring Morrison's engagement with the history of the Puritans and the Founding Fathers in *Paradise* include those by Dalsgard, Jill Jones, and Widdowson; none of these, however, mentions Morrison's interest in classicism's role.

Christi Americana (1702) “repeatedly denounces the myth of Aeneas as pagan, heathenish, erroneous, even an abomination”, the extent of the “borrowings from Vergil’s *Aeneid*” that punctuate the work mean that “his stubborn denials finally fail to convince” (58). My own contention with regard to *Paradise* is that in this novel Morrison engages not just the notorious Salem Witch Trials of 1692, and not just (through the endless mythopoeia of Ruby’s Founding Fathers) what Bercovitch calls the generalized “implicit mythicizing” by Mather in *Magnalia* (Shields 57). Through the very precise phrasing with which the Morgan brothers and others make their history legendary, she also specifically parodies Mather’s insistence on the parallels between the Puritan mission and that of Aeneas. And this is one of the many means by which she problematizes (in Shields’s title phrase) “the classical origins of the American self”.

Steward Morgan is enraged by the young Rubyites’ desire to change the motto on the Oven because their radicalism reveals how “they had no notion of what it took to build this town. What they were protected from. What humiliations they did not have to face” (*Paradise* 93). His sense of his ancestors’ unique triumph over adversity recalls the description of Ruby on the fifth page of the novel as “the one all-black town worth the pain” (5). Both the phrases “what it took to build this town” and “the one all-black town worth the pain”, though only occurring once each, are at once epic and clichéd in tone, sounding as though they are often repeated in the Fathers’ endless reinforcement of their sense of exceptional provenance. The words also resonate as distorted echoes of the phrases that Cotton Mather in turn borrows from *The Aeneid* to convey his sense of the Puritans’ exceptional provenance.

As Shields points out, the title page of *Magnalia*'s first book reads (in Latin) "So much labor did it cost to establish a people for Christ", which is "an obvious adaptation of *The Aeneid* 1, 33: [. . .] 'Of such great effort it was to establish the Roman people'" (Shields 65). And in his introductory section, the Puritan writes that the reader will want to know what (in Latin) "impelled men so distinguished in devotion [. . .] to endure so many misfortunes, to encounter so many hardships"; here Mather is quoting *The Aeneid* almost verbatim, simply changing Virgil's "man" to "men" (Shields 65). Aeneas's astounding effort, devotion (or *pietas*), willingness to make sacrifices, resilience and endurance — all of which inform Mather's sense of Puritan history — also reverberate in Ruby's dominant narratives of "what it took to build this town" (*Paradise* 93).³⁰

But why would Mather's classically-informed insistence on his people's exceptionalism be of particular interest to Morrison? The point that both *Paradise* and American history reveal to be a truism is that exceptionalism goes hand-in-hand with exclusivism and that, in Morrison's own words on her novel, "a paradise based on exclusion carries within it the seeds of its own destruction" (Address, Oxford). Just as the Puritans' rigid missionary convictions resulted in the Salem Witch Trials, and just as the nation has been

³⁰ There are resonances of Mather's obsessive listing of significant individuals (such as the "MANY REVEREND DIVINES (ARRIVING FROM EUROPE TO AMERICA) BY WHOSE EVANGELICAL MINISTRY THE CHURCHES OF NEW ENGLAND HAVE BEEN ILLUMINATED" [Mather 213]) in Patricia's listing of the significant surnames and families in Ruby (see for example *Paradise* 191). Furthermore, Shields notes that Virgil's line, "Of such great effort it was to establish the Roman people", is the closing phrase to the following: "And so they wandered for many years over all the oceans, driven by destiny" (65). The critic asks, "Do the seeds of the American cultural imperative, its Manifest Destiny, lie in the example of Vergil's hero, 'driven by destiny'?" (65). Whether directly or indirectly so, the myth of the founding of Ruby and Haven recalls the classical as well as the Biblical *muthos* of the extensive wanderings that precede the discovery of the destined (or promised) land: "On one's own land you could never be lost the way Big Papa and Big Daddy and all seventy-nine were after leaving Fairly, Oklahoma. On foot and completely lost, they were" (*Paradise* 95).

riven by “the problem of the color-line” ever since Jefferson, Madison and their colleagues decided to restrict the right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” to white males, so Ruby’s assault on the women at the Convent is almost an inevitability (Du Bois, *Souls* v; “Declaration” 3).

Morrison highlights another classical precedent for this exceptionalism that becomes exclusivism through the “utility” that “became a shrine” dominating the town of Ruby: the Oven (103). John Shields argues that Hector’s exhorting Aeneas to take his *Penates* (household gods) and companions on a long journey to found a new city “closely parallels the Puritans’ task of transporting their religion and families across a hostile sea in order to found New Zion” (xxxv). The fifteen founding families of Ruby do not carry with them any *Penates*; instead, they take from Haven to Ruby both their fierce Christianity and the Oven, “carrying the bricks, the hearthstone and its iron plate two hundred and forty miles west” (*Paradise* 6). There is of course some affinity between the Roman *Penates* — who were worshipped in the temple of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth (Phillips) — and the Oven in *Paradise*; Morrison once again engages the general sacredness of the hearth in classical culture that she uses to great effect in *The Bluest Eye* and elsewhere. But there is also a striking and exact analogy between the “brick oven that once sat in the middle of [Haven]” and the *koine hestia* or communal hearth that was housed in the *prytaneion*, the town hall or “symbolic centre” of the Greek polis (*Paradise* 6; Spawforth).

As I shall go on to demonstrate, Morrison establishes surprisingly close parallels between the nature and function of the Oven and the site that was the focus of Greek religious and civic pride. While there is no indication that any

self-conscious classicism motivates the citizens of Ruby in their reverence for their “huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done” (6-7), the analogy is central to the author’s sceptical engagement with the classicism of America’s historical Founding Fathers and their successors. For, while the Oven is evidently modelled on the *koine hestia*, Morrison also repeatedly marks its differences from and the ways it fails to live up to the idealized Greek precedent, and in this way she protests African-American alienation from dominant American culture. And while the Oven (a monument to its people’s exceptionalism) may be “flawlessly designed”, it also monumentalizes the flawedness of the exceptionalist position (*Paradise* 6). Through the exclusivist, sexist ideology that the facility embodies and the corrupted ideals that it comes to represent, Morrison demonstrates that the exceptionalism of both Ruby and of America has affinities with that of classical Athens that simultaneously (and somewhat ironically) cause their downfall.³¹

In the first instance, it is useful to chart the obvious similarities between the Oven and the Greek communal hearth. In his *Athenian Religion: A History* (1996), Robert Parker writes of the *koine hestia* that “[p]ublic guests, both human and divine, were invited to dine there, [. . .] religious processions started from there; magistrates [. . .] derived their authority to perform sacred functions ‘from the common hearth’” (26). And, within the Prytaneion, “the

³¹ Of course there is no single equivalent to Ruby’s shrine among the many neoclassical monuments in Washington DC but there is surely an implied general affinity between them. Morrison’s scepticism about dominant cultural monumentalizing tendencies recalls the assertion of Muriel Rukeyser in her 1938 long poem, *The Book of the Dead*, about an industrial disaster in Western Virginia. Of the irrelevance of the nation’s public self-definitions to suffering individuals, Rukeyser writes: “Words on a monument. / Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough” (65).

flame that burned perpetually on Hestia's altar symbolized the vitality of the civic unit" (Pantel and Zidman 93). In Haven, meanwhile, the Oven originates as a "community 'kitchen'", and "no family needed more than a simple cookstove as long as the Oven was alive, and it always was. [. . .] Even in 1934 when everything else about the town was dying [. . .] the Oven remained alive" (*Paradise* 99, 15). In the early days of Ruby, the Oven functioned "as the meeting place to report on what done or what needed; on illness, birth, deaths, comings and goings" (111), and after baptisms "the blessed and saved [. . .] made their way to the Oven" (103). All these details recall the fact that at the Greek hearth "were enacted the rituals for the admission of newcomers (a baby, a wife, or a slave)" (Pantel and Zidman 111). And while in Ancient Greece "colonists took with them a spark of fire from the hearth in the prytaneion of their mother city as a symbol both of the life of their new foundation and of the source of that new life" (S. Miller 14), Morrison's Founders take their whole Oven with them to their new settlement. Finally, the mythological origins of Ruby's defining monument recall the fact that the Athenian Prytaneion "was allegedly founded by Theseus" (Spawforth).

Close analysis reveals, however, that Morrison does not suggest a simple equivalence between the Oven and the Athenian institution; the specific oppressions to which the African-American community have been subjected have defined the history of their monument in important ways. For example, the idea of the "community 'kitchen'" is "so agreeable" to the men of Haven because it embodies their pride that "none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman's kitchen or nursed a white child", and have therefore been relatively safe from the threat of rape (99). In addition, the Founders of Ruby take their

Oven with them not because they are powerful, wealth-amassing “colonists” but because they are effectively refugees, abandoning a town in a state of collapse. And while in Athens “the prytaneion seems to have served also as a quasi archives”, housing “the laws of Solon” and “statues [. . .] of both historical and allegorical significance for the community” (S. Miller 16-17), the motto on Ruby’s Oven is partially indecipherable and its meaning is in dispute, reflecting the precariousness of the citizens’ position. Most significant of all is the fact that while “the right of asylum and supplication” was associated with Hestia, and while the Prytaneion dispatched “social welfare” and “hospitality in the form of meals served to foreign visitors” (S. Miller 16, 129), any sense of sanctuary or welcoming of foreigners is most definitely absent from the Oven and from Ruby as a whole. This is best exemplified by Gigi’s discovery on arriving in the town that there is no motel, no restaurant, and that “[o]ther than the picnic benches at the barbecue thing, there was no public place to sit at all. All around her were closed doors and shut windows where parted curtains were swiftly replaced” (67).

In *Paradise* the Greek virtues of hospitality and asylum are in evidence not in the self-important town but in the Convent that it now despises. In its early days Ruby recognized that the Convent women “took people in — lost folk or folks who needed a rest. Early reports were of kindness and very good food” (11). Ironically enough, then, it is Consolata and her companions who fulfil the ideals that the Oven is supposed to represent.³² This explains the association between that household and plentiful, satisfying cooking and

³² The allusion through the fused fig trees to Ovid’s tale of Baucis and Philemon engages that couple’s welcoming hospitality to the disguised gods (*Paradise* 230; *Met.* VIII.637-49).

produce that recurs throughout the novel. And meanwhile, the Oven begins to fall short not just of Greek ideals but of its creators' own aspirations. In a passage that is striking for its nostalgic lyricism, Soane regrets that the Oven is no longer used either for cooking or for religious celebrations, and that "minus the baptisms the Oven had no real value" (104). The Fathers are appalled by but powerless to prevent what they perceive as the increasing desecration or pollution of a sacred site: including sexual activity and the drinking of alcohol, "what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed" (11). But while they express outrage at the contamination purportedly caused by the Convent girls' provocative dancing, it is the men themselves who unequivocally invert the values it stands for by meeting there to plan the women's destruction.³³ It is not until they set out for the massacre that the Oven "shifts" on "undermined" ground (287); when Lone overhears "the devilment they were cooking" Morrison's choice of metaphor is no accident (269).

Three specific details about Athenian cultural and political life shed great light on the recurring associations in *Paradise* between the Oven and the Founding Fathers' anxieties about their origins, heredity, procreation and the sexual propriety of "their" women. The first is that, with time, exclusivist notions of

³³ Through the men's concern with the polluting presence of the women and their sense that the Oven is defiled Morrison engages the Greek concept of *miasma*. The specific implication that sexual behaviour contaminates the Oven recalls the fact that, as Robert Parker notes in *Miasma*, in his *Works and Days* Hesiod forbids the exposure of the semen-spattered body to the hearth: "and it is the hearth that he seeks to protect. This is partly due to respect for fire, a pure element, which is liable, it seems to contamination by this particular form of dirt" (*Miasma* 77). Vernant makes the same point: "Hesiod says that near the hearth one should not reveal parts of the body spattered with semen. [. . .] Semen is not dirty in itself; however, it defiles the fire of the hearth because Hestia, the virginal goddess, must — like Artemis or Athena — keep away from all contact with sex" (*Myth and Tragedy* 130-32). I discuss Morrison's novels' widespread engagement with classical conceptions of pollution in Part III.

Greek “national” identity became associated with the communal hearth; according to Parker, “Herodotus restricts the ‘most true-blooded Ionians’ to those who had ‘set out from the Prytaneum at Athens’” (*Athenian Religion* 26). The second is that, according to Page duBois, among “a series of metaphors [. . .] used to refer to the female body” (including field, furrow, vase, and stone) “the analogy between [. . .] the uterus and an oven is [. . .] a commonplace of Greek thought” (3, 110). While early thinking associated women with fields, the later conception of woman as an oven, as something that is “not autonomous, needs fueling, is a possession” signals “the process of [. . .] making the female body into property, alienable, portable, and absolutely passive” (duBois 165).³⁴

Finally, the laws governing citizenship and marriage that came into force in Athens during the later years of its democracy are strikingly echoed in the unspoken “blood rule” that governs the hierarchies and marital arrangements in the town of Ruby (*Paradise* 195). In 451 BCE, Pericles introduced a law limiting citizenship to those with an Athenian mother as well as an Athenian father (Gomme); the logical extension of this was that soon afterwards, “marriage between an Athenian and a foreigner was forbidden” (Berger). Similarly, Ruby’s “8-rock” families are “careful that their children marry into other 8-rock families” (*Paradise* 196); “neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (194). And

³⁴ According to duBois, “the metaphor of the oven seems to have strong affinities with the furrow/earth metaphor” (110). Did this fact inform Morrison’s choice of the Oven’s motto, “Be/Beware/We are the Furrow of His Brow” (*Paradise* 85-86)? Are there implications for gender politics in the struggle to pin down the monument’s inscription? Patricia deploys the “furrow” metaphor when she observes that “the Morgan line was crop feeble” (192). A sense of these classical metaphors also informs *Love*, where L describes a woman who “*furrowed in the sand with her neighbor’s husband*” (5; original italics), and later tells the sterile Heed, “Wake up, girl. Your oven’s cold” (174).

those who violate the blood rule — Roger Best, Menus Jury — are effectively ostracized by the rest of the community (195). Through this exclusivism and its classical resonances, Morrison critiques the racial separatism that was assumed from the inception of the new American nation, as well as the nativist obsession with defining and restricting citizenship that has recurred throughout the country's history.

After burning her doomed family trees in disgust, Patricia Cato has a sudden insight:

Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality. [. . .] In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from the women. (*Paradise* 217)

Pat's realization that the women exert a unique power in the town (due to their function as the guarantors of the unsullied perpetuation of the stock) recalls the fact that Athenian women occupied a strikingly similar position in their society. And the same paradox is true of both Athens and Ruby: the direct result of the women's importance is their disempowerment. Exceptionalism results in racism which results in sexism.

Deacon Morgan recognizes that "women always the key" (61), but this directly feeds the twins' hypocritical obsession with female sexual purity, the idealization of "the nineteen Negro ladies of [their] youthful memory (279), Steward's view of the Convent women as "a new and obscene breed of female" (279), and the unswerving belief that "everything" (or every woman) in Ruby "requires their protection" (12). The women's secret resentment at the Oven's being moved from Haven may indeed have been provoked by the space and

time devoted to it, as Soane remembers (103), but it may also have sprung from the fact that, as a “community ‘kitchen’” the facility served to make public and to regulate what might otherwise have been an autonomous female space, one that enabled exactly the kind of freedoms that the menfolk feared (99).

Implicitly, the Oven is an embodiment of the women’s oppression, just as metaphorically the oven stood for the circumscribed position of women in Greek society.

It is highly significant that the woman who makes the greatest discoveries about Ruby’s 8-rock exclusivism is named “Patricia Cato”. While her surname functions as the counterpoint to the Roman republican hero that I have already discussed, the name “Patricia” is equally invested; it connotes the Roman term “patrician”. Thus in one sense it is an entirely appropriate label both for the woman who researches Ruby’s most distinguished families and for the chapter in which she does so, even though she herself is excluded from her town’s “patriciate”.

Like the founding dynasties of the Oklahoma town, the Roman patricians were “a privileged class of Roman citizens” consisting of various aristocratic clans who monopolized political and religious office (Momigliano). “In the republican period patrician status could be obtained only by birth; and it may be surmised that in early times both parents had to be patricians” (Momigliano). The unwritten marriage laws of Ruby, then, have as much in common with Roman practice as with that of Athens. And the fact that “as an aristocracy of birth, the patriciate was unable to reproduce itself, and patrician numbers gradually declined” reappears in Ruby as the declining number of 8-

rock families and the increasing reproductive difficulties within those (Momigliano).³⁵ While “the hereditary patriciate seems finally to have disappeared in the third century” (Momigliano), *Paradise* closes with Ruby and its people facing an uncertain future.

The affinity between America and a corrupt, precarious Rome that Morrison hints at in *Paradise* is also intimated in *Tar Baby* and explored more fully in *Love*. The analogy between imperialist America and Imperial Rome stands as an ironic twist to the self-conscious, idealized “Romanness” that informs the “discovery” and “foundation” of America. Although unintended by the dominant culture it is an equivalence with a long tradition of its own; Tom Holland’s recently published *Rubicon: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic* (2003) makes this plain (Stothard 6).³⁶ Morrison exploits the compelling parallel in *Tar Baby* when she has Valerian proudly tell Son, “I was named after an emperor” (147). To Son, the industrialist’s “head-of-a-coin profile” only exacerbates the outrageousness of his imperialist practices: “he had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort” (203).

The equation of the two superpowers is less than flattering to the USA because it implies that its “decline and fall” is imminent. Morrison plays with this idea in *Love*, where Cosey (founder of an ultimately-doomed empire) is described in terms equally applicable to contemporary America and Imperial Rome: “He was the Big Man who, with no one to stop him could get away with

³⁵ I discuss Morrison’s exploration of incest in Ruby in Part III.

³⁶ In his review of Holland’s book, Stothard writes that the author’s “notion of Americans as neo-Romans is not an original idea and has been much bandied about by foreign policy watchers since the end of the Cold War. [. . .] Holland’s narrative of the first century before Christ is well crafted for those with current Americans on their mind” (6).

[. . .] anything [. . .] he wanted” (133). I have already mentioned earlier in this chapter the author’s allusion to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* through the fact that Romen’s grandparents’ surname is Gibbons. But just as “Romen” is not “Roman”, “Gibbons” is not “Gibbon”.³⁷ Morrison suggests that downfall and disaster are not inevitable, either for the protagonist of *Love* or for America itself. The nation does not have slavishly to follow classical precedent. And at the same time, there may yet be the potential within classical tradition to effect a reconceptualization of America. The fact that the ship on which Consolata travels from her South American birthplace to the United States is at once called *Atenas* (the Spanish for “Athens”), and is closely associated with the utopian ship in the novel’s closing vision, certainly suggests this possibility (224).

II.iv The South, Slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction

“The fundamental and passionate ideal for which the South stood and fell was the ideal of an agrarian society”, declared Frank Lawrence Owsley in the anthology of the Agrarian Movement, *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). “All else, good and bad, revolved around this ideal”, he continued, “the old and accepted manner of life for which Egypt, Greece, Rome, England, and France had stood” (69). There is perhaps no version of American history more self-consciously

³⁷ There is a second, heavily veiled allusion to the collapse of Rome through the fact that former guests at Cosey’s hotel include two actresses, “one of whom had auditioned for *Anna Lucasta*” (75), the play by Philip Yordan. Among the films for which Yordan went on to be screen writer/co-producer was the famous epic, *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964).

reliant on Graeco-Roman tradition than that adhered to by defenders of the “Old South”, and it is this classically-dependent perspective on slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction that Morrison takes to task in *Beloved* and *Jazz*. I begin this section by outlining the extent of the relationship between conceptions of the “Old South” and classical tradition. This preliminary sketch contextualizes my primary concern: Morrison’s transformative engagement with the genres of tragedy, epic and romantic pastoral in her exploration of the African-American experience of slavery and its aftermath.

As Caroline Winterer observes, during the antebellum era defenders of the Southern “way of life” repeatedly “invoked ancient Greece, and especially ancient Athens, to justify the nobility of a slave society” (*Culture* 74). Lewis P. Simpson argues in *The Dispossessed Garden* (1975) that nineteenth-century Southern self-definitions comprised “a struggle to accommodate the pastoral mode to the antipastoral novelty of the South as expressed by the institution of African chattel slavery” (39); surely, however, it was the repeated drawing of analogies with Greek and Roman precedent that made such an accommodation all too easy. What is striking, furthermore, is the continuing appeal of the analogy to subsequent constructors of Southern cultural memory. The classicism of the Old South is repeatedly affirmed by artistic productions ranging from *Birth of a Nation* (1917) through Faulkner’s novels to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), by those seeking to establish currents in “thought” such as Vernon Parrington or the Agrarian Movement, and by more recent scholars who with a surprisingly uncritical excitement reinscribe the asserted equivalence between Southern history and that of Greece and Rome. Exemplifying this last, the 1977 special issue of the *Southern Humanities*

Review (entitled “The Classical Tradition in the South”) is notable for its tone of celebratory pride as it explores what its editor calls “the special claim of Greece and Rome upon the imagination of the South” (Wiltshire, Introduction 3). Whether discussing “*Romanitas* in Southern Literature” (Bradford 4), or Basil L. Gildersleeve’s elaborate analogy between the Civil War and the Peloponnesian War (Kennedy 21), or “The White Column Tradition” in Southern architecture (Gamble 41), contributors fortify the mythological affinity between their region and the classical past as much as they analyse it.

One of the most striking essays in the collection is Susan Ford Wiltshire’s “The Classics and the Two Minds of the South”, in which she contrasts the perspectives on slavery and race of Thomas Jefferson and the nineteenth-century South Carolinian statesman, John C. Calhoun. Her portrait of Calhoun as a classically-inspired “conservative” is uncontroversial (Introduction 2); as Vernon Parrington argued some years earlier, “it was the persuasive ideal of a Greek democracy in the plantation states that lay back of Calhoun’s defense of slavery” (79).³⁸ But Wiltshire’s assertion that Jefferson’s classical engagement informed a “progressive” stance is questionable, if not misleading (Introduction 2). For, as Carl Richard explains in *The Founders and the Classics*, while theoretically opposed to slavery, Jefferson used the Roman example to support his segregationist views (Richard 96-97). To quote Jay Fliegelman’s gloss on *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the Virginian maintained that “color and not condition was the root cause of black inferiority” (194), and

³⁸ For more on the role of classicism in pro-slavery arguments see Winterer, *Culture* 74-75, and Harrington.

the deployment of Rome as an “antimodel” supported this somewhat contorted logic (Richard 96). So it is surely not possible to argue that Jefferson’s classicism made him a “progressive” on the race question any more than did that of Calhoun or of his fellow pro-slavery theorists such as George Fitzhugh.³⁹ And Fitzhugh’s works, in turn, “show how Aristotle’s natural slave doctrine found a more comfortable home and exercised greater influence on nineteenth-century Virginia than it ever had in Greece or Rome” (Wiesen 211). It is a vehement opposition to this range of oppressive ideologies — all of which enlist Greece or Rome to make their case — that Morrison’s combative classicism in *Beloved* and *Jazz* constructs.

As reactionary retrospectives such as *I’ll Take My Stand* make clear, it is the classical example that fulfils what Simpson calls the Old South’s “need to reconcile slavery to pastoral piety” (41). Historically, pastoralism has of course been a nation-wide phenomenon in America, and “American pastoral representation cannot be linked to a single ideological position” (Buell, “Pastoral Ideology” 14). But it is surely in the South that the pastoral ideal informs racial politics most unambiguously, in that Southern pastoralism is utterly dependent on either slavery or an oppressed labouring class. Jefferson’s transcription into his commonplace book of an excerpt from Horace’s *Epodes* illuminates this point; it includes the lines, “what joy to see the tired oxen dragging along the upturned ploughshare and the young slaves, industrious swarm of an opulent house” (Richard 161-62). Over a century later, the “twelve

³⁹ As I discuss at more length in Part III, Jefferson claimed that as Roman slaves were white (which is itself a spurious claim) they were not inferior to their enslavers, and therefore once freed could be integrated into mainstream society. By contrast, American slaves — being black and therefore culturally inferior to their masters — must not be allowed to assimilate after their emancipation. J. Drew Harrington writes that “Thomas Jefferson’s views on the Negro race were basically those adopted by later proslavery writers” (61).

southerners” who co-author *I’ll Take My Stand* define “an agrarian society” in their opening manifesto as “one in which agriculture is the leading vocation [. . .] — a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure” (xix). The Agrarianists repeatedly emphasize the “leisure” which their cherished lifestyle entails without scrutinizing too closely the systemic oppression that enables such a luxury.

Occasionally the self-conscious pastoralism of the South is treated ironically, as in the anonymous 1833 parody “Old Virginia Georgics” reproduced by Clarence Gohdes. But here it is the poor quality of the farming rather than the fact of slavery that is the subject of the satire. The classical names of the slaves (an exaggerated version of actual plantation practice) provide much of the humour.⁴⁰ The association between the South and the pastoral tradition is so enduring that it is often interpreted as an objective fact rather than a cultural construction. Indeed, in the creation of Midwestern pastoral that is *My Ántonia*, through the depiction of the pianist, Blind D’Arnault, Willa Cather imports the sentimental pastoralism of Southern slave society as a means of reinforcing her region’s claim to the classical genre.⁴¹

Perhaps the most convincing explanation for the persistence of Southern classicism is to be found in David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001). In documenting how “the forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture”, Blight shows

⁴⁰ The poem includes the details, for example, about stubborn mules (“Tho’ Pompey punch them and tho’ Caesar curse, / It serves no purpose but to make them worse”) or about the hogs getting into the corn (“The master curses, but ’tis Sambo’s sport”) (Gohdes 49, 53).

⁴¹ In *My Ántonia* Jim Burden recalls fondly the evening when Blind D’Arnault — a musician from “the Far South” — played “some good old plantation songs” in the Black Hawk hotel (139). His account of the discovery of the black child’s miraculous musical talent functions as a synecdoche that sentimentalizes Southern plantation life (139-42).

how “romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory” (2, 4). Paradoxically, the romanticizing process was dependent on the conception of the Lost Cause as tragedy and an association of the South’s ruins with “America’s classical past” (Blight 217-19). Civil War veterans became “symbols of a lost age of heroism” (8), and “Americans now had their Homeric tales of great war to tell” (73).⁴² This exposure of the ideological motivations behind dominant cultural reliance on tragedy, epic and romantic pastoral in representing Southern history explains the reactionary classicism that informed both the production and the reception of many twentieth-century treatments of the subject. *Birth of a Nation* stands as a perfect illustration of Blight’s theory: there the pastoral idyll of the Cameron plantation is shattered first by the War and then by Reconstruction, in which the tragic “degradation and ruin” is redeemed only by the highly symbolic marriage of Southerner Ben Cameron to Northerner Elsie Stoneman (Lang 114). Meanwhile, a contemporaneous review of the film in the *Atlanta Constitution* exulted that “Ancient Greece had her Homer. Modern America has her David W. Griffith” (McIntosh 183). Classical antiquity is thus invoked in the process of confirming the epic’s place in the American mainstream.⁴³

Both Blight’s thesis and my preceding overview of classicism’s many roles in shaping Southern history make only too plain exactly what is at stake in the engagement with Greece and Rome in Morrison’s own representations of slavery and its consequences. It is important to note that her simultaneously

⁴² In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (with which Morrison takes issue in *Playing in the Dark*, 18-28), Cather exactly exemplifies this tradition. The novel’s final section, “Nancy’s Return”, describes the local Confederate hero, Turner Ashby, as “all that the old-time Virginians admired: *Like Paris handsome and like Hector brave*. And he died young. ‘Shortlived and glorious,’ the old Virginians used to say” (275; italics in original).

⁴³ Blight briefly discusses both *Birth of a Nation* and *Beloved* (395-97, 319).

playful and politically serious engagement with Southern classical traditions is not confined to *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Her description of Helene and Nel's train journey to New Orleans in *Sula*, for example, includes detail of the pair passing "the men who stood like wrecked Dorics under the station roofs of those towns" (24). The image suggests that the men are like damaged columns holding up the station roofs, and thus on first reading appears to reinscribe the conventional association between the fallen South and the failed Greek ideal. But Morrison never clarifies whether the column-like men are white or black, and through this crucial ambiguity she questions whether it was whites or blacks who served as the fundamental structure underpinning the Southern way of life, and also whether whites or blacks are since more "wrecked".⁴⁴ This is the kind of ludic, multi-resonant classical allusiveness that is developed in the first two novels of the trilogy to effect a widespread destabilization of traditional Southern history's dependence on the ancient world. I demonstrate this first by considering the many functions of *Beloved*'s interventions in conceptions of Southern history as tragedy, and then by analysing the configurations of epic and romantic pastoral that characterize both that novel and *Jazz*.

Although there are several critical essays concerned with *Beloved*'s affinity with Greek tragedy, none addresses the ways the generic engagement interacts with classically-informed dominant American ideology and history. In Part I, I explored how various tragic elements of *Beloved* destabilize the ideology of the American Dream. I argued that Morrison's conception of Sethe as a tragic hero,

⁴⁴ Morrison's choice of "Doric" is significant. In modern perception, Doric is the Greek dialect which — as spoken by Theocrotan shepherds, for example — epitomizes the pastoral tradition. Garry Wills observes that "[I]ike Palladio, Jefferson associated the Doric order [. . .] with Roman farms" (112).

capable of exercising choice, is a crucial means by which the author asserts her character's freedom. I now turn to analysis of the way that novel's tragic elements engage literary and historical narratives of Southern history. I show that it is through its deployment of tragic conventions that *Beloved* both revises canonical representations of slavery and counteracts traditional articulations of the Lost Cause or the Fall of the Old South as tragedy.

Morrison's conception of Sethe as a tragic hero is crucial to her participation in what Blight calls "the struggle to own the meaning of Civil War memory" (16). Her hubristic, outrageous protagonist functions as a rebuke to Twain's representation of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and to Stowe's of Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Both these novels exemplify the denial of active tragic heroism to African-Americans that typifies literary treatments of the nineteenth-century South. Twain plays with the idea of a tragic configuration of Jim when the duke "dressed [the fugitive] up in King Lear's outfit" to avoid his having to be tied up in the wigwam when the others are ashore (220). But the impostor then "painted Jim's face and hands and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue" (220). "Why", exclaims Huck, "he didn't only look like he was dead, he looked considerable more than that" (221). Paraded behind a sign reading "Sick Arab – but harmless when not out of his head", Jim can be visible only as a grotesque, freakish parody of a classic tragic hero (220).⁴⁵

Meanwhile, though Harriet Beecher Stowe is at pains to emphasize the tragic aspects of the institution of slavery, as it is a critical commonplace to observe, she conceives of Tom as a heroic victim rather than an active hero. Tom's nobility rests entirely on his passive acceptance of his suffering and on

⁴⁵ Morrison discusses *Huckleberry Finn* in *Playing in the Dark* (54-57).

his forgiving rather than retaliating against Legree (422-423, 427). While Stowe's eponymous character is not exactly the "faithful slave" that became a stereotype of retrospective "plantation school" depictions of the "Confederate War" (Blight 274), he is hardly a rebellious one either. Sethe, on the other hand, in the "personal pride, the arrogant claim" that her killing of Beloved embodies, is obviously the antithesis to both Uncle Tom and the prototype of fidelity (249).

Morrison gives to the black community of Cincinnati a critical attitude towards Sethe's *hubris* that is itself of questionable worth. When the protagonist is arrested after the murder, the narrative voice describes her having "a profile that shocked [the onlookers] with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably" (152). The word "probably" creates as much doubt as it does certainty, suggesting that although Sethe's head is high and her back is straight, they may well not be "too much" so. Morrison thereby revises the classical notion that *hubris* is a flaw, suggesting instead that it is almost a virtue in these circumstances. As Shelly Haley argues, the character's killing of Beloved is an act of "resistance" to the enslaving system (200); the act of defiance similarly counteracts dominant representations of black passivity and victimhood.

There is an interesting precedent for the transformation of *hubris* into admirable rebelliousness in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. According to John Shields's interpretation, the poem "Niobe in Distress" changes Ovid's cautionary tale about the impious *hubris* of the Phrygian queen who refuses to worship the goddess Latona into a "sophisticated argument for freedom of the oppressed" (Shields 222). As Shields points out, while Wheatley describes

Niobe's instigation of "rebel fires" and Apollo's determination to scourge the woman's "rebel mind", by contrast "Ovid makes no reference to rebellion or subversion" (224). This indicates that "the emphasis upon rebelliousness [. . .] is wholly Wheatley's invention" (Shields 224).⁴⁶

Shields does not comment, however, on a second revision that the African-American poet makes to Ovid's version — one that to my mind is even more striking and that resonates significantly in *Beloved*. In *The Metamorphoses*, Niobe bases her feelings of superiority on the fact that she has fourteen children while Latona has just two; her pride springs from her abundant fertility (VI.179-95). Wheatley adjusts the dramatic emphasis slightly in representing the queen as prone to excessive affection for her children: "Thy love too vehement hastens to destroy / Each blooming maid, and each celestial boy" (103). While there is no implication of dangerously uncontrolled maternal feeling in Ovid's poem, it is exactly this accusation that Paul D levels against Sethe when he tells her "your love is too thick" (*Beloved* 164). And although Niobe's and Sethe's fates differ — the former slave actively kills her child while the Theban queen loses all of hers in Latona's punishment — the shared interest in the relationship between a mother's love, hubristic behaviour and rebelliousness is compelling. Of the poem's title, "Niobe in Distress", Shields observes that in the late Eighteenth Century the term "distress" was used to describe "the condition of the slave" (223). So, through their outrageously

⁴⁶ Shields develops a complex interpretation whereby Niobe's children symbolize Wheatley's poems. He writes, "[i]nterpreted as an allegory of Wheatley's subversive poetics, 'Niobe in Distress' may be seen as this poet's apologia for not using her poetry, written before her manumission on or before October 18, 1773, more actively to rebel against her white oppressor" (224). I am more interested, however, in the poem's depiction of the rebelliousness of extreme maternal love, wherein lies the thematic connection to *Beloved*.

loving tragic heroines, both Wheatley (implicitly) and Morrison (explicitly) protest against the violation of maternal rights that the slave system enacts.⁴⁷

In Ovid's story, Niobe famously weeps so much over her loss that she becomes a dripping statue or rock (VI.300-10). Morrison may have this image in mind when she describes a statuesque Sethe (who does not weep at all) covered in her children's blood as she is driven away by the sheriff: "the hot sun dried Sethe's dress, stiff, like rigor mortis" (153). More significant still is that in the opening paragraphs of her own relation of the killing to Paul D, Sethe includes an apparently irrelevant memory about how she used to long for child-rearing advice from "Aunt Phyllis", the midwife who was called to Sweet Home for the birth of "each and every one of [her] babies" (160). Given the thematic connections between "Niobe in Distress" and *Beloved*, it is tempting to interpret this detail as Morrison's acknowledging Phillis Wheatley — a writer who similarly deployed classical tradition to radical ends — as a kind of intellectual "midwife" to herself.

While her assertion of Sethe's *hubris* interacts significantly with specific literary antecedents, at the same time Morrison's overall conception of nineteenth-century African-American experience as tragedy intervenes in the dominant culture's general tendency to articulate the Lost Cause in tragic terms. David Blight documents the extensiveness of this convention while highlighting the contemporaneous critical perspective expressed by the Unionist veteran and lawyer, Albion Tourgée:

⁴⁷ In her recent study, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* (2004), which argues that "mothering is represented in Morrison as a site of resistance", Andrea O'Reilly asserts that "infanticide, for Sethe [. . .] is an act of preservative love" (136).

The sheer “woefulness and humiliation that attended its downfall” [. . .] is what made the “history of the Confederacy” so attractive in America’s cultural memory. [. . .] The South and its war were the seat of “catastrophe” and the “eternal refrain of remembered agony”. By the 1880s the South had been “glorified by disaster” [. . .]. (219)

Blight explains that this emphasis on the suffering of the losing side was a necessary condition of the romantic, reconciliationist impulse that informed the prevailing practice of “national forgetting” (219). To insist, therefore, as Morrison does with *Beloved*, that the tragedy and tragic heroism in these events belongs not to the Confederacy but to African-Americans is to challenge the erasure of political realities that became the dominant cultural norm.

Morrison was of course not the first black writer to refute what Blight calls “the hegemony of Lost Cause ideology” (251). The historian points out that Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* — a “tragic vision of American history” — exemplifies “resistance” to the “full-fledged mythology” that narratives of the Civil War had become (351). Blight describes the chapter “Of the Black Belt”, for example, as:

an imaginative way to dissent from the traditional image and history of slavery and the South. The “cause lost” is unmistakable. [. . .] Du Bois combined the beauty of nature, the sweep of history in epic proportions, and the painful ruck of the freedmen’s daily lives to forge an indelible memory that countered the romance of the Lost Cause and national reunion. (252)

This analysis would serve equally well as a description of *Beloved*.

A striking feature of *Souls* — one that Blight does not discuss — is its classical allusiveness. Du Bois anticipates Morrison, not just in expressing African-American experience in terms of the classical genres of epic and tragedy but also in deploying the very body of mythology on which his ideological opponents depended. In a famous chapter entitled “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece”, he asks:

Have you ever seen a cotton-field white with the harvest—its golden fleece hovering above the black earth like a silvery cloud edged with dark green [. . .]? [. . .] Certainly one might frame a pretty and not far-fetched analogy of witchery and dragon’s teeth, and blood and armed men, between the ancient and the modern Quest of the Golden Fleece in the Black Sea. (*Souls* 83)⁴⁸

This powerfully ambiguous allusion functions like Morrison’s to Oedipus and Medea in *Beloved*, in that it employs in its attack on the mythologized structures of the Old South the very resource — Greek myth — that is central to their fabrication. The defenders of slavery enlisted classical tradition to their own ends, but Morrison and Du Bois engage it to eclipse the sentimentalism of the Lost Cause with the realities of the “cause lost”.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a writer whose narratives of the South depend on allusions to Greek and Roman culture is William Faulkner. As countless critics have observed, his novels are replete with classical allusions:

⁴⁸ I return to further analysis of this allusion and Morrison’s engagement with the same mythology in my discussion of the Civil Rights Movement at the end of this part. Du Bois returns to and revises the analogy between cotton and the fleece of classical myth in his 1911 novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. There, Miss Taylor (a young schoolteacher from New England) compares cotton to the Golden Fleece, names it “the silver fleece”, and tells the myth of Jason to her pupil (31). The chapter in which Zora’s privately-grown swamp cotton is bought at a dishonest price is called “The Rape of the Fleece” (181).

Sutpen names his slave daughter “Clytemnestra”, “naming with his own mouth his own ironic fecundity of dragon’s teeth” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 61-62); the “swine of Euboeus” recur in *The Sound and the Fury* (147, 175); Doc Hines’s first name is “Eupheus” (*Light in August* 347); the very title of *As I Lay Dying* is a quotation from a speech by Agamemnon in *The Odyssey* (Wadlington 107). Moreover, the fact that Sutpen appears to Rosa “like the mask in Greek tragedy” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 62), that Mrs Hines and Byron Bunch narrate events to Hightower “in monotonous strophe and antistrophe” (*Light in August* 376), or that Quentin’s world is governed by “the gods” (*The Sound and the Fury* 177) indicate the author’s sense of an affinity between his subject matter and Greek tragedy that Morrison discusses at some length in her M.A. thesis. *Beloved*’s appropriation of tragic conventions to express the black perspective on slavery and what followed constitutes a crucial part of the African-American writer’s dialogue with Faulkner.

The male novelist’s deployment of neoclassical architecture expresses his conception of the tragic fate of the Old South. At the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, the demise of the Compson family is symbolized by “the square, paintless house with its rotting portico” (298). And in *Light in August* — just as in *Birth of a Nation*, where the gleaming columns of the Camerons’ house become gradually soiled as events unfold — the Greek revivalist façades of Jefferson’s main square have become tainted with the passing of time: “From the shallow, flagged terrace the stone columns rose, arching, weathered, stained with generations of casual tobacco” (414). It is interesting to compare these descriptions with Morrison’s portrayal of “the Butler place” in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman is overwhelmed by the sight of “the big crumbling house”;

although it has “four graceful columns support[ing] the portico” it nonetheless “looked like a murderer’s house. Dark, ruined, evil” (239).⁴⁹ Whereas the specific cause of the buildings’ decay in Faulkner’s descriptions remains somewhat ambiguous and impersonal, Morrison leaves us in no doubt that the state of the Butler place symbolizes the moral depravity of its inhabitants. In *Beloved*, meanwhile, although 124 Bluestone Road is obviously not neoclassical in design, it nonetheless appears to Denver as “a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits” (29). The house embodies the suffering of its family, and recalls the *oikos* — the Greek compound of a building and its inhabitants — that I discuss in Part I.⁵⁰ In both these instances, Morrison wrestles classically-informed architectural motifs out of Faulkner’s hands to serve her own political ends.

In her M.A. thesis, the African-American student (as she then was) observes of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* that “an atmosphere of doom [. . .] pervades these novels” (24). Paradoxically, *Beloved*’s final eschewal of tragedy is as strong a rebuke to the Faulknerian vision as is Morrison’s prior claim to tragic representation of African-American experience. In enabling a better future for Sethe, Paul D and Denver, the author insists on the possibility of surviving and even triumphing over slavery, the Civil War and its aftermath, and testifies to her characters’ resilience. By contrast, as Philip Weinstein writes in his essay comparing the two authors,

⁴⁹ It is interesting that the Butler Place is located near Danville, Pennsylvania; Pennsylvania is neither a “Southern” state nor one that defended slavery at the time of secession. In applying Southern stereotypes to a Northern context, Morrison challenges the myth that only the South is corrupt.

⁵⁰ The set of the opera *Margaret Garner* as it was staged in Cincinnati in July 2005 comprised very obvious architectural symbolism: the architrave of the Gaines’s neoclassical home was fractured and resting on the slave cabins (*Margaret Garner*).

with Faulkner “we are in the presence of an authorial insistence upon disaster” (61). “His greatest fictions present and re-present a racial and gendered nightmare — a design gone irreparably wrong and yet uselessly repercussing rather than replaced by something better” (72).⁵¹ Morrison shares Sethe’s determination to “make a way out of this no way” (*Beloved* 95), whereas Faulkner — presumably because he can afford to — revels in a catastrophic conception of Southern history.

The “doom” that Morrison identifies in her forebear’s work connotes not just the idea of inevitable disaster but also a sense of predestination or the absence of individual agency. In one of many interviews given while in residence at the University of Virginia, Faulkner declared “I think man’s free will functions against a Greek background of fate” (Gwyn and Blotner 38); his novels repeatedly stress that the South is irrevocably predestined to collapse. Joanna Burden rehearses a favourite Faulknerian theme to Joe Christmas, telling him he is part of “a race doomed and cursed to be forever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins. [. . .] His doom and curse” (*Light in August* 252). Characters are in thrall to the “tragic and inescapable earth” (*Light in August* 60); Miss Burden believes “a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act” (255). Joe Christmas, meanwhile, “believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe” (280).⁵² *Beloved*, on the other

⁵¹ Weinstein argues that (in contrast to *Requiem for a Nun*) “*Beloved* and *Jazz* begin the work of reconceiving the black male outside the Oedipal/patriarchal frame in which he is doomed to fail” (73). For another comparison of Morrison’s final optimism with Faulkner’s enduring pessimism see Hogan, especially 169, 180.

⁵² Among the countless other examples are the fact that before killing his lover Joe “was saying to himself I had to do it already in the past tense” (*Light in August* 280), Quentin’s questioning “why God let us lose the War” in *Absalom, Absalom!* (11), and the Compson family’s belief that “there’s a curse on us its not our fault” in *The Sound and the Fury* (157).

hand, rejects any notion that “fatality” or “the land” or a “curse” dictated the course of slavery, the Civil War or Reconstruction; it insists that humans take responsibility for their own actions.⁵³

The contrast between Morrison’s and Faulkner’s conceptions of history is apparent in their strikingly different deployment of a not dissimilar image. Towards the end of *Light in August*, Brown starts to believe that people “were all just shapes like chessmen— [...]—unpredictable and moved here and there by an Opponent” (437-38), while some pages later Percy Grimm “seemed indefatigable, [. . .] as if the Player who moved him for pawn likewise found him breath” (462). In *Beloved*, meanwhile, the realities of plantation life teach Baby Suggs that “nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23). While Faulkner’s game of chess is directed by an anonymous, capitalized “Opponent” or “Player”, Morrison clearly holds slave owners responsible for the fragmentation of Baby Suggs’s family.⁵⁴ Faulkner’s classically-informed sense of fatalistic tragedy, his ambivalent doom-mongering, become a way of distancing and falsely dignifying acts as outrageous as the lynching of Joe Christmas. They exemplify Guitar’s complaint in *Song of Solomon* that white cultural production tries to represent white depravity as “glorious” and “natural” (157). “Their writers and artists have been saying it for years”, he observes, “[. . .] They call it tragedy” (157).

⁵³ In her recent Foreword to *Jazz*, Morrison writes that “the music insisted that the past might haunt us, but it would not entrap us. It demanded a future—and refused to regard the past as ‘an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle’” (x). “Record” here has an obvious second meaning as “history”.

⁵⁴ Stanley Crouch misreads this image in *Beloved* when he asserts (having quoted the “checkers” paragraph) that “*Beloved* means to prove that Afro-Americans are the result of a cruel determinism” (68-69). It is Crouch himself who understands the whites whom Morrison blames for black suffering as an impersonal “determinism”.

Faulkner attempts to make historical injustice and oppression “glorious” not just through explicit classicism, but also through mythologizing the era that is his subject. Ironically, while his novels to some extent share Morrison’s concern with the dangers inherent in mythical misconceptions of reality, they contribute to that process as much as they dismantle it. For example, the author is anything but wholly sympathetic to Hightower’s inability to escape “those phantoms who loomed heroic and tremendous against a background of thunder and smoke and torn flags which now filled his waking and sleeping life” (*Light in August* 469). Yet the epic nature of this prose does much to justify and glamorize Hightower’s position. It creates an implicit equivalence between the historical reality that was the American Civil War and the legendary wars of classical epics.⁵⁵

Faulkner’s fondness for such analogies is clear in the explanation that he once gave for the title of *Light in August*:

In August in Mississippi there’s a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there’s [. . .] a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times. It might have fauns and satyrs and the gods [. . .] from Greece, from Olympus in it somewhere. (Gwyn and Blotner 199)

⁵⁵ There are clear ideological ends served by the mythological distancing of the antebellum era, the fabrication of it as a legendary period or impossibly distant past. In his *Education*, Henry Adams records of 1900 that “in forty years, America had made so vast a stride to empire that the world of 1860 stood already on a distant horizon somewhere on the same plane with the republic of Brutus and Cato, while school-boys read of Abraham Lincoln as they did of Julius Caesar” (*Education* 1056). Interestingly, in *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner’s Heroes* (1963), John Lewis Longley Jr. endorses this impulse in Faulkner. Longley writes:

Sutpen and John Sartoris, especially when viewed in their dynastic patterns, are tragic heroes in the grand and completely tragic mold, partly because, of course, they are located in a remote and more ‘heroic’ time, when presumably there existed that scope of action and choice large enough for heroic gestures. (193)

There is a kind of flight from political reality in this affiliation between Mississippi and Ancient Greece that *Beloved* seeks to counter. After witnessing Sethe's murder of Beloved in the woodshed, the sheriff is possessed by "the urge to run into the August sunlight" (151). "The sheriff wanted to back out" of the shed (151), perhaps into the Faulknerian world of *Light in August*, where events are legendary rather than real. But for the characters of *Beloved* there is no escape into a classical fantasy land.

Interestingly, it is also "August" when Golden Gray sets out in search of his father in *Jazz* (143), and in this novel Morrison extends the dialogue with Faulkner about epic representations of Southern experience that she begins in *Beloved*. Many critics have commented on the overtly parodic nature of the Golden Gray episodes: in Linden Peach's words, they "somewhat mischievously" present "stock themes" and "stock characters" (151), and "the style, the mythical nature and the content of the chapters depicting life in the South clearly parody the Southern romance narrative" (150). John Duvall, meanwhile, argues convincingly that the novel comprises a "pastiche of Faulknerian style and matter in the delineation of the racially mixed Golden Gray" (13).⁵⁶ My aim is not to go over well-trodden ground by drawing attention to each and every one of Morrison's parodic gestures but rather to expand on prior criticism by drawing attention to her largely undiscussed

⁵⁶ Duvall points out that Morrison "reverses Faulknerian genealogy" through the fact that it is Golden's father (not mother) who is black (13). Dimino makes a similar point: "Though she strikingly echoes Faulknerian language in both episodes, she transforms the relation between Bon and Sutpen with a racial reversal" (37). The important point is not surely that Morrison "echoes" Faulkner but that, as Duvall observes, Henry LesTroy's reaction to Golden "seems to deflate [the son's] 'Faulknerian' tragic rhetoric" (14). Blight's recording of Albion Tourgée's critique of the "plantation school" of literature illuminates Morrison's parodic configuration of True Belle and Rose Dear: "Blacks were cast in one of two roles, Tourgée observed. Either they were the 'devoted slave who serves and sacrifices for his master and mistress,' or the 'poor "nigger" to whom liberty has brought only misfortune'" (220).

satirical engagement with classical tradition in these passages.

The narrator's reconstruction of Golden Gray's search for his father begins "I see him in a two-seat phaeton. [. . .] He is a long way from home and it begins to rain furiously, but since it is August, he is not cold" (143). The use of the present tense here imitates the style of classical epics. And even the narrator's imagined vehicle has a significant classical resonance; in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Phaethon is unsure of his paternity and asks his father, Helios, to prove his fatherhood by allowing him to drive the horses of the sun for a day (*Met.* II.1-270).⁵⁷ The inclusion of the "phaeton" detail creates a mock-heroic perspective on Golden Gray's anxiety about his father and his racial origins.

Morrison continues this mock-heroism through the fact that the older man's name is "Henry Lestory or LesTroy or something like that" (149). Although Roberta Rubenstein correctly observes that "Lestory" signals "the narrative's deliberate fictionality: le story" (158), it is also significant that "LesTroy" sounds as "Less Troy". This none-too-subtle invocation of the definitive war of classical mythology, accompanied by the reductive qualifier, "less", suggests Morrison's wish to diminish the epic importance that the dominant (and in particular, Southern) culture attributes to miscegenation. The fact that Golden Gray's father is black is not in fact a crisis equivalent to the Trojan War, even though interracial mixing is commonly viewed as as drastic in consequence as Paris's rape of Helen. In addition, the phony French of "le

⁵⁷ As Radice explains, Phaethon's mission ends disastrously in that he is unable to control the horses of the sun, and would have burned up the world had he not been killed by Zeus (Radice 191-92). Interestingly (and as I discuss in Part III) in *The Metamorphoses* Phaethon is Ethiopian and the fire that ensues from his recklessness is what turns Ethiopians black (Ovid II.232). As it is in *Jazz*, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the phaeton carriage is associated with anxiety about paternity: the fact that "Ellen's phaeton" appears at the door to take her and the Sutpen children to church precipitates Judith's screaming fit at the realization that her father will not be accompanying them (and is absent) (26).

story” and “les troy” makes fun of the elaborate French names of Faulkner’s miscegenated characters such as “Charles Etienne de Saint Velery Bon” in *Absalom, Absalom!* (384).⁵⁸

The French invocation is significant, too, because “LesTroy” also connotes Chrétien de Troyes, the writer of the paradigmatic twelfth-century courtly romances. In fusing allusions to Homeric epic and medieval European tradition Morrison engages the way Southern mythology blends romance and classical tradition in its self-defining works such as *Gone With the Wind*.⁵⁹ The author mocks the South’s preoccupation with chivalry though the narrator’s suspicion of Golden Gray’s desire to “brag about this encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness” (154), and his realization that Wild will not be his “lance and shield” (160). And the narrator’s suspicions about the character’s “grand fake gestures” reflects Morrison’s general scepticism about the appropriateness of romantic and pastoral conventions to either Southern rural or Northern urban experience (*Jazz* 158).

⁵⁸ It is interesting to consider Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* (1946) in relation to Morrison’s choice of name, “LesTroy”. The Fairchild family’s overseer — whose inappropriate marriage to Dabney comprises the central plot — is named “Troy Flavin” (26). Arguably, from an African-American perspective there are many aspects of Southern life more epically catastrophic than a woman marrying “beneath her”. Louise Westling discusses the many classical allusions and overt pastoralism of Welty’s novel on 125-47. Ralph Ellison anticipates Morrison in deploying a mock-heroic classicism to satirize conventional hysteria surrounding miscegenation. When the significantly-named “Sybil” asks the Invisible Man to rape her, he asks, “What’s happening here? [. . .] A new birth of a nation?” (522). Attempting to find her a taxi, the protagonist records: “We tottered before an ancient-looking building, its windows dark. Huge Greek medallions showed in spots of light upon its façade, above a dark labyrinthine pattern in the stone, and I propped her against the stoop with its carved stone monster” (529). In his 1974 article, “Ralph Ellison’s Use of *The Aeneid*”, C. W. Scruggs highlights this passage’s parody of Aeneas’s encounter with the Sybil of Cumae (Scruggs 369).

⁵⁹ Explicit rebukes to that film in Morrison’s work include Guitar’s description of the woman Emmett Till had whistled at as “some Scarlett O’Hara cunt” (*Song* 81), and the fact that in *Love* “Heed paraded around like an ignorant version of Scarlett O’Hara” and wore a “Gone with the Wind hat” (36, 99).

The author sets out to expose the political deceptions of the Deep South's traditional pastoralism in *Beloved* as well as *Jazz*. In the earlier novel, both Sethe and Paul D experience Southern landscapes as disturbingly seductive and surreal. As Paul D traipses northwards after escaping from the chain gang, he is "astonished by the beauty of the land that was not his. He hid in its breast [. . .] and tried not to love it" (268). And as Sethe recalls Sweet Home:

[A]lthough there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. [. . .] Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her, remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

Sethe's struggle with her memory is a microcosm of the battle Morrison fights — and wins — against the national memory's tendency to erase the brutality of historical events with nostalgic representations of natural beauty.⁶⁰

Beloved engages and transforms the function of a recurring motif from classic descriptions of American pastoral: that of the hummingbird. In his analysis of the texts that first mythologized the slave plantations as a kind of benign garden, Lewis Simpson quotes from Robert Beverly's *The History and Present State Of Virginia* (1705; Simpson 15). The critic observes that Beverly "offers a poetic evocation of a plantation summer house and almost ignores the concrete details of life on the plantation" (16); this evocation includes a lengthy

⁶⁰ Marc Conner makes a similar comparison between *Beloved* and *Jazz*: "Joe and Violet flee brutal lynchings, burnings, starvation, disenfranchisement — their fond recollections of this awful place recall Sethe's musings in *Beloved* about Sweet Home" (Conner, "Wild Women" 350). In the opera *Margaret Garner*, the composer Richard Danielpour and Morrison expose the dangers of nostalgic pastoralist memory through Edward Gaines's sentimental but captivating aria, "I Remember" (*Margaret Garner*).

meditation on “the charming colours of the hummingbird” (16). More famous is Crèvecoeur’s meditation “On Snakes and the Hummingbird” in his *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782; 180-86). The author writes of having “amused [himself] a hundred times in observing the great number of hummingbirds with which our country abounds” (184). His description of the species includes the detail that “its bill is as long and as sharp as a coarse sewing needle” (184).⁶¹

When Toni Morrison deploys the hummingbird in a dramatically different context — in her account of Sethe’s decision to destroy her children — she turns the slave-owning American Farmer’s “needle” simile into an aggressive metaphor: “Little hummingbirds stuck their *needle beaks* right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings” (163; my emphasis). “The hummingbird wings beat on”, Morrison writes (163), and at the novel’s end when the protagonist mistakes Bodwin for Schoolteacher, the “needle beaks” sentence is repeated verbatim (261). The author thereby creates a set piece — a persistent association between the hummingbird and Sethe’s violence (itself representative of generalized African-American resistance to slavery) — which refutes the mythological deployment of the hummingbird as a conventional feature or set piece of the slave-dependent garden that so much American pastoral describes.

The fact that (in a much-quoted letter of 1916) D.H. Lawrence asks Amy Lowell, “Have you still got humming birds, as in Crèvecoeur?”, is indicative of the species’ function as a shorthand for the exotic paradise-like

⁶¹ Leo Marx also discusses Beverly’s work on 75-88, and quotes the “hummingbird” excerpt on 84.

nature of idealized rural America.⁶² But close reading of Crèvecoeur's writing suggests that *Beloved's* signifying on the hummingbird passage may involve more than a simple refutation of the pastoral ideal. For the *Letters of an American Farmer* is more conflicted and contradictory on the question of slavery than might be readily assumed.⁶³ The Farmer's graphic description of a "Negro, suspended in a cage" being pecked to death by birds and insects on a plantation near Charleston — an account which immediately precedes the "hummingbird" chapter — is an overt denunciation of the horrors of Southern slavery that anticipates Harriet Beecher Stowe and other abolitionists (178). The epistolarian's earlier claim that "we have slaves likewise in our northern provinces, [. . .] but [. . .] they enjoy as much liberty as their masters" reads as a somewhat clichéd hypocrisy that typifies self-justifying Northern depictions of Southern brutality (171). But an implicit and ultimately more provocative uneasiness about the race question characterizes the description of the fighting snakes that accompanies the hummingbird piece. The fact that the "black snake" eventually overcomes and drowns the "water snake" can be understood as a double allegory: it is a prophetic vision of race relations and (as it is a critical commonplace to observe) a suggestion of a doomed Eden.

Crucially, Crèvecoeur's snakes fight not in some remote Southern location but in the farmer's own garden. And even the description of the

⁶² Lawrence's letter is quoted by Marx (73) and later by Shields (335).

⁶³ I am indebted to my supervisor, Helen M. Dennis, for the insight that Morrison's deployment of the hummingbird signifies on Crèvecoeur. There is very little secondary material on Crèvecoeur and race or slavery. Doreen Alvarez Saar writes:

A careful reading of *Letters* reveals that [Africans and Native Americans] have been covertly excluded from the process of Americanization: they remain outside the melting pot process open to the English and the Europeans. [. . .] Crèvecoeur, although he abhors slavery and praises the Native American way of life, acknowledges that the Africans and the Native Americans are treated differently". ("Heritage" 245)

The same author argues that the discussion of slavery in the *Letters* functions as a vehicle for Whig Revolutionary rhetoric in "Crèvecoeur's Thoughts on Slavery".

hummingbird is more threatening and suggestive than dominant cultural allusions to it would have us believe. The passage is actually more in the style of a natural historian's observations than of a pastoralist's eulogy, and it includes the details that the creatures "will tear and lacerate flowers into a hundred pieces", "are the most irascible of the feathered tribe", and "often fight with the fury of lions" (184). Morrison's imagery thus directly imports Crèvecoeur's sense of unexpected violence and strength.

The African-American author also engages her forebear's uneasiness about race relations in unsettlingly ambiguous details of her own. In trying to explain her behaviour to Paul D, Sethe realizes that the "truth" lies in the hummingbird instincts and not in "a long drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells" (163). In this context the "tree cages" refer back to a contraption she remembers slave mothers using "to hang the babies in the trees—so you could see them out of harm's way while you worked the fields" (160). But coming just two sentences before the first hummingbird image, the phrase "tree cages" cannot fail to conjure up Crèvecoeur's description of the utterly contrasting device that was used to torture an insurrectionist negro: "something resembling a cage, suspended to the limbs of a tree", in which the victim is imprisoned (Crèvecoeur 178). The eighteenth-century writer's indignant abolitionism thus flickers in the background of Morrison's own protest. Interestingly (in the same chapter as the caged-Negro-hanging-from-a-tree incident) Crèvecoeur explicitly refutes the argument that "slavery cannot be so repugnant to human nature as we at first imagine because it has been practised in all ages and in all nations", and he directly denounces "the most horrid oppression" practised by "the Romans"

(173). This dismantling of classical justifications of slavery does much to explain Morrison's stake in clarifying and extending the subversive elements of *Letters of An American Farmer*.

Crèvecoeur's moments of radicalism co-exist with the straightforward deployment of pastoral conventions for which he is more commonly remembered. The writer's emphasis on his leisured enjoyment of his farmland — "one of my constant walks when I am at leisure is in my lowlands, where I have the pleasure of seeing my cattle, horses and colts" (183) — is directly in the Horatian tradition which so appealed to Jefferson. Jefferson's "commonplace book" excerpt from Horace's second Epode includes the Roman's celebration of the farmer's freedom to "recline now under an ancient oak, now on the thick grass" (Richard 162). "Meanwhile the brooks flow between the high banks", the quotation continues, "birds warble in the woods, and springs bubble with running water, a sweet invitation to repose" (Richard 162). In both *Beloved* and *Jazz* Morrison exposes both the inaccessibility to African-Americans of any such leisured enjoyment of the natural world and the reality that white leisure is dependent on black labour.

As I have already intimated, an emphasis on leisure is a hallmark of Southern pastoralism across the centuries. In the first essay of *I'll Take My Stand*, John Crowe Ransom stresses the cherished place of "leisure" in "the Southern establishment" no fewer than five times (12; 10-15), while in his later contribution Donald Davidson laments that "leisure" is "spoiled [. . .] by the kind of work that industrialism compels" ("Mirror" 34). The consciously overlooked ironies implicit in a slaveholding culture's celebration of

leisureliness reach an apogee in the depiction of the Cameron plantation in *Birth of A Nation*. Here the titles introduce us to “Piedmont, South Carolina, [. . .] where life runs in quaintly way” (Lang 45). This is soon followed by the young white friends’ stroll “Over the plantation to the cotton fields” (Lang 48); the walkers’ recreation is emphasized by a close-up shot of slaves tending blooming cotton. It is against this background that Ben Cameron first sees “the ideal of his dreams” in the miniature of Elsie Stoneman, which makes the pastoral matrix of romance, leisure and an idyllic rural setting complete (Lang 48). And it is exactly this matrix that Morrison takes apart in *Jazz*. As I go on to demonstrate, she does so both through the resolute anti-pastoralism of the scenes set in the South, and through engaging but ultimately dismissing pastoral and romantic conventions in those set in the North.⁶⁴

When talking to Alice Manfred about her childhood in rural Virginia, Violet Trace recalls, “We picked cotton, chopped wood, plowed. I never knew what it was to fold my hands” (112). In her depictions of the struggle that was the black experience of farming in Vesper County, Morrison makes a point of emphasizing the sheer hard work that life involved. Violet “loaded hay and handled the mule wagon like a full-grown man” (92); she “hauled hay [. . .] and handled a four-mule team in the brace” (96); she was “the powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any

⁶⁴ My argument is informed by but ultimately disagrees with Marc Conner’s article, “Wild Women and Graceful Girls: Toni Morrison’s *Winter’s Tale*”. While acknowledging the author’s stress on the horrors of Southern rural life, Conner argues that “in *Jazz* Morrison imagines the African-American novel as Romance” (341-42), and contends that she creates an “explicitly pastoral setting or romance” (353). The quotations from *The Winter’s Tale* which serve as epigraphs to each section of Conner’s essay assert a parallel between that play’s classic pastoralism and *Jazz*. While I agree with Conner’s identification of many conventional tropes of the pastoral genre within Morrison’s novel, as I shall go on to demonstrate I understand their deployment to be as sceptical as it is sincere.

man” (105). While testifying to women labourers’ heroic strength, such repetition insists that from the African-American perspective any association between the South, agricultural life and leisure is nonsensical.

Morrison pointedly stresses the exhausting nature of ploughing; this directly counters the celebration of the plough that is a recurring feature of classical and American pastoralism. The closing pages of the novel comprise a flashback to Violet’s falling asleep in her shoes after a day of plowing (225), while Henry Lestroy’s servant boy “had seen enough people slumped over a plow” to know that Wild was not dead (162). Such depictions mock the Agrarianist Frank Owsley’s assertion that “[i]t was Cincinnatus, whose hands were rough with guiding the plow [. . .] whom Southerners admired the most” (70), his colleague John Crowe Ransom’s insistence on “the love of the tiller for the soil” (18), Jefferson’s quotation from Horace about “the tired oxen dragging along the upturned ploughshare” (Richard 162), or the claim of Crèvecoeur’s American Farmer that when he ploughed with his baby son attached to the plough “the odiferous furrow exhilarates his spirits” (55). Here Morrison again continues the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who, as Blight points out, includes in his chapter “Of The Black Belt” the first-person account of a sharecropper who “seen niggers drop dead in the furrow, but they were kicked aside, and the plough never stopped” (Du Bois, *Souls* 77; Blight 252).⁶⁵

Morrison also highlights the obvious point that the privilege of contemplating natural beauty is denied to those who have no leisure. Her

⁶⁵ Cultural historians who discuss the significance of Cincinnatus and his plough to Jefferson, Washington and others include Richard (160) and Wills (13, 36). Leo Marx also discusses Jefferson’s glorification of the plough and ploughing (130-32). Interestingly, the city on the edge of which most of the action of *Beloved* takes place was presumably named after Cincinnatus.

descriptions of the Traces' experiences of the rural South constitute the characters' brief recognition of the attractiveness of their environment being immediately swept away by a more pressing economic demand or emotional problem. For example, the lyrical observation that "all of Palestine was downy with the cleanest cotton they'd ever seen" is at once deflated by the reality of the labour the cotton involves: "Three weeks. It all had to be done in three weeks" (102). Similarly, Joe's meditation on "how the hibiscus smells at night" is overwhelmed by his anguish at his mother's refusal to acknowledge him (36). Indeed, though Morrison's male protagonist "loved the woods" and likes to think of himself as a "country boy, country man" (106, 129), the author finally depicts him as a would-be pastoralist rather than one who actually achieves that fulfilment.

Critics, however, have often understood a straightforward association between Joe's rural experiences and the pastoral tradition. Patricia Hunt, for example, writes of the character's attempt "to connect with . . . the lost pastoral idyll of his youth" (53). Marc Conner, meanwhile, argues that with a passage describing Joe's search for his mother "the narrator overtly shifts the form of the narrative from the genre of the novel to the mythos of romance" (352). It is not hard to see why such conclusions are reached, because the lines comprise the novel's most explicit engagement with pastoral conventions:

Once, [. . .] Joe had walked past that place and heard what he first believed was some combination of running water and wind in high trees. The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, woodsmen have also heard. It hypnotizes mammals. Bucks raise their heads and gophers freeze. (177)

This account clearly invokes the Pan-like or Orphean idyll of classical pastoralism, and Conner is right to point out both that “there are no shepherds to be found in the Virginia woods” and that “only in the world of pastoral romance does music emanate from nature itself” (352). But it is also true that Morrison discredits Joe’s perceptions as soon as she describes them, so that the moment ultimately becomes parodic: Joe “first *believed*” he was hearing the harmonies of the pastoral world, and he “*thought* that was it” (176-77; my italics). He soon realizes that “the scrap of song came from a woman’s throat” (177); this mundane phraseology punctures the preceding romanticism. The music and its abrupt end signals the first time Wild rejects Joe, and the fact that the man then detects in her cave a “fragrance” that is “a mixture of honey and shit” destroys any idyllic possibilities (177). Joe’s mistaken impression that he is experiencing a pastoral epiphany finally serves not to endorse that tradition but to emphasize his alienation from it.

It is impossible to reconcile the Traces’ experiences with Jefferson’s famous declaration that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God” (Richard 162). As Carl Richard observes, such statements typify how Jefferson “glorified agriculture in a manner reminiscent of the *Georgics*” (162). With *Jazz*, Morrison effects not just a general challenge to the Virgilian celebration of rural life that so appealed to Jefferson and others, but also specifically engages the Roman poet’s first Eclogue. Leo Marx identifies the *Eclogues* as “the pure fountainhead of the pastoral strain in our literature”, and argues “it is in [them] that the political overtones of the pastoral situation become evident” (19). My contention is that in the repeated accounts of “the dispossession” of Rose Dear and her family from their home near Rome,

Vesper County (177), Morrison enlists Meliboeus and Tityrus's discussion of the former shepherd's eviction from his home by the authorities in the imperial city of Rome.⁶⁶ The context that Marx delineates for the Latin poem bears a striking relationship to *Jazz*:

In the background of the first eclogue, sometimes called "The Dispossessed", there was a specific action of the Roman government: the expropriation of a number of small landholders (including the poet himself) so that military veterans might be rewarded with the seized land. (20)

The presence of distorted echoes of Virgil in Morrison's novel creates new perspectives on the black experience of Reconstruction and on the theme of dispossession as it recurs throughout African-American literary tradition.⁶⁷

It is highly significant that Morrison sets the childhood home of Violet in "a little depot called Rome" (99). The fact that this Rome is a "mean little place" obviously mocks the grandiose notions of equivalence between America and the fêted European civilization to which both the Founding Fathers and pro-slavery theorists aspire (138).⁶⁸ At the same time, Morrison's choice of place name specifically destabilizes the juxtaposition of urban and rural settings

⁶⁶ Through what Shields calls her "subversive pastoral" (102, 128), Phillis Wheatley again anticipates Morrison. For Shields's discussion of this strategy in Wheatley's poems such as "To Maecenas", see *American Aeneas* 119-21. Dissonant echoes of Virgil's thematic concern with slavery in the first Eclogue sound in *Jazz*, as does his ninth Eclogue, which is also concerned with dispossession.

⁶⁷ A famous exposition on "dispossession" is of course that of Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* (279-81).

⁶⁸ Morrison mentions the place name repeatedly in the space of a few pages. For example, in addition to those I have quoted in my text she writes that Violet "had about decided to beg her way back to Rome" when she meets Joe, and has Joe narrate that "in 1906" he took his wife "to Rome" (*Jazz* 103, 126). As well as exploiting the ironic disparity between Violet's home and the European city, Morrison also engages the highly critical equivalence between the American South and Ancient Rome that Orlando Patterson asserts. Patterson writes that the American slave system "was to be Rome's closest cultural counterpart in the modern world" (76).

that characterizes the conventional pastoral mode and which is explored in the first Eclogue. According to Virgil's Tityrus, "Rome carries her head as high above other cities / As cypresses tower over the tough wayfaring tree" (Eclogue I.24-25). But while the imperial capital allows this speaker to stay on his land, through the fact that it dispossesses Meliboeus it comes to represent (as Marx points out) "organized power, authority, restraint, suffering and disorder. We are made to feel that the rural myth is threatened by the incursion of history" (21). Morrison subverts the city/country dichotomy by selecting "Rome" to refer to the rural location from which the family are evicted.⁶⁹ Furthermore, she refutes the possibility of any "rural myth" or idyll. Meliboeus envies the fact that Tityrus will continue to enjoy "loll[ing]" in "the longed-for shade" and listening to the sound of the "husky-voiced wood pigeons" while he himself is about to be deprived of such pleasures (Virgil, Eclogue I.1, I.52, I.57). But Violet's family do not lose "the solid satisfactions of the pastoral retreat: peace, leisure, and economic sufficiency" (Marx 23), because they never enjoyed those anyway. They are simply robbed of the means to survive.

Morrison reinforces the fact that her characters' plight is more serious than that of the Virgilian shepherd through depicting the actual dispossession in stark detail. Meliboeus's eviction is merely imminent, and therefore it is not quite real; in Leo Marx's reading, the poem ends with one last "night of comfort and companionship" between the two shepherds, and this "twilight mood, a blend of sadness and repose, succeeds aesthetically" (Marx 31). But

⁶⁹ A similar parodic deployment of a significant name in *Jazz* is "Wordsworth", referring both to Colonel Gray and to the county seat where he and his family live (140). The name ironically invokes the fact that, as Leo Marx argues, William Wordsworth was an important forerunner to nineteenth-century American pastoralism: "the ground of Hawthorne's reaction [to the train] had been prepared by Washington Irving and Wordsworth and the 'nature poets' of the previous century" (Marx 18).

there is no “comfort and companionship” for Rose Dear; Violet’s sudden flashback recalls her suicidal mother sitting “alone in the moonlight [. . .] waiting for morning when men came” who “hailed away the plow, the scythe, the mule, the sow, the churn and the butter press” (*Jazz* 97-98). This list emphasizes both the labour on which the family’s subsistence depended, and the fact that each and every tool has now been removed. Morrison records the family’s sense of violation as the men “picked around in [their] things” before removing the table and tipping Rose Dear out from her chair (98). The repeated listing in True Belle’s version of events — that “the men had come for the stock, the pots and the chair her daughter Rose Dear was sitting in” — reinscribes a traumatic immediacy which is absent from Marx’s reading of Virgil’s poem (*Jazz* 138).

Meliboeus laments that he is to be “driven from his home place” and asks “when shall I see my native land again?” (Virgil, *Eclogue* I.4, I.67). By contrast, Rose Dear and her family are doubly dispossessed, in that their ancestors have already been uprooted from their native Africa. The Latin word *patria* that is so pivotal in the first *Eclogue* does not translate straightforwardly to African-American experience. And Morrison further readjusts the Virgilian perspective through the fact that while the eviction of Meliboeus is the single dramatic focus of the Roman poem, the dispossession of Violet’s family is just one among many in *Jazz*. In Joe’s memory “the dispossession” refers to a widespread event; he recalls travelling to Palestine past “the burned ground and fields of black stalks; looking away from the cabins that were now just hot bricks” (177). In addition, his narrative includes a brief mention of the fact that he and Violet were later “run off” a piece of land he thought he had bought

(126). Morrison thereby highlights the fact that in the postbellum South dispossession was an everyday occurrence. In Marx's terms, African-American existence is certainly "threatened by the incursion of history" (21), but arguably that history comprises something far grimmer than the threat posed by Rome to Virgilian shepherds.

II.v Black Migration and Urbanization

The general exploration of black alienation from the pastoral idyll that is *Jazz* not only develops classical explorations of threatened rural life, but also revises Leo Marx's central thesis concerning the pastoral tradition in American experience. According to Marx, the writings of Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau and others demonstrate that "it is industrialization, represented by images of machine technology, that provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design" (26). Morrison would presumably agree that "history" makes "sentimental" pastoralism an impossibility (Marx 5, 24), but she would surely take issue with the assertion that the arrival of technology is the most traumatic aspect of that history, that Hawthorne's encounter with a train is "in many ways the greatest [. . .] event in our history" (Marx 27), or that "the contrast between the machine and the pastoral ideal [. . .] is the germ of the most final of all generalizations about America" (Marx 353). In her essay "City Limits, Village Values", the African-American author argues that in black writing anxiety about urban life is not founded on an aversion to "the mechanization of life" (38). "The horror of industrialization seems to me

mostly an elite preoccupation”, she observes parenthetically (38).⁷⁰ Her depiction of black migration and urbanization in *Jazz* supplements the strident anti-pastoral of the accounts of Southern agricultural life in a combined challenge to partially-sighted accounts of American history such as Marx’s.

A passage from Hawthorne’s notebook quoted in *The Machine in the Garden* includes the novelist’s assertion that “the space of a mile cannot mollify [the whistle of the locomotive] into harmony” (Marx 13). By contrast, *Jazz* celebrates both the centrality of the train in jazz music and the significance of the railway in African-American experience.⁷¹ Joe and Violet are part of “the wave of black people running from want and violence” (33), and as their “dancing” on the exhilarating train ride North testifies (32), technology plays a fundamental role in their escape. The characters exemplify the theory of James Alan McPherson (quoted by Houston Baker in his *Blues, Ideology and African-American Literature*):

To [. . .] those not bound by the assumptions of either business or classical traditions in art, the shrill whistle might have spoken of new possibilities. These were the backwoodsmen and Africans and recent immigrants—[. . .]. To them the machine might have been loud and

⁷⁰ In *Paradise*, Morrison makes the point that it is technological advances and industrialization that have actually enabled African-Americans to experience a version of pastoralism. In Ruby the women start to cultivate gardens, about which they become fiercely competitive, when they find that they have some free time as a result of the labour-saving machines in their homes. “In every Ruby household appliances pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed. And there was time: [. . .] front yards were given over completely to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it” (89).

⁷¹ The *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* makes the following observations in defining jazz music:

Particularly it was influenced by the tremendousness and the music-in-motion of the modern train, the beautiful machine that always seems to have represented both the power and the promise of moving away from the land where one’s parents and grandparents had been slaves [. . .] and the remembrance of such images in the spirituals [. . .] and in the underground railroad [. . .]. From the beginning, jazz was a

frightening, but its whistle and its wheels promised movement. (Baker 6)

The iconic position of the train in *Jazz* testifies to the specific implications for African-Americans of the machine's appearance in the garden that Marx's argument overlooks.

The struggle to accommodate industrialization that Marx identifies in canonical nineteenth-century American writing recurs in the Southern Agrarianists' *I'll Take My Stand* as a contemptuous refusal to countenance it. The group's introductory manifesto describes "the common or American industrial ideal" as an "evil dispensation" (x, xx). Of particular interest in relation to *Jazz* is Donald Davidson's essay, "A Mirror for Artists", which paints a satirical picture of "industrialized" artistic production. The Agrarianists' doubt that the urban or industrial lifestyle can give rise to artistic merit of course goes hand-in-hand with their defence of leisured pastoralism; their introduction argues that "art depends [. . .] on a free and disinterested observation of nature that occurs only in leisure" (xv). Morrison's testimony to jazz music — produced by a class of people for whom leisure (as opposed to unemployment) was scarce if not non-existent — forms part of her interest in Harlem as what the narrator of *Jazz* calls an "artful city" (118). As many critics have observed, the novel dismantles rather than reinforces the myths of the Harlem Renaissance and the idea of 1920s black New York as an artistic utopia.⁷² But nonetheless, it does bear witness to the vibrancy of black urban

music of train-whistle guitars, bell-ringing pianos and horns, "conductors" calling and squalling. (Gates and McKay 55)

⁷² See for example Gates's essay, "'Harlem on Our Minds'", 162, 166-67. Morrison herself once remarked in an interview about contemporary black writing, "I'm not sure that the other Renaissance, the Harlem one, was really ours. I think in some ways it was but in some ways it was somebody else's interest in it that made it exist" (Taylor-Guthrie 233).

culture at this time. It is noteworthy that while Davidson contemptuously imagines a “shop-girl” who “reads the comic strip with her bowl of patent cereal and puts on a jazz record while she rouges her lips” (35), in *Jazz* two pieces of information about Dorcas that Violet finds out are “what kind of lip rouge the girl wore” and “the band the girl liked best” (5).

In arguing that Morrison’s impulse in *Jazz* is counter-pastoral, and that she defends urbanization from the Agrarianists’ attacks, I do not wish to suggest that the novel presents an uncritical vision of city life. Indeed, as many critics have observed, she strives to expose the falsity of the idealization of urban experience. She does, nonetheless, insist on the existence of some genuine advances. For example, as part of the narrator’s euphoric description of “the City” she describes the way “wealthy whites [. . .] pile into mansions decorated and redecorated by black women richer than they are” (8). Morrison can record such a redressing of the political balance without resorting to the wacky pastoral wonderland with which Scott Fitzgerald expresses his unease about changing racial politics in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick Carraway records of an outing to “the city” that “[a]s we crossed Blackwell’s Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. [. . .] ‘Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge’ I thought” (67). And on the previous drive into Manhattan, Nick “wouldn’t have been surprised to have seen a great flock of white sheep turn the corner” (30). Both the sheep and the chauffeured blacks are part of the same fantasy land, as unlikely as each other, whereas for Morrison there can be

economic redistribution without the sheep required to make it seem unreal (and thus unthreatening).⁷³

I diverge from established criticism in arguing that through the plot centring on Joe, Dorcas, Violet and Felice Morrison explores the final inappropriateness of romantic pastoral conventions to black urban life. Several scholars argue that in Dorcas's death Morrison uncritically deploys the paradigm of sacrifice, and that this ritual plays a part in the novel's final resolution as pastoral romance. Marc Conner, for example, asserts that "Dorcas's blood is the price exacted by the City, the blood sacrifice it demands whereby youth itself is offered up to the world of sensuality and desire" ("Wild Women" 346), and also that the character functions as "a sacrificial figure in the novel, the young girl who must die in order to make possible the survival and restoration of Joe and Violet" (359). Patricia Hunt, meanwhile, argues for a more explicitly Christian interpretation of the novel's denouement. "Joe's killing of Dorcas makes her the sacrificial lamb", Hunt writes, "a Christ who is not born but murdered at Christmastime, and who rises again in the person of Felice at Easter" (56). My own reading of the final chapters, however, is that they ultimately comprise a critical engagement with and a rejection of both

⁷³ In his essay "His Mind Aglow", Bert Bender discusses the reactionary racial politics of Scott Fitzgerald, some of which find expression in *The Great Gatsby*. Morrison's referring to Harlem as "the City" in *Jazz* revises Fitzgerald's use of "the city" as a shorthand for New York in both *Gatsby* and essays such as "My Lost City". The African-American author might well take issue with Fitzgerald's appropriation of jazz music to define an "age" or cultural phenomenon from an all-white perspective. In his essay, "Echoes of the Jazz Age", the writer describes the era as a "whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure" (15); whether he means the "human race" or "the white race" is ambiguous. The only mention he makes of black people in the essay is that "for a while bootleg Negro records with their phallic euphemisms made everything suggestive" (18); in stating that "the word jazz [. . .] has meant first sex, then dancing, then music", he makes no acknowledgement of the African-American origins of the form. Interestingly, there is a significant engagement with classical tradition in *Gatsby*, not just in the deployment of epic and romantic pastoral tropes, but also in the fact that Fitzgerald originally planned to call the novel *Trimalchio in West Egg* in an allusion to Petronius's *Satyricon* (Tanner vii).

sacrificial ritual and the traditions of romantic pastoral. My interpretation is at once grounded in the details of the narrative and supported by the historical and cultural contexts against which the story is played out.

Conner is undoubtedly right in detecting resonances of Shakespearean romance in the end of *Jazz* (359). Indeed, the very name “Dorcas” recalls one of the shepherdesses in the famous sheep-shearing festival scene of *The Winter’s Tale*; Shakespeare’s character epitomizes the comic innocence of the pastoral mode. And, as Conner points out, through “Dorcas” Morrison also invokes the Biblical Tabitha (known as Dorcas), the dead young girl in the Book of Acts whom Peter restores to life (“Wild Women” 360). So there undeniably exists a distinct suggestiveness about the restorative roles of both Dorcas and Felice. My specific disagreements are with Hunt’s assertion that Dorcas “rises again in the person of Felice” (56), and with Conner’s claims first that Felice functions as Shakespeare’s Miranda, Perdita and Marina do, and second that Dorcas’s death is a condition of Joe and Violet’s reunion (355, 359). For in fact, as we discover at the novel’s opening, Dorcas’s death precipitates the nadir of the Traces’ relationship. The couple exist in a state of crisis after Violet has attacked Dorcas’s corpse at the funeral, and Joe cannot stop weeping. And although Conner is right that it is Felice whose “very presence” brings about “regeneration” (355), to my mind Morrison makes it clear that Felice is not a restored Dorcas.

It is Felice herself who most emphatically distinguishes herself from her friend, and she does so through an outspoken criticism of the dead girl to which scholars have paid surprisingly little attention. The surviving character is clearly furious with the dead one: she refuses to go to her funeral because she

believes Dorcas “let herself die” (an accusation she later repeats), and insists that she died “like a fool” (204, 213, 205). These are strong words, and any notion of the dead girl as a self-sacrificing heroine cannot withstand them.⁷⁴

Moreover, if Felice is not a reincarnation of Dorcas then neither can she be a Perdita, a Marina or even an Alcestis, for each of these characters is not simply one who plays a restorative role, but one who has herself actually returned from banishment or death. Rather than subscribing to classic romance conventions, then, Morrison positions her characters at a critical tangent to them.

One reason for the novel’s final refusal to endorse either sacrificial or romantic gestures may be American dominant culture’s persistent valorization of both. It is not hard to grasp the political implications of the popularity of the Greek tragedies *Antigone*, *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Alcestis* during the late Victorian era and the early years of the Twentieth Century that Winterer documents.⁷⁵ Each of these plays centres on either a female suicide or sacrifice; as Winterer argues, “the vast majority of American commentators on *Antigone* [. . .] cast her as a hyperfeminine, domestic figure, the incarnation of Victorian ideals of true womanhood” (“Victorian *Antigone*” 77). Indeed, “*Antigone* became a study in the selfless quality of appropriate feminine action”

⁷⁴ My critical perspective on Dorcas revises Morrison’s own expressed sense of the sacrificial heroism of her prototype in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978) which allies her with Sethe, and which I quote in Part I: “A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself” (Taylor-Guthrie 207).

⁷⁵ In a footnote to “Victorian *Antigone*”, Winterer writes:

Among the three hundred and forty-nine college productions of Greek tragedies and comedies on American campuses between 1881 and 1936, *Antigone* had a total of seventy-five, more than any other. The next most performed were *Iphigenia* with forty-nine performances; *Alcestis* with forty-five, and *Trojan Women* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* both with twenty-one. Dommis Pluggé, *History of Greek Play Production in American Colleges and Universities from 1881 to 1936* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia Uni., 1983), 31. (90)

It is interesting to note that the only Greek tragedies performed by the Howard University Players either when Morrison was an undergraduate (when she was a member of that theatre group) or when she was a teacher there are *Alcestis* (in 1952 – when she was an undergraduate), *Medea* (in 1959), and *Antigone* (in 1961) (Muse).

("Victorian Antigone" 78). Even more pertinent both to Morrison's reluctance to cast Dorcas in a sacrificial role and the author's generalized concern to demythologize ideologies of the American South is Winterer's point that:

A best-selling novel in the wartime Confederacy was Augusta Jane Evans's *Macaria; Or, Altars of Sacrifice* (1864), a novel that drew parallels between a modern woman sacrificing herself for the Confederate cause and a self-sacrificing woman in classical Greece. (Winterer, *Culture* 65).⁷⁶

When Winterer uses the word "woman" in the above contexts she presumably means "white woman", for (as Hazel Carby has argued) ideologies of black and white womanhood in nineteenth-century America were poles apart (*Reconstructing* 32). "[E]xisting outside the definition of true womanhood, black female sexuality was nevertheless used to define what those boundaries were", Carby writes (30). Building on the work of Barbara Welter, who points out that according to dominant cultural ideals of femininity, death itself was preferable to a loss of innocence, Carby argues that "the black woman repeatedly failed the test of true womanhood because she survived her institutionalized rape, whereas the true heroine would rather die than be sexually abused" (59, 34). And even where sexual impurity was not involved, the idea of young female death was widely revered; as Welter points out, the death of a young girl was "so celebrated as a triumph of beauty and innocence that a whole ritual grew up around it" (*Dimity Convictions* 11).

⁷⁶ The whole notion of sacrifice can be seen as tainted by Confederate ideology, in that the belief that the Civil War demanded the South to sacrifice itself to the Lost Cause was prevalent. *Birth of a Nation* typifies this sentiment when it describes the Cameron brothers' enlisting with the Confederate army as "[a] mother's gift to the cause — three sons off for the war" (Lang 56).

Bearing in mind these cultural contexts and their implicit racial exclusions, it is hard to read Dorcas's death as a noble sacrifice that should be celebrated. After all, the character in *Jazz* who chooses to abandon her own children to bring up her mistress's is named "True Belle", a contemptuous and parodic fusion of "true womanhood" and "southern belle". Carby points out that while black women's tendency to survive their misfortunes excluded them from achieving true womanhood, black writers such as Harriet Jacobs turned this to their own advantage by insisting on their survival as a means of defiance (*Reconstructing* 32, 59). In my discussion of Morrison's rejection of the tragic mode in Part I, I documented the author's "interest" in survival. But Dorcas chooses not to survive; she begs the fellow party guests not to call an ambulance, and "to please leave her alone and let her rest" (210). And in Felice's exasperation as she relates these facts, it may be possible to detect some of the author's own.

According to her friend, Dorcas self-consciously styled herself as a tragic or romantic heroine; even worse, she "used people" to that end (212). "Everything was like a picture show to her", Felice complains, "and she was the one on the railroad track, or the one trapped in the sheik's tent when it caught on fire" (202). The narrator's perspective on the party where Dorcas so enjoys holding centre stage with Acton contains an unmistakable critique of the scene's contrivedness: "Oh, the room—the music—the people leaning in doorways. [. . .] This is the market where gesture is all" (192). The comparison between the occasion and an epic battle is mock-heroic: "Everything is now. It's like war. Everyone is handsome, shining, just thinking about other people's blood" (191). And the superficiality of Acton and the party hostess — evident

in the fact that after the shooting they care not about Dorcas but about the mess her wound is making — means that the assertion “this is the place for romance” is utterly undermined (192).

Having exposed the flaws and inadequacies of romance in the social setting, Morrison does not attempt to reclaim the tradition for her novel’s ending. She eschews the closing vision of Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1900), in which events are described by one character as “a fairy tale of love and chivalry such as we read of only in books” (Hopkins 398). Instead, through significant, revisionary echoes of canonical literary works she rejects classically-informed romanticism, and to reinforce this rejection she combines it with an unashamed celebration of the mundane realities of the Traces’ and Felice’s lives. Describing Joe’s alienation from the party scene, the narrator observes, “Any throwaway lover in wet unlaced shoes and a buttoned-up sweater under his coat is a foreigner here. This is not the place for old men; this is the place for romance” (192). The second sentence here clearly plays on W.B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”, which famously begins, “That is no country for old men” (821). Yeats’s “aged man”, a “tattered coat upon a stick” who has no place among “the young in one another’s arms” is not far-removed from Joe in his tatty shoes and sweater, and there are clear affinities between the Morrisonian protagonist’s rejected love for Dorcas and the Irish poet’s “heart”, which “sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / [. . .] knows not what it is”. The divergence begins, however, when Yeats asks the “sages” to “gather [him] / Into the artifice of eternity”. The poet wishes to be immortalized as a classical piece of art, in “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths

make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling”. But Morrison has a very different future in store for Joe.

On the novel’s penultimate page, the narrator focuses on the down-to-earth realities of the Traces’ newly-restored love. He “closes her neckline snap while waiting for the trolley”, while she “brushes lint from his blue serge suit when they come out of the movie house into the sunlight” (229). Just as their coming out of the movie house into natural light symbolizes the unromantic, non-mythological nature of their relationship, they also do not resemble a photograph. The narrator realizes, “When I see them now they are not sepia, still, losing their edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are real” (226). The word “still” in this passage works as both an adjective meaning “motionless” and as an adverb meaning “unchangingly” or “continuously”. The couple are not still, like a photographic image, and they are not still like a photographic image. This dual function of the word exactly mirrors its use in the well-known opening lines of Keats’s “Ode on A Grecian Urn”: “Thou still unravished bride of quietness / Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time” (607). But while Keats praises the urn for being still, in *Jazz* the narrator celebrates the fact that the Traces are “not” still. In contrast to the youth and the maiden depicted on the urn, Morrison’s couple are not “caught midway between was and must be” (*Jazz* 226), but are getting on with enjoying their lives, “busy being original, complicated, changeable—human” (220). And Felice — herself uneasy with the way she and Dorcas used to picture themselves as people they’d “seen in a picture show or magazine” (209) — shares the narrator’s appreciation for the

couple's "reality". "She doesn't lie, Mrs Trace", she observes, "Nothing she says is a lie" (205).⁷⁷

Unlike a Van der Zee photograph that mythologizes the Harlem Renaissance, unlike Yeats's Grecian goldwork, unlike the statuesque Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* and unlike the Grecian Urn, the Traces are not a frozen art form. At the end of *Jazz*, Morrison implicitly rejects the kind of "cold pastoral" that so fascinates Keats (Keats 607). And this is symptomatic of her widespread sceptical engagement with the various elements of classical and neoclassical tradition — myth, epic, tragedy, the visual arts as well as romantic pastoralism — that the dominant culture has deployed in its historiography of slavery and all that followed.

II.vi The Civil Rights Movement

In her 2004 Foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison writes with pride of the list of authors she had edited while at Random House in the 1970s. These included,

⁷⁷ A relevant deployment of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is that of Faulkner's in "The Bear". Here, in trying to persuade Ike to accept his inherited land, McCaslin Edmonds reads out the lines, "*She cannot fade though thou hast not thy bliss, [. . .] Forever wilt thou love and she be fair*" (Faulkner, "The Bear" 283; italics in original). In this seminal text of Southern pastoralism, as Westling has argued, the older man tries to link Ike's respect for the bear to his relationship to the farmland and thus to equate the land, the bear and the erotic feminine body (Westling 118-21). Lucinda MacKethan discusses this same passage from "The Bear" in her essay on that story and *Song of Solomon* (109). There is a recurring impulse in Faulkner's writing towards moments of tableau or arrested movement, often expressed in the imagery of classical representative art. For example, in *Light in August* the author compares Joe Christmas to "an equestrian statue strayed from its pedestal" (210), and later describes Hightower perceiving "his future, his life, intact and on all sides complete and inviolable, like a classic and serene vase" (478). Morrison may be engaging this tendency when she describes the scene of Hagar's attempted murder of Milkman as "the paralyzed woman and the frozen man" (*Song* 130), or in the "tableau" that Sethe, Denver and Beloved create in the Clearing (*Beloved* 98), in the woodshed after the killing of Beloved, where "they all might have remained that way, frozen until Thursday, except one of the boys on the floor sighed" (151), and in the echoes of the statuesque Niobe in the blood-soaked Sethe that I have already discussed (*Beloved* 153).

she specifies, “public figures eager to set the record straight (Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Huey Newton)” (ix).⁷⁸ Her own novels’ consideration of the Civil Rights Movement is not extensive, but it is nonetheless significant. In *Song of Solomon* and *Love* her deployment of classical tradition is central to her own setting straight of the record on that revolutionary period in American life.

The author only mentions Muhammad Ali once in her fictional oeuvre, and that is in her most recent novel. There, Sandler Gibbon recalls a fishing trip with Cosey in which, after drinking laced coffee, “They were soon deep in the merits of Cassius Clay, which quelled an argument about Medgar Evers” (42). Morrison’s deployment of Ali’s original name has a multi-layered resonance that epitomizes both her ambivalence towards the function of classicism in American culture and the radical potential of that ambivalence. According to the autobiography that she edited, *The Greatest* (1975), the boxer changed his name in 1964 after joining the Nation of Islam (xiii); his subsequent refusal to answer to “Cassius Clay” became a source of lifelong controversy.⁷⁹ Morrison’s use of his original name not only avoids anachronism — the fishing trip takes place some time in the 1950s — but also invokes both the Roman Cassius, co-assassin of Julius Caesar who was revered by the American Founding Fathers, and the nineteenth-century Kentuckian statesman and abolitionist, Cassius

⁷⁸ The texts Morrison edited are: Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (1975); Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), and Huey P. Newton, *To Die For the People* (1972), re-published in 1995 as *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*, ed. Huey P. Newton and Toni Morrison.

⁷⁹ In *The Greatest*, Ali refers to “Cassius Clay” as his “slave name” (30). He writes:
Actually I liked the way my name sounded, and I hadn’t thought of changing it until I went deeper into black history and heard the teachings of Mr Muhammad. Then I asked, why should I keep a name handed down to me by a slave master, liberal or not? Why should I keep my white slave master’s name visible and my black ancestors invisible, unknown, unhonored? (41)

Marcellus Clay, for whom both Muhammad Ali and his father were named.⁸⁰

Readers' knowledge of the boxer's vehement rejection of his given name effects a questioning of narratives of Civil Rights history such as that by Garry Wills, who argues that "the heroic age of Civil Rights" can be conceptualized as a sequel to or reincarnation of the Revolutionary and Early Republican era (*Cincinnatus* 131).

Ali's most controversial political act was his refusal to fight in the Vietnam War and his outspoken criticism of the conflict, but he maintains in *The Greatest* that he "wanted to be known as a freedom fighter", and he repeatedly includes details of his civil rights activism, from his argument with a waitress who wouldn't serve him in 1960 to his much later sharing of a platform at an Arkansas college lecture with Floyd McKissick of CORE (68, 313). In the same work, he writes of his disillusion in discovering that his Kentuckian namesake was not worthy of the esteem in which he was traditionally held:

Whatever pride I may have felt in the name faded when I found out a little more of what abolitionist Clay thought about black people. One of my teachers at Central High, proud that I had that name [. . .] directed me to a book, *The Writings of Cassius M. Clay*, by Horace Greeley. The next week I brought it back to him and read out loud what the Great Clay had said about race: "I am of the opinion that the Caucasian or white is the superior race. [. . .] Historians now unite in making the Caucasian race the first in civilization through all past time." [. . .] That

⁸⁰ In his *Cassius Marcellus Clay: Firebrand of Freedom* (1976)—which itself epitomizes American historiographers' recourse to classical tradition in that it compares Clay to Ulysses (105)—H. Edward Richardson describes the man as "a paradox of history" (ix).

was the last time I was ever called on in school to follow white Clay's footsteps. He had gotten rid of his slaves, but held on to White Supremacy. (40)

Muhammad Ali must renounce the bequest of both white American heroism and the dominant cultural classicism that underpins it. But to Cosey and Sandler in *Love* (as an unparalleled boxer named Cassius Clay) he is an unambiguous hero who distracts them from their disagreement over Evers.

It is interesting to note that *The Greatest* may well have influenced Morrison's representations of the Emmett Till case, of Guitar and of the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon*. Ali recalls his outrage at Till's murder, that Emmett Till and [he] were about the same age", and that he "couldn't get Emmett out of [his] mind" until he derailed a train as "a way to get back at white people for his death" (34).⁸¹ Guitar is similarly outraged, similarly inspired to take revenge, and is also incredulous at Milkman's attempt to prioritize his own Oedipal anxieties over the Mississippian murder. When trying to enlist Guitar's sympathy over his discovery that he was breastfed till late into his childhood, Milkman says, "Yeah, well, fuck Till. I'm the one in trouble" (88). Guitar's incensed reply, "Did I hear you right, brother?", asserts the greater urgency of racial justice over classically-archetypal personal issues. But in the same novel, Morrison simultaneously enlists Greek myth in the service of her representation of black political struggle.

Towards the end of *Song of Solomon*'s first part, Morrison includes a classical reference that is so conventional in canonical literature that it functions here as a kind of palimpsest. The author appropriates for an African-American

perspective on the Civil Rights Movement an allusion that has traditionally been applied to other historical processes that are more valued by the dominant culture. The passage in question occurs when Corrie returns home from her liaison with Porter to hear:

Men's voices. Corinthians blinked. She had just come from a house in which men sat in a lit kitchen talking in loud excited voices, only to meet an identical scene at home. She wondered if this part of the night, a part she was unfamiliar with, belonged, had always belonged, to men. If perhaps it was a secret hour in which men rose like giants from dragon's teeth and, while the women slept, clustered in their kitchens.

(203)

The comparison between both the arguing Milkman and Macon and the strategy-making Seven Days to the men sprung from dragon's teeth in Greek myth comprises a multiple engagement with prior texts.

On first reading, the analogy between the Dead family and the founding dynasties of Thebes (who grew from the teeth sown by Cadmus) stands straightforwardly as one of several castings of Milkman and his family in relation to Oedipus and his lineage, the House of Cadmus. Understood in this way the reference gives heroic stature to the Dead family, and suggests the possibility of their undergoing a tragic fate. But the frequency of allusions to the Cadmean myth in prior American literature, as well as the fact that Corrie's simile applies to the bloodthirsty Civil Rights activists as well as to her family, immediately complicate this singular interpretation.

⁸¹ Ali's *The Greatest* was published in 1975, two years before the appearance of *Song of Solomon*.

I have already drawn attention to William Faulkner's comparing Thomas Sutpen's offspring to an "ironic fecundity of dragon's teeth" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 62). But the twentieth-century novelist is not the first to enlist this allusion in representing Southern experience. In Henry Adams's *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880) the Northern protagonist Sybil is taken by the Southerner, Carrington, to view the Civil War's dead in Arlington Cemetery. Adams writes:

[E]ven [she] was startled as she rode through the gate and found herself suddenly met by the long white ranks of head-stones, stretching up and down the hill-sides by thousands [. . .] as though Cadmus had reversed his myth, and had sown living men, to come up dragon's teeth. (109)

Adams suggests that the Civil War is a kind of grotesque inversion of the heroic internecine conflict of the Cadmean warriors.

Besides invoking canonical representations of Southern history, Corrie's observation speaks to Ezra Pound's depiction of the American Revolution. In Canto 62, the first of the poet's so-called "Adams Cantos" — a sequence partly concerned with the *Works* of John Adams, with America's founding and with the concept of origins as a whole — the poet includes the elliptical quotation, "never Cadmus" (Pound 160). This phrase is taken from Adams's description of the Boston Massacre, in which the statesman writes, "the drops of blood then shed in Boston were like the dragon's teeth of ancient fable . . . the seeds, from which sprang up the multitudes who would recognize no arbitration but the deadly one of the battle-field" (Brooker 307). John Adams and Pound after him imply that the Revolution has the mythical and tragic status of the war that leads to the foundation of Thebes. Both they and Henry Adams equate

dominant cultural America with the ancient City. By contrast, in comparing the arguing Milkman and Macon and the discursive members of the Seven Days, Morrison suggests that the American conflict equalling the classical archetype in status and significance is neither that of the Revolutionaries deposing their colonizing oppressor, nor that of the Union and Confederate armies led by Grant and Lee. Instead, she suggests, it is the divisions between African-American men during the Civil Rights era — expressed here in conflicts between Macon, Milkman and Guitar over questions of material gain versus political advancement and violence versus non-violence — that merit this comparison.⁸²

Unlike that of Henry Adams or Ezra Pound, Morrison's allusion does not specifically mention Cadmus. This lack of specificity enables it simultaneously to engage the myth of Jason and the Golden fleece: Jason plants teeth which rise as armed men who fight each other over a rock instead of attacking their creator. W.E.B. Du Bois subverts this myth in the description of the cotton plantations with which he opens the "Quest of the Golden Fleece" chapter of *Souls* (83). Du Bois's analogy maintains a powerful ambiguity in terms of exactly who it implies the fighting men to be: does the author conceive of his "armed men" as the two sides of the Civil War, or as opposed whites and blacks, or does he mean that since Reconstruction white America has escaped with the golden fleece by provoking divisions within the black community in a policy of "divide and rule"? The lack of clarification allows for both

⁸² Morrison is not the first African-American to deploy the Cadmean allusion to serve black political interests. In a letter of 1859, Frances Ellen Harper compares anti-black legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Law to "the fabulous teeth sown by Cadmus — they rise, armed men, to smite" (Foster 48).

conservative and radical interpretations. And the ambiguity serves Morrison well in turn, in that it enables her to revise canonical deployments of the Cadmus myth while acknowledging Du Bois's prior reconfiguration of the Jason myth.

There is yet another important dimension to Corrie's simile. Given that the character's return home immediately precedes her brother's intervention in her love affair and her father's subsequent injunction against Porter, the gender politics implicit in the reference are significant. The concept of armed men "clustering" in women's "kitchens" — a sacred, creative space in Morrison's novels — is a threatening one (*Song* 203). It anticipates the Founding Fathers gathering at the Oven to plot the destruction of the Convent in *Paradise*. At the same time it comprises a comment on what Michele Wallace has termed the "macho" elements of the Civil Rights Movement and on the problematic implications of those elements for black women.⁸³

Amongst her many arguments and examples, Wallace quotes from Angela Davis's 1974 autobiography (edited by Morrison) to prove her point that "precious few women were allowed to do anything important in the Black

⁸³ For Wallace's discussion of the misogyny of the Movement, see her *Black Macho and The Myth of The Superwoman* (1978), for example 6-7, 13, 34-38. David Cowart perceives the conflict between men and women in the Civil Rights Movement to be a significant theme in *Song of Solomon*. He writes:

Members of [black militant] organizations espoused violence to acquire political power—and sexism to recover or reconstitute black manhood. Ron Karenga, for example, openly preached the idea that black women's role was properly to "complete" or "complement" black men. This notion continues to polarize black men and women, and its presence contributes part of the dramatic tension in Morrison's novel. (96)

Movement” (162).⁸⁴ While Corrie in *Song of Solomon* has not been allowed to do anything important at all, the men-as-dragon’s-teeth-in-women’s-kitchens image protests not just her own disempowerment but the exclusion of feminism from the agenda of the Civil Rights struggle. Interestingly, Morrison also deploys a classical reference to make a similar point in *Love*. In that novel, as I have already argued, the author puns on the Greek Kore in Christine’s misunderstanding of CORE as “Cora” (96). The homophone contributes to the novel’s thematic concern with conceptions of America’s discovery and colonization in terms of rape. But the invocation of Kore in this context — “CORE is sitting-in in Chicago (who was she, this Cora?)” — also specifically critiques the Civil Rights Movement for its reinscription of the dominant culture’s oppression of black women (*Love* 96).⁸⁵ And at the same time, the allusion implies that the Movement itself became a corrupted, violated cause.

Exemplifying the versatility of her classicism, however, Morrison’s association between the struggle for black civil rights and Kore ultimately envisions a positive future as much as it protests a lamentable past. For Kore is symbolic not just of rape and loss but also of regeneration and renewal. As Helen Dennis explains of Eleusinian ritual, the Greater Mysteries which were sacred to Demeter and Kore “culminated in a vision of the Kore appearing to

⁸⁴ Wallace quotes from Davis’s account of the workings of the SNCC, for example that “whenever we women were involved in something important, they began to talk about ‘women taking over the organization’—calling it a matriarchal coup d’état” (Wallace 160). Wallace goes on to critique Davis for “reach[ing] right over all of the possible issues that might have been considered relevant to her own experience of the issue of the plight of the black male ‘political prisoner’”, but adds that she “understand[s] Angela Davis’s choice much better than [she] often care[s] to admit” (164-65).

⁸⁵ Of particular relevance to Morrison’s association of Kore with the Civil Rights Movement is Wallace’s recording of a comment by Stokely Carmichael, “The only position of women in SNCC is prone” (7).

rise from out of the ground and seen in or through fire. [. . .] The vision constituted a reassurance of life's perpetuation".⁸⁶ The ritual sought "confirmation", Dennis continues:

that both the agricultural and the civic life would continue to flourish. The vision of the Kore rising from death was a concrete image of the initiates' knowledge that the natural and the cultural world would not die during the winter months, but would merely rest, to be reanimated the following spring. (275)

The analogy between the Civil Rights Movement and Kore in *Love* thus fits perfectly with the simultaneous processes of dismantling and reconceptualizing culture that define the Morrisonian project.

"Either we will make history or remain the victims of it", writes Michele Wallace in *Black Macho* (177). This analysis has focused on Morrison's own remaking of the narratives of American history. It has shown that her representations of the nation's past depend absolutely on her strategic engagement with classical tradition.

⁸⁶ Dennis's explanation is based on Carl Kerényi's *Eleusis* (1967).

fetish” of “the purity of blood” and on its moral and intellectual correlatives. Through allusion to classical literature that itself shares these concerns, through ironic deployment of the imagery of *miasma* and through distorted echoes of classical purification ritual she exposes the illogic and the dangers inherent in what Paul Gilroy calls “ideas about the integrity and purity of cultures” (*Black Atlantic* 7). Morrison’s strategies obtain a particular power from the fact that constructions of racial difference have consistently appealed to the classical world for validation, and that the classical tradition has itself been fabricated as a pure and purifying force.

In her devastating analysis of the processes by which, in 1991, Clarence Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court in spite of the damning testimony of Anita Hill, the author deplores the fact that “the site of the exorcism of critical national issues was situated in the miasma of black life” (“Friday” x). Her perception that African-American culture is constructed as a contaminating or defiling presence by the dominant one recalls the central premise of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), in which the survival of the nation and all it esteems is threatened by the “*psychic epidemic*” of “Jes Grew”, which “infects all that it touches” (5, 13; italics in original).² The novelists’ use of the concept of *miasma* is effective not just because it mocks the grandiosity of the culture that promotes the fear of pollution, but also because it imports from Ancient Greece the sense of contamination’s ubiquity. In his work *Miasma* (1983), the

² There is little published scholarship comparing Reed and Morrison. Lawrence Hogue discusses both *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Jazz* to illustrate his thesis that “African American writers [. . .] have attempted to engage textually the limitations of Enlightenment reason, the violence of what Enrique Dussel calls the ‘myth of modernity’, the representation of the African American as other than reason, and the postmodern African American experience” (168). He does not consider the issue of pollution or *miasma* in Morrison, however, nor either author’s interest in the interconnectedness of African and classical cultures.

Part III Traditions of Purity in American Life

III.i The Power of *Miasma*

“What then, is the Big Secret about to be shared?”, asks Morrison of Claudia’s conspiratorial opening sentence in *The Bluest Eye*. “A botanical aberration”, the author suggests to herself. “Pollution, perhaps” (“Unspeakable” 21).¹ Here she simultaneously conceals and reveals an oeuvre-wide concern, for her novels engage less with environmental disaster than with various ideological constructions of “pollution” and of its polar opposite, purity. This final part of my thesis demonstrates the importance of the Greek concept of *miasma* in Morrison’s explorations of the impure and the pure. The author configures processes of contamination and purification in ways that destabilize the interdependent, insidious (and ultimately nonsensical) conceptions of racial, moral and intellectual purity that have been valorized in dominant American culture since the nation’s emergence out of Enlightenment thought.

In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison lists “fetishization” as one of the “linguistic strategies” deployed by “Africanist” texts (68). “Blood, for example”, she writes, “is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex” (68). American literature (both black and white) has of course concerned itself with these themes since its inception. My specific interest here is with the transformations that Morrison’s classicism enacts on the “pervasive

¹ Claudia’s first sentence in *The Bluest Eye* reads, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” (3). Morrison repeats her point about the “Big Secret” in her 1992 Afterword to the novel (171).

classical scholar Robert Parker describes the concept as a “pervasive phenomenon” (2). In Greece the concern with pollution and purification comprised a complex network of religious beliefs and social behaviours, and the “metaphor of defilement” is applied to “certain dangerous conditions” including birth, death (both natural and violent), disease, crime and sex (4). Making a similar point, Vernant writes in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* that “[d]efilement could affect men, families, cities, holy places, and even the gods themselves. The many types of defilement are matched by many forms of ritual” (123). Morrison’s catch-all phrase “the miasma black life” suggests that to the dominant culture every aspect of the dominated one is a potential pollutant. At the same time, nothing in what Reed calls “Civilization As We Know It” is safe from contamination (*Mumbo Jumbo* 4).

Comparison between the workings of *miasma* in Ancient Greece and the USA highlights a partial (and ironic) affinity between Greek purificatory practice, modern Enlightenment tradition and American racial segregation. Parker’s study of *miasma* quotes Plato’s definition of purification in the *Sophist* as “the science of division” (18), and his own study focuses on the way the practice “relates [. . .] to the desire for order” (31). The representations of racist thought in Morrison’s novels show how Enlightenment race theory and segregationist practice in the US share what Plato (again defining purification) calls “the kind of division that retains what is better but expels the worse” (Parker 18). Both Reed and Morrison would probably argue that America diverges from Greece, however, in the extent to which purity is an ideology or a political ideal. Parker acknowledges that ideas about *miasma* did reinforce ideology (17), and his observation that the “lustral stoups” outside temples and

important civic buildings in Athens demarcated “the barrier beyond which those deprived of civil rights might not pass” certainly attests to this (19). But Vernant insists that “in the official religion the quest for purity plays only a minor role: it is a means of preparation but never an end in itself” (*Myth and Society* 123).

For characters in novels such as *Tar Baby* or *Paradise*, on the other hand, purity is most definitely an end in itself. Valerian Street’s obsession with decorum or Jade’s with racial differentiation are ideologically rather than religiously motivated, and while the men of Ruby invoke Christianity to strengthen their cause, it is an obsession with purity itself that drives their moral and racial censoriousness. As I shall go on to demonstrate, Morrison’s deployment of the imagery associated with *miasma* and with the purification ritual of scapegoating is strikingly extensive. Yet in her engagement with these classical paradigms, the ambivalence that characterizes her relationship with tragic tradition and with the role of Greece and Rome in American historiography persists. That is to say, while she repeatedly critiques the dominant culture’s deployment of concepts of purity and impurity, she also — most notably in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* — enlists the discourse of *miasma* to serve her own political ends.

According to Robert Parker, the “noun *miasma*” is “ubiquitous in the tragedians” (13). While it is Oedipus who stands out as “one of the great polluted figures of Greek literature” (Parker 109), and while there are allusions to the Sophoclean drama in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, it is the extent of Morrison’s dialogue with both *The Oresteia* and *The Bacchae* that interests

me here.³ The power of *miasma* is a central theme in the reciprocal violence that structures the Aeschylan trilogy; as Parker observes, Orestes is “driven to the matricide by the fear of one pollution” but is “seized by another after performing it” (1). Wherever Morrison is interested in cycles of crime and atonement and in either inter- or intra-racial revenge, — that is, in every novel from *Sula* to *Love* — there are revisionary echoes of Oresteian imagery. As I go on to illustrate, while the establishment of the Athenian court of law and the redefinition of justice with which *The Eumenides* ends has a specific resonance within dominant, Enlightenment-bred American culture, it has a specific dissonance within African-American experience. Morrison exploits this disparity to the full in *Song of Solomon* and in her own trilogy, while in *Love* she takes on the Aeschylan themes of order and disorder, and of the triumph of rationality over blind, mad passion.

Disorder, madness and passion are of course themselves contaminating forces in the Greek worldview, and together with their inverse, order and reason, they famously comprise the central concerns of *The Bacchae*. In its staging of Pentheus’s attempts to overthrow Dionysus and the god’s merciless response, Euripides’s play is also profoundly concerned with vengeance, and, particularly in *Paradise*, Morrison’s intertwined allusions to both it and *The Oresteia* illuminate a relationship between the two Greek works which conventional classical scholarship tends to overlook. While Athena’s rational vision at the end of *The Eumenides* speaks to that of the American republic,

³ I am grateful to Sharon Jessee for first illuminating the dialogue between *The Bacchae* and *Paradise* in her conference paper, “The Gods are Laughing at Us”, and for directing me to the C.K. Williams translation of the Euripides. Critics who (briefly) discuss *Beloved* and *The Oresteia* include Corti, Leslie Harris, and Otten in “Melodrama”.

Pentheus (who is obsessed with order, limits and control while prone to excessive use of force) embodies the rationalism of Greek and American Enlightenments taken to its logical (or illogical) extreme. His fate at the hands of Dionysus illustrates the savagery of vengeance with which *The Oresteia* is concerned, but may also be prophetic about the fate of the American hegemony.⁴

It has been illuminating, when reading various translations of *The Bacchae* with Morrison in mind, to consider not just Arrowsmith's "standard version" or C.K. Williams's more recent poetic rendition, but also Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, which was first published in London in 1973. Morrison has been interested in Soyinka for decades. In 1972, while working as an editor at Random House in New York, she anthologized an excerpt from his short play, *The Strong Breed* (1964). And in April 2005 she joined with Nadine Gordimer and Derek Walcott at Harvard to honour the Nigerian playwright on his seventieth birthday.⁵ Soyinka's version of *The Bacchae* is important to this discussion because he explicitly establishes a "Black Atlantic" context for the staging of Euripidean conflicts. For example, in his introductory account of the rise of Dionysian mysteries in Greece, he writes that "[a] series of wars had displaced peasants in their

⁴ For a discussion of the parallels between the Greek Enlightenment and modern, Enlightenment-bred "rational" culture see Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational* 189 and 195, and especially 254.

⁵ I go on to discuss Morrison's anthologizing of *The Strong Breed* in *Contemporary African Literature* later in this part. In a 1986 interview Morrison described "the plays of Soyinka" as "the kinds of books that one can re-read with enormous discoveries" (Taylor-Guthrie 229). For a description of her attendance at Soyinka's 70th Birthday see Ken Gerwertz, "Soyinka Feted by fellow Nobel Prize Winners". There is little published scholarship comparing Morrison and Soyinka. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi discusses "the abiku/ogbanje phenomenon" in Soyinka's *Aké* and Morrison's *Beloved*, but no critic has considered Soyinka's *Bacchae* in relation to Morrison. This is presumably because her own classicism has been underemphasized until now.

thousands [. . .]. Such labour migrations, as in the contemporary instance of the Americas and the Indies, brought with them their customs and religions” (vii).⁶ As I shall later discuss in more detail, Soyinka emphasizes and extends Euripides’s themes of purity and impurity, of voyeurism, and of revenge: all the aspects of *The Bacchae* with which Morrison’s novels also engage.

There is an obvious objection to my claim that Morrison and Soyinka draw an affinity between Pentheus and American dominant culture, in that it appears to construct a second implied affinity between the followers of Dionysus and African-American culture. The stereotype of the irrational African, or what Morrison describes as “the transference to blackness of the power of illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire” is exactly the kind of deployment of impurity that her novels fight against (*Playing* 80-81). Making a similar point, Soyinka has castigated the Negritudists, who (in his eyes) “said, oh yes, the Gobineaus of this world are right; Africans neither think nor construct, but it doesn’t matter because — voilà — they intuit” (“Ideology and the Social Vision” 129).⁷ But Morrison’s engagement with *The Bacchae* in *Paradise* suggests not that the Convent women are the equivalent of the frenzied Thebans, or of the vengeful chorus of Bacchantes, but that that is how the dominant culture constructs and perceives their “otherness”. The novels demand a re-evaluation and redefinition

⁶ Soyinka’s *Bacchae* of course appeared nearly twenty years before Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, and Gilroy does not discuss the work, but as a Nigerian playwright’s re-working of a Greek tragedy in an implicitly American context for performance in London, the play seems to epitomize many of Gilroy’s concerns. Other details in Soyinka’s version that suggest an American context include the addition of an extra chorus of slaves, the fact that the Slave Leader should be “fully negroid” (xiii), and the stage direction that “[the leader’s] style is based on the lilt and energy of the black hot gospellers” (18; italics in original). For a recent discussion of the play see Lorna Hardwick, “Decolonizing Classics” 9.

⁷ On the same theme, Gilroy observes that it is possible to effect “an archaeology of the icons of the blacks that appear as signs of irrational disorder or as a means to celebrate the power of human nature uncorrupted by the decadence of the civilizing process” (45).

of irrationality; they refuse its dismissal as what the author calls “the general miasma of black incoherence” (“Official” ix).

Ishmael Reed anticipates Morrison’s insistence on reconceiving the irrational in one of *Mumbo Jumbo*’s repeated phrases: “They are calling it a plague when in fact it is an anti-plague” (25, 33). The revolutionary spirit of African culture in the Americas, with its “miasmatic source” in Haiti, though perceived as a disease or blight is in fact, like an antibody or antidote, a cure (Reed 64). Reed, who explicitly links the Jes Grew phenomenon first to Osiris and then to Dionysus, writes that “Dionysus traveled to Greece where the Dance ‘spread like wildfire’ although Homer doesn’t mention it” (168). Here, in one of the semi-parodic citations of scholarship that characterizes his work, he is both directly quoting and glossing E.R. Dodds’s *The Greeks and the Irrational*.⁸ Dodds’s book sheds interesting light on Morrison’s own work, in turn, because it reminds us to distinguish between Dionysiac religion as it was actually practised by the Ancient Greeks and as it is represented in the bloody climax of *The Bacchae*. Dodds argues that the “social function” of “early Dionysiac ritual” was “essentially cathartic” (76); “Dionysus is [. . .] the cause of madness and the liberator from madness” (273). In the early choral odes of *The Bacchae* itself the women insist that their rites are pure and holy; in Williams’s translation they call on worshippers to be “pious and purified” and in Arrowsmith’s the first Messenger records seeing the Bacchantes sleeping “modestly and soberly, not as you think” (*Bac.* trans. Williams 6; trans.

⁸ Dodds writes of “the Power of the Dance” in his chapter on “Maenadism”: “As Pentheus observes [. . .] it ‘spreads like wildfire’” (*Greeks* 272). And in his chapter “From Shame-Culture to Guilt-Culture”, Dodds observes, “There is no trace in Homer of the belief that pollution was either infectious or hereditary” (*Greeks* 36).

Arrowsmith 685).⁹ The irrational is, paradoxically, at once contaminating and purifying.

So while in *Jazz* and *Love* Morrison explores the potential dangers of Dionysiac excess, in *Sula* and *Paradise* she shows that what is commonly perceived as “plague” can in fact be “anti-plague”. The need for a new relationship between Nietzsche’s “Apolline” and “Dionysiac” forces (a predicament that recalls *The Bacchae*), and the need for practicable alternatives to violent revenge (a predicament that recalls *The Oresteia*) drives almost every storyline in the Morrisonian oeuvre, from Pilate’s and Macon Dead’s contrasting worldviews to Jade’s and Son’s conviction that they need to rescue each other from an abyss; from Milkman’s and Guitar’s different stances on racial justice to Sethe’s murder of Beloved and Beloved’s determination to avenge herself on Sethe; and from Valerian’s confrontation with the outrage at the core of his supposedly exemplary existence to Joe Trace’s extra-marital affair, to both his and Violet’s reactions to that affair, and to the struggles between women fighting for the power they believe Bill Cosey can confer. The author’s recourse to canonical Greek drama in exploring these conflicts is fundamental to the refutation of dominant American conceptions of purity that her work comprises.

At the heart of *Mumbo Jumbo* is Reed’s memorable account of how “The Book of Thoth” came to be buried (or not buried) “beneath the center of the Cotton Club” in Harlem (190). A crucial moment in the dissemination of Egyptian

⁹ As C.K. Williams provides no line numbers, references throughout to his translation are to page numbers; references throughout to Arrowsmith’s translation are to line numbers.

religion is Osiris's orchestral tour with "a choir directed by a young comer named Dionysus whom you don't hear very much about in his Egyptian setting" (165). Here Reed engages the theory of Egypt's cultural legacy to Greece to which Martin Bernal, some fifteen years later, devotes pages of scholarship in *Black Athena*. As I have already mentioned, in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" Toni Morrison unequivocally endorses Bernal and his claim that it took "some seventy years" to "eliminate Egypt as the cradle of civilization [. . .] and replace it with Greece". What interests her, she says, is the "process of the fabrication of Ancient Greece, and the *motives* for the fabrication". And those motives, she glosses, "involved the concept of purity, of progress" ("Unspeakable" 6-7; italics in original). While critics have explored the *West African* presences in Morrison's work, in my analysis of her own exposure of ideological constructions of purity I focus on the novels' recurring invocation of Egypt and Egyptian traditions.¹⁰ I show that in insisting on both the classicism of Egypt and the Egyptianness of classicism she inscribes herself within a subversive and incompletely-acknowledged genealogy of African-American cultural production.

The classical text that is fundamental to the novels' reconnections between Greece and Rome and Africa is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the first part of this thesis I discuss Morrison's engagement with Ovid's account of Tereus's rape of Philomela, while in the second I analyse her revisions of the Latin poem's role in narratives of America's "discovery" and colonization. In this final part I examine passages in which her signifying on Ovid contributes to

¹⁰ As I go on to discuss, scholarship on West African influences in Morrison's work includes that by Higgins, Sharon Patricia Holland, Vashti Lewis, O' Shaugnessy and Wilentz.

her interrogation of purity. The Latin poet's relevance to Morrison's general concern with *miasma* is multi-faceted: disorder, unrestrained passion and various miasmatic acts are a unifying theme in his stories, and, although the African-American does not share his amoral "postmodernism", his very "unEnlightenment" interest in the permeability of boundaries and the fragility of hierarchies has an obvious appeal.¹¹ In the context of this discussion the most significant revision of the *Metamorphoses* occurs in Sula's mental transformation of Ajax from a statue into "loam" (*Sula* 135). As I shall later demonstrate, this signifying on Ovid is one of several echoes of the Latin poem that express Morrison's sense of Africa's fundamental role within classicism.

Ultimately the history of the reception of the *Metamorphoses* is of as much importance to this study as is the work's content. According to the editors of *New Metamorphoses* (1994) Ovid is "now enjoying a boom" (Hofmann xi), but the censure on grounds of impurity to which the poem has frequently been subjected reveals the conventional conception of classical tradition as pure, original, and morally edifying.¹² Morrison's classicism unsettles this cherished view of the tradition by illuminating the multiple "impurities" of all classical literature, of which the cultural exchanges between Africa and Greece and Rome are just one part.

The claims for the African influence on America's classical heritage that the Morrisonian oeuvre makes, and the affinities between African and

¹¹ For a reading of the *Metamorphoses* as "postmodern" see Calvino's "Ovid and Universal Contiguity".

¹² Ovid's poem was famously "moralisé" in the Fourteenth Century, dismissed as "absurd fictions" in a 1769 diary entry by one of America's Founding Fathers, Benjamin Rush (Runes 376), was "bowdlerized" for the American school curriculum in the Nineteenth Century (Richard 223), and was described by J.W. Mackail in 1895 as "perhaps the most immoral poem ever written" (N. Vance 216). Norman Vance writes that the Victorians also criticized Ovid for being unoriginal; Herder complained that he was "merely derivative" (N. Vance 225).

Ancient Greek worldviews that it illuminates, illustrate the extent to which dominant conceptions of racial and intellectual purity are mutually constitutive. This interdependence is, of course, no “Big Secret” in itself; conservative intellectual historians have often deployed the imagery of “blood” and heredity in their expositions.¹³ It is not the inevitable interconnectedness of ancestry, cultural values and intellectual tradition, in itself, that Morrison’s novels protest. Her concern is rather with the falsifying process to which the ideologically-motivated obsession with purity has subjected that powerful matrix. In restoring the African “contaminations” and “contagions” that have always been part of America’s “parentage” or “pedigree”, and by destabilizing the purified classicism by which the nation has attempted to purify itself, Morrison shows that the interaction between ancestry, cultural values and intellectual tradition can itself exercise an emancipatory power.

The following detailed analysis of Morrison’s concern with *miasma* comprises three parts. The first begins with an overview of dominant American racial thought from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century, revealing its consistent dependence on the imagery of pollution and on other aspects of a purportedly-pure classical tradition. Against this background I illuminate the multi-faceted discourse of *miasma*, the representations of intersecting ideas of

¹³ In his 1944 lecture “What is a Classic?”, for example, T.S. Eliot argues:

As Europe is a whole (and still, [. . .] the organism out of which any greater world harmony must develop), so European literature is a whole, the several members of which cannot flourish if the same blood-stream does not circulate throughout the whole body. The blood-stream of European literature is Latin and Greek, [. . .] for it is through Rome that our parentage in Greece must be traced. (31)

And, as James Snead observes in his useful essay, “European Pedigrees/African Contagions”, two centuries earlier Samuel Johnson declared (in relation to the Hebridean islands), “What can a nation that has not letters tell of its original? [. . .] I’m always sorry when languages are lost, because language is the pedigree of nations” (231). I return to a discussion of Snead’s essay, which is on “nationality, narrative and communality” in the work of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe and Ishmael Reed, later in this part (230).

moral, racial and intellectual purity, various processes of social purification and the repeated juxtaposition of “Enlightened” and “unEnlightened” worldviews that recur in Morrison’s novels. In the second part I focus on the author’s interest in revenge and in vengeful scapegoating, demonstrating that her engagement with *The Oresteia* and *The Bacchae* enable a devastating critique of American “justice” and other conceptions of moral purity as they are pursued in the courts, in domestic and in foreign policy. And in the final section I show how the revised allusions to the *Metamorphoses* are just one expression of Morrison’s interest in Africa’s interactions with Greece and Rome, in how those interactions have been strategically obscured, and in the widespread implications of their restoration. It is exactly because the novels unambivalently embrace the impurity of tradition, I argue, that tradition within them is such a powerful force for change.

III.ii Images of the Impure and the Pure

A recurring theme in Morrison’s non-fiction is the fact that dominant cultural conceptions of race have made no progress in the last three hundred years.

“Race”, she writes in 1992, “now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed racisms whose dynamics we are more used to deciphering” (*Playing*

47).¹⁴ “Black life” functions as “miasma” in 1991, and the following summary of racial thought to which (in Paul Gilroy’s words) “the ambiguous intellectual traditions of the European Enlightenment” have given rise shows that the image is as long-lived as it is powerful (Morrison, “Friday” x; *Black Atlantic* 30).

Contextualizing the antebellum conviction that “a literate slave” was “a contradiction in terms”, Morrison describes “the Age of Scientific Racism” as the “twin” of “the Age of Enlightenment” (“Site of Memory” 108). “David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, to mention only a few, had documented their conclusions that blacks were incapable of intelligence”, she observes (“Site” 108). It is a truism that the Enlightenment is defined by its relationship to the classical world: the movement attempted (as Garry Wills puts it) “an abrupt leap backward, over the medieval darkness, into antiquity’s liberating air” (115), or (in Isaac Kramnick’s words), “to lift the darkness that fell with the Christian triumph over the virtues of classical antiquity” (ix). But scholars have paid less attention to the specific role of classicism in creating the “Africanism” that, as Morrison shows, “was inevitably yoked” to construction of “the rights of man” (*Playing* 38).¹⁵ Enlightenment racial theory invokes the ancient world both explicitly and implicitly: it makes analogies and cites authorities to justify its own conclusions, while at the same time (and without acknowledging that it is doing so) it deploys the discourse of *miasma* in its expressions of racial difference. As Jennifer DeVere Brody’s *Impossible*

¹⁴ In a similar vein, Morrison has remarked that “racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment” (*Playing* 63), and that Melville’s radicalism was/is dangerous “[e]specially then. Especially now” (“Unspeakable” 18). In a speech at Howard University Charter Day in 1995, she observed in a telling turn of phrase that “we are still once again defending or explaining the absence of a defense for racial and genetic inferiority” (Lecture 4).

¹⁵ A notable exception to this rule is David Wiesen’s essay, “The Contribution of Antiquity to American Racial Thought”, which I discuss in Part II of this thesis in relation to pro-slavery theorists’ deployment of classical tradition.

Purities (1998) reveals of Victorian racial thought, and as Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America* (1995) shows of the early Twentieth Century, while theories about race may change over time, their dependence on classical tradition is a constant. Morrison's novels — in their combination of explicit classical allusion with parodic echoes of the purportedly-universal discourses of racial thought — unsettle both that constant and the theories that it underpins.

Skin colour has “‘meant’ something”, argues *Playing in the Dark*, since “at least the moment, in the eighteenth century, when [. . .] scholars started to investigate both the natural history and the inalienable rights of man” (Morrison 49). As Clive Bush argues in *The Dream of Reason*, America's intellectual inheritance is characterized by “the method of classificatory order” that originates in work of the Swedish natural historian, Carl Linnaeus (17, 99). Linnaeus — whose father, according to the Linnean Society of London, “invented” the Latin name of Linnaeus “in allusion to a large and ancient tree of the small-leaved linden” — published the first version of his *Systema Naturae* in 1735.¹⁶ This classificatory system of the species, written entirely in Latin, notoriously includes the division of *homo sapiens* into five varieties, of which the “European”, who is “governed by laws” stands in stark contrast to the absolute impurity of the “Black” or “Afer”, who (besides being “crafty, indolent, negligent” and self-annointed “in grease”) is “governed by caprice” (Linnaeus 13). Bush explains that Linnaeus's “model of scientific stability” had a particular appeal to eighteenth-century Americans because he “was a maker of a whole system [. . .] and his laws provided a psychological confirmation of

¹⁶ For the history of Carl's father adopting the name “Linnaeus”, see “Origins of the Name Linnaeus” on the website of the Linnean Society of London. 26 Oct. 2005. <<http://www.linnean.org/index>>.

a world order” (99, 197). Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Bush continues, parodies in its “Cetology” chapter the “psychopolitical phenomenon of classification” that the work of Linnaeus and his successors became (301). In turn, Morrison — who is outspoken in her praise for Melville’s “recognition of the moment in America when whiteness became ideology” — continues the parodic work of the nineteenth-century novelist (“Unspeakable” 15).¹⁷ She mocks both the classificatory worldview and the specific practice of defining and interpreting racial difference that Linnaeus initiates.

The influence of innovation in natural history on eighteenth-century European philosophers is evident even in the titles of their works, such as Hume’s “Of National Characters” (1748), and Kant’s subtitled “On National Characteristics” (1764), and his “On the Different Races of Man” (1775).¹⁸ Though differing in the detail of their assertions, both these constructors of racial and national identity employ the discourse of black stupidity — what Morrison calls “the confirmations of black irrationality” — that is a fundamental part of the “miasma of black incoherence” (*Playing* 45; “Official” ix). For example, in a now notorious footnote Hume asserts that “the negroes and in general all other species of men” are “naturally inferior to the whites”. He continues, “There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation” (“National Characters” 33). For his part, Kant records an encounter with a Negro carpenter who was “black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he

¹⁷ For a discussion of “the meaning of whiteness in American literature and culture” that discusses both Melville and Morrison, see Valerie Babb’s *Whiteness Visible* (1998).

¹⁸ Kant’s “On Natural Characteristics” is a subsection of his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764).

said was stupid” (“National Characteristics” 57). As James Beattie pointed out in 1770, Hume’s argument depends on Aristotle’s theory of the “natural slave” that was later to become so popular with American defenders of slavery, while Kant’s explicit endorsement of Hume’s assertions about blacks’ intellectual incapacity places him within the same Aristotelian tradition.¹⁹

The contorted racial logic of Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) is indebted to Hume and Kant in its struggle to prove black stupidity. Jefferson dismisses the literary production of Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho as somehow springing from their irrational rather than cognitive faculties, and argues that “among the Romans” slaves managed to be “the rarest artists” because they “were of the race of whites” (142).²⁰ These strained assertions are intended as evidence against the proposition that America should “retain and incorporate the blacks into the state” (138), but in his final invocation of Ancient Rome, the statesman reveals his own irrational fear. “Among the Romans [. . .] the slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master”, he observes, whereas in the new nation the freed slave “is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture” (143). In the images of “staining the blood” and “mixture”, Jefferson resorts to the classic discourse of *miasma*; he enlists, in Morrison’s words, “the pollution of African blood and sex” (*Playing* 68).

¹⁹ In his “Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism”, James Beattie describes Aristotle’s theory as “an important error in morals” and suggests that “[h]e wanted perhaps, to desire some excuse for servitude; a practice which to their eternal reproach, both Greeks and Romans tolerated even in the days of their glory. / Mr Hume argues that nearly in the same manner in regard to the superiority of white man over black” (Beattie 34-35). In Part II of this thesis I discuss David Wiesen’s illumination of the irony that Aristotle’s theory of the “natural slave” was much more important to American defenders of slavery than it ever was in Ancient Greece (Wiesen 211).

²⁰ In “Laws” Jefferson notoriously writes, “Religion has indeed produced a Phyllis Whately (*sic*); but it could not produce a poet”; and that “Ignatius Sancho has approached nearer to merit in composition; yet his letters do more honour to the heart than the head” (*Notes* 140).

An obsession with racial “mixture” and “staining” persists in both the social theory and the artistic production of the Nineteenth Century. The now infamous Arthur de Gobineau, whose *Essay on the Inequality of Races* (1853-55) is quoted by Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (133), epitomizes the theorists’ tendency to deploy classical analogies to prove their hypotheses. As Thomas Gossett explains, for Gobineau it is “the precise degree of intermixture of a people at any one time” which is critical; “Greece had just the right amount at the time of its cultural ascendancy” (Gossett 344-45). And the Romans’ mistake was their excessive racial intermixing; “So long as they kept the same purity of blood”, Gobineau writes, the Romans “would have lived and reigned” (Gossett 344). The influence of the *Essay* on American racial debate is plain. For example, in 1895 (one year after the formation of the Immigration Restriction League), Thomas Bailey Aldrich published an alarmist poem, “Unguarded Gates”, which held up racially-hybridized Rome’s fate as a cautionary example (Gossett 306). And at the height of nativist anxiety, in 1922, Charles W. Gould continued this trend in *America a Family Matter*, attributing the falls of Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome “to the infusion of the blood of degenerate races” (Gossett 398).²¹

In her study of “blackness, femininity and Victorian culture” Jennifer DeVere Brody points out that “purity is impossible” and that “every mention of the related term, hybrid, only confirms a strategic taxonomy that constructs purity as a prior (fictive) ground” (11-12). Her analysis of the “circum-atlantic”

²¹ Aldrich (whose poem was published in *Atlantic*) writes:
O Liberty, white Goddess! Is it well to leave the gates unguarded?
[. . .] For so of old
The thronging Goth and Vandal trampled Rome,
And where the temples of the Caesars stood,
The lean wolf unmolested made her lair. (Gossett 306)

novel *The Woman of Colour* (1808) and Boucicault's play *The Octoroon* (1859) highlights the range of moral impurities that the "mulatto" protagonists connote (14-58). And of crucial interest to this study is her point that Hiram Powers's famous statue *The Greek Slave*, which was exhibited in twelve American cities during the 1840s, was promoted as a "pure abstract human form" by its creator, and engaged "the cleansing trope of classicism as a way of effacing the material history of [its] subject" (Brody 67, 74).²² This notion of classicism as itself a purifying force recalls Joseph Roach's point that nineteenth-century historians of slavery found a "legitimizing dignity" in the fact that slaves had also been exhibited naked in Greek and Roman slave markets (211).

As Caroline Winterer has demonstrated, America had conceived of classical education as a "purifying, ennobling force" at least since the 1820s (*Culture* 4). As Greece and Greek culture came into intellectual fashion, classicism's "new role in the antebellum classroom" was that of "antidote to modern perils" (81); it was a way for students to "purg[e] themselves of modern materialism, anti-intellectualism and selfishness" (81).²³ Yet the same tradition was later invoked in the services of modern ideology, and Walter Benn Michaels highlights the illogic characterizing nativist invocations of classicism

²² Brody's and Roach's observations have an obvious relevance to my discussion of slavery and classical analogy in Part II. The 1851 *Punch* cartoon "The Virginian Slave" (discussed by Brody on 69-71) exposes the strategy of articulating a contentious political issue in neoclassical form. For another analysis of this statue see Joy S. Kasson "Narrative of the Human Body: *The Greek Slave*". Kasson writes, "One art historian has argued that the sculpture evoked the issue of American slavery and reflected Powers's abolitionist views. [. . .] However, *The Greek Slave* was as popular in New Orleans [. . .] as in Boston" (185). In addition, the association between whiteness, classicism and purity that the statue constructs anticipates the ideological deployment of white neoclassical architecture, such as in the White City at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1894 (see Rydell 48), or in the monumental architecture of Washington DC. Ralph Ellison parodies this association in *Invisible Man*, where the Liberty Paints' "purest white" paint, "Optic white", is "heading for a national monument" (201-02).

²³ For more on classicism as a conservative force see Winterer, *Culture* 68-76, "Greece and the Critique of Antebellum America".

as a “determinant” of American identity (*Our America* 36). In 1921, for example, the then-Vice-President Calvin Coolidge addressed the American Classical League at the University of Pennsylvania, where he argued that “it was a study of the classics rather than the Constitution that would promote [. . .] the modern American’s desire to be ‘supremely American’” (Michaels 37).²⁴

The pernicious collusion between national ideology, education and classical tradition that Morrison’s deployments of *miasma* expose is also the underlying theme in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed’s narrative describes “the 4 years of university” as a “process by which they would remove all the rebels and dissidents”; it simultaneously stages the initial elimination of the Jes Grew plague in the American towns bearing classical names (153).²⁵ And in its representation of “the Negro” as Jes Grew’s “classical host” *Mumbo Jumbo* shares and illuminates an underlying irony that the Morrisonian oeuvre exploits (17): that the Enlightenment-bred culture of the United States relies on the construction of pollution or plague, and thus on a concept representative of the “irrational” world of pre-Enlightenment Greece.

The paradoxical predicament of purity-obsessed America is epitomized in *The Bluest Eye*’s Soaphead Church. Himself a mixed-race West Indian immigrant to

²⁴ “The answer to the question, ‘what are the fundamental things that young Americans should be taught?’ was ‘Greek and Latin’”, Michaels writes (37). He continues:

What the Johnson Act (keeping out, among others, the descendants of the Greeks and Romans) would contribute to the heredity side of American character formation, a classical education (studying the literature of the ancestors whose descendants the Johnson Act was excluding) would contribute to the training side. (37)

²⁵ Reed parodies the notion of the classics as a purifying force through the observation that the morality of the Egyptian princess Thermuthis is a consequence of her “expatriate fling in Europe”, where she had “listened to Greek, the language of ‘civilization’” (175).

Lorain, where he works as a “Reader, Adviser and Interpreter of Dreams” (131), he is the inevitable product, the novel suggests, of Enlightenment and Victorian ideology. He is from “a family proud of its academic accomplishments and its mixed blood—in fact they believed the former was based on the latter” (132). They were “industrious, orderly, and energetic”, and aspired “to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau’s hypothesis” regarding “civilization” and “noble blood” (133). Loyal Enlightenment disciples, the men “studied medicine, law, theology”, and, as a child, Elihue (Soaphead) read widely in “the best minds of the Western world” (133-34). And yet his forefathers were “corrupt in public and private practice, both lecherous and lascivious” (133), and Soaphead, whom one might call “a very clean old man”, indulges a “patronage of little girls” (132).

Morrison suggests that the character’s obsession with purity explains his perversion, and that his perversion cultivates his obsession with purity. He has “a hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay”, and is revolted by bodily functions (134, 132). As an extreme embodiment of a process recurring in later novels in which the attempt to eradicate pollution itself comprises evil, Soaphead enjoys the fact that while his victims would “eat ice cream with their legs open while [he] played with them”, there apparently “wasn’t nastiness, and there wasn’t any filth, and there wasn’t any odor” (144). And while the author claims that “[e]verybody knew what ‘Soaphead’ meant” — it is the look of his hair when pomaded, a “sort of primitive process” — it is clear that “Soaphead” perfectly describes the character’s (and the dominant culture’s) pathological drive towards purity and purification (133). The character enacts his own purification ritual (or “primitive process”) to

catastrophic effect in the trick he plays on Pecola that also eliminates the “mangy” dog (137).

In the early pages of the novel, Claudia recalls her childhood dislike for the “irritable, unimaginative cleanliness” that the Christmas bath brought about (15), but she now recognizes her own acquiescence in the dismissal of Pecola as a “pot of black dirt” (3). The community treat the girl as though she were contaminated even before her father assaults her: no one sits next to her at school, the shopkeeper is reluctant to touch her hand, and the sweet-smelling Geraldine cannot bear the sight of the “dirty”, “matted”, “muddy” and “soiled” Pecola (34, 37, 71). But although both Otten and Awkward separately observe that the character is subjected to a process akin to ritual scapegoating, neither they nor other critics highlight the affinities between her fate and that of the *pharmakos* in Ancient Greece.²⁶

The classical scholar Robert Parker explains that “one form of purification” available to the Ancient Greeks “was that by expulsion of a ‘scapegoat’ — [. . .] he was called either a ‘medicine’ (*pharmakos*) or ‘offscouring’ (*katharma*), and the rite’s explicit purpose was to ‘purify the city’” (*Miasma* 258). In *Myth and Tragedy* Vernant and Vidal-Naquet describe the nature of the ritual in Athens, which “took place on the first day of the festival of the Thargelia” (128). The *pharmakoi* were paraded in a procession through the city before being expelled over its borders, and “they were most

²⁶ Terry Otten writes that Pecola “serves as a scapegoat without the benefit of martyrdom” (*Crime* 24). In his chapter “The Evil of Fulfilment” Michael Awkward discusses “the purgative abuse of Pecola” and identifies the paradigm’s function as a critique of American society (*Inspiriting* 74-76). Awkward also cites Ogunyemi’s 1977 essay, “Order and Disorder in *The Bluest Eye*”. This essay in turn observes that “running through the novel is the theme of the scapegoat”, but, like Otten and Awkward, Ogunyemi does not mention any classical parallels (116).

likely recruited from the dregs of the population”, including those whose “crimes, physical ugliness, lowly condition, and base and repugnant occupations marked them out as [. . .] the refuse of society” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 128).²⁷ Pecola is poor, ugly and marginal in Lorain before she is raped by her father; afterwards she exists “on the edge of [. . .] town, among the garbage and the sunflowers” (164). The fact that in her insanity her “head jerk[ed] to a drummer so distant only she could hear” brings the Athenian purificatory procession to mind (162).

Claudia recognizes — “much too late” — that the entire community have exploited Pecola as a scapegoat (163). The outcast “absorbed”, her former friend observes, “all of the waste which we dumped on her. [. . .] All of us [. . .] felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her” (163). Anticipating the paradoxical role of Sula and the Convent women in *Paradise*, Pecola serves the people who have rejected her: “we were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. [. . .] her pain made us glow with health” (29). Yet Morrison strategically juxtaposes Lorain with the Greek cities. In Greece, the Thargelia festival and its ritual, which were associated with “the rebirth of springtime” and “the forces of fertility”, symbolized that for the new year “the land and men” were “made pure once again” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 130). But in Ohio, as we know from Claudia’s opening sentence, “*there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*” (3; italics in original).

In a ritual that anticipates the final scapegoating, the bullying schoolboys (who

²⁷ See also Bremmer on “Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece”; on the Thargelia and the *pharmakos* see Jane Ellen Harrison 95-105.

“sacrifice” Pecola “for their own sake”) chant “Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked” (50). The taunt’s implied association between dark skin and immoral sexuality is, as Morrison observes, “wildly fitting in its incoherence” (50), and it is an incoherence that she engages throughout the oeuvre. The novels expose not just the automatic conflation of blackness with “the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature” that Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* deplures, but also characters’ tendency to view passion and natural functions as pollution: “wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away” (*Bluest Eye* 64). Into the equation, as well, must be factored the horror of racial impurity, so that Sula, for example, whose mother is described as “sooty” (29), and whom Nel confronts on her death bed with “all the dirt [she] did in this town” (145), is also accused of sleeping with white men: “the dirt that could not ever be washed away” (112).

Indeed, perhaps more interesting than the recurrence of various polluting concomitants of blackness (a trope in nearly all American literature, as *Playing in the Dark* points out), are Morrison’s repeated configurations of characters who are obsessed with washing and cleaning. As I do with the motifs of falls and falling in Part I, I am highlighting this oeuvre-wide phenomenon in some detail. The accumulative effect of my examples is to show that Morrison constructs the routine washing and cleaning of bodies, clothes, and houses as a purification ritual that rivals formal purificatory practice in Ancient Greece.

The author constructs an association between washing and scapegoating in *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola has come to the white family’s house to pick up “the laundry bag, heavy with wet clothes” when she is spurned by her mother, and is “washing dishes” when she is assaulted by her father (85, 127).

But it is in *Tar Baby* that the imagery of soiling and cleaning is pervasive, and where whites and blacks construct each other as polluting presences in the most hyperbolic terms. The characters' response to the filthy, dreadlocked and devastatingly attractive Son, for example, is initiated by the hysterical Margaret, who at first can say only "[b]lack" when she discovers him in her closet (77). When she imagines that "black sperm was sticking in clots to her French jeans" (84), her wealth allows her to contemplate a purification of outrageously indulgent proportions: "She'd have the whole closet cleaned. Or better still, she'd throw them all out and buy everything new" (84-85).²⁸ The lengthy description of Son taking a shower, meanwhile, emphasizes that his true dirtiness is exactly that: not racial or moral contamination, but accumulated grime that can simply be washed away.

In his mind, Son exacts revenge on the Streets by configuring them (and the dominant culture of which they are a part) as themselves a defiling force. Colonizing powers, he rages "could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more" (204). They "would fight and kill to own the cesspools they made" and "spent their whole lives bathing bathing washing [. . .] as if pure soap had anything to do with purity" (203). Morrison emphasizes, too, that it is black people who are employed to clean away white people's defecations. Ondine complains that she is "the one who cleans up [Margaret's] shit" — a reference both to her role as housekeeper and to her employer's abuse of Michael (208) — while, in a wry but all-too-credible turn

²⁸ Other characters are no slower to collate Son's skin colour with the predictable chain of pollutants: Sydney calls him a "stinking ignorant swamp nigger", Ondine baulks at the thought of having to "clean his tub, change his bed linen" and "collect his underwear (Jesus)", and Jadine wants to "clean him off" once he has "pressed his loins" into her, which anticipates the very obvious symbolism of her post-swamp bath (*Tar Baby* 100, 102, 122).

of events, Alma Estée is working as the airport toilet cleaner at the novel's end (291).

Valerian, meanwhile, though the only member of the household who is apparently unmoved by Son's blackness, has himself an easily-missed but highly significant obsession with the laundry. In a sentimental gesture, when building the house he "insisted on a separate washhouse" because it reminds him of his childhood home and "the shed where the washerwoman did the family's laundry" (142, 141). In the detail that as a young boy he grieved for his dead father in helping the servant handwash the clothes, Morrison invokes the Greek belief that death is a pollutant that demands purification.²⁹ Now in his Caribbean mansion he fetishizes the washhouse and fantasizes that (despite the washing machine) Thérèse "was bending over a scrub board rubbing pillow slips with a bar of orange Octagon soap" (140). On "Christmas Eve's eve", moreover, the fact that "the washerwoman was there, bless her heart" reinforces his overall contentment (188). Whether Valerian wants to wash away his own guilt, or the racial stain of blackness, or the one projected on to the other, is left ambiguous. But Morrison includes the ironic details that Thérèse loathes doing the laundry and does a deliberately bad job. The character is glad that her employers are increasingly outsourcing the task, and she consciously overstuffs the washer with whites (103, 111).

An early sign of the imminent Christmas disarray is that Jadine has to do the washing herself, and it is symbolic of the household's collapse that, at the novel's end, "the roof of the washhouse was completely obscured by a heavy branch" (191-95, 287). "Pure soap" has nothing "to do with purity", Son

²⁹ See Parker's chapter "Birth and Death", in *Miasma* 18-31.

insists (203), but Morrison depicts other characters (recalling the paradigmatic Soaphead Church) who fixate on the product, and even on specific brands.

Valerian associates “Octagon soap” with clothes washing (140), while Margaret conveys the renewal of her good relationship with him through the fact that she “washed his hair [. . .] with Kirk’s Original Castile Soap. He doesn’t like Breck” (280).³⁰ The motif makes emphatic the conventional imagery of personal moral guilt as physical defilement, a convention exemplified by the publicly-shamed Margaret’s wish “to wash her hair, hard. Soap it with mountains of lather, and rinse it over and over again” (237). The character’s impulse recalls *Song of Solomon*’s Milkman trying to bathe away “something like shame” after stealing Pilate’s bag of bones (209). But unlike Milkman, whose still-partial self-knowledge means that “the pleasant effects of his bath” are “wiped out” (210), Margaret now feels “clean, weightless” (241). These associations between crime, guilt and pollution, and between atonement and purification, of course reach their fullest expression in *Beloved*, and I shall analyse their configurations in that novel in my discussion of justice, revenge and *The Oresteia*.

Morrison continues to deploy the imagery of pollution in illuminating the complex interactions between conceptions of moral and racial purity in her last three novels: *Jazz*, *Paradise* and *Love*. In the second novel in the trilogy, the narrator describes Joe’s affair as his “dirt”, and records that in the days following Dorcas’s murder Violet “washed and ironed [the] handkerchiefs” that Joe sat weeping into because “she couldn’t abide dirty laundry” (5, 119). In the

³⁰ The recurring symbolism recalls *Mumbo Jumbo*, in which “Western History” is configured as a “3-story building” housing “religious articles”, “guns”, and, “at the top, an advertising firm which deals in soap accounts” (Reed 82).

chapters of this novel set in the South, the representations of miscegenation as contamination contribute crucially to the parody of Faulkner that I (and other critics) have already discussed. For example, Colonel Gray's fury at his daughter's pregnancy is itself a pollutant metaphorically connected to her defilement: "his rage seeped into the room, clouding the crystal and softening the starched tablecloth" (141). The fact that Vera Louise and True Belle bathe the baby Golden Gray "three times a day" makes ridiculous their attempts to eradicate the shame of his origins and to retain the paleness of his skin (141), while the parodic mode continues in the adult hero approaching Wild "holding his breath against infection or odor or something" (145).

Anxiety about racial, sexual and general moral purity drives the plot in *Paradise*. The Rubean men's obsession with their own "eight-rock" status nourishes their convictions about the impurity of the Convent women, and the imagery of *miasma* can be found on almost every page of the novel, from the "filth" which the men set out to "expose" on the first page, to the "sea trash" that "gleams" around Piedade and Consolata on the last (193, 3, 318). The emphatic configurations of the women as contaminants are balanced by subtler details such as Sweetie fleeing to the Convent without taking her morning bath (125), or the abandoned Seneca cleaning her teeth "until the toothbrush was pink with blood" in an attempt to atone for whatever sins she assumes have made Jean stay away (127), or the fact that as the Convent women descend into chaos "the plumbing in the mansion [is] breaking up" (255).

In the same novel, the author and one of her protagonists confront the absurdity of relying on physical manifestations of moral corruption. Pat Best asks herself, in the middle of her rage about her daughter's sexual habits, "What

did the sheets have to do with it? Was there blood where there should not have been or no blood where there should have been?" (287). The ambiguity brings to mind the paradox in *Jazz* in which the proof of Vera Louise's guilt is not a stain but an absence of one: True Belle detects the pregnancy from the fact that the girl's "personal garments" stop needing to be "soaked" (140). And this inversion, in turn, recalls the complicated morality in *Song of Solomon*. There, the goodness of Milkman's sexual encounter with Sweet (for which he "gave her fifty dollars") is symbolized by the fact that they bathe each other and clean up the house together (285), while Corrie, "who had held herself pure all these years (well, almost all, and almost pure)", lies down on Porter's bed "feeling bathed, scoured, vacuumed, and for the first time simple" (198-99).

By contrast, in *Love Morrison* represents once again the conventional association between immorality and pollution. Christine's and May's obsession with Heed's "jungle-y" origins develop after Cosey has chosen the girl as his bride; they fear that as she "bathed [. . .] in a washtub full of the murky water left by her sisters" she might "never get rid of the cannery fish smell" (75). L believes Christine views Heed as "*a bottlefly*" who is "*bound to smear her with the garbage it was born in*" (136; italics in original); Heed's recollection that "she never felt clean enough in those early days" is therefore unsurprising (124). Christine complains to her lawyer that she has continuously "cleaned" for Heed, "washed her underwear" and "laundered her sheets" (95). The pair's shared concern with cleanliness is presumably rooted in the "rot" of their childhood's "twin shame" (190): Cosey's molesting Heed and Christine's observing him masturbating. It is no accident that immediately after her ordeal, May makes Heed "help carry sacks of soiled bed linen through to the laundry"

(191). But the women are only finally “purged” by the confessions and reconciliation of their last moments together.

A few pages into *Tar Baby* we learn that Valerian Street has “given up books” because “the language in them had changed so much—stained with rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness” (12). As does *The Bacchae*, in their exploration of the relationship between excessive and insufficient order or control, Morrison’s novels investigate the conception of disorder and irrationality as themselves polluting forces. Throughout the oeuvre the author contrasts processes of organization and categorization (that recall Enlightenment traditions) with representations of chaos and unchecked passion. Her imagery frequently brings either Pentheus or Dionysus to mind.

“2,000 years of patrolling the plants”, the narrator of *Mumbo Jumbo* complains of Western Civilization. “2,000 years of probing classifying attempting to make an ‘orderly’ world so that when company came [. . .] they would be careful about dropping ashes on the rug” (Reed 153).³¹ *The Bluest Eye*’s Pauline Breedlove exemplifies exactly this kind of domestic expression of European intellectual thought, revealing herself through her housework as a true daughter of Enlightenment science. “She liked [. . .] to arrange things. To line things up in rows— [. . .] whatever portable plurality she found, she organized into neat lines, according to their size, shape, or gradations of color” (86-87). She loves her job cleaning for the white family because “[h]ere she found beauty, order, cleanliness, praise” (99). Predictably, however, her secret

³¹ Reed conflates the Enlightenment outlook with the two thousand years of Christianity; I discuss Morrison’s very different take on Christianity later in this chapter.

desires are very different: as a teenager she dreams of a “Presence” who “would lead her away” to places of Dionysiac intoxication, “to the sea, to the city, to the woods . . .” (88). A similar conflict is embodied in *Sula* in the obvious contrast between the immaculate home kept by the repressed Nel and the “household of throbbing disorder” over which Eva presides (52). In *Song of Solomon*, likewise, Ruth Dead bans any form of “dirt, noise or disarray” (64), while in Pilate’s home “no meal was ever planned or balanced or served” (29). And in *Paradise* Morrison returns to the same juxtaposition in contrasting domestic habits in Ruby and the Convent.³²

As my discussion of Linnaeus, Hume, Kant and Jefferson has already demonstrated, what Wole Soyinka calls “a recognizable Western cast of mind, a compartmentalizing habit of thought” finds all too “logical” an expression in racial theory and racist practice (“Drama” 37). While Morrison obviously parodies the prototypical Enlightenment scientist through the notebook-wielding Schoolteacher in *Beloved*, she also explores the tendency through *Tar Baby*’s Jadine, whose many anxieties about Son include the fact that he doesn’t “know the difference between one Black and another” (126).³³ Jade’s intellectual expertise in the art of “cloisonné” (or compartmentalized enamelling) is an ironic echo of her insistence on compartmentalized racial identities (116, 120, 301). For all her sophistication, she is no more progressive

³² In *Paradise* it is Deacon who takes pride in the “orderly cupboards” and “linen laundered and ironed to perfection” in the households of Ruby and is appalled by the “slack habits” of the Convent women, who “have not even sorted, let alone washed, the jars” (*Paradise* 111, 5).

³³ In his *Negative Liberties* Patell makes the same observation, writing that Schoolteacher in *Beloved* is “an Enlightenment figure” (84). Patell’s reading of Morrison has much in common with my own, in that, for example, he argues that she (and Pynchon) “dramatize those flaws that arise from liberalism’s Enlightenment inheritance, namely its overreliance on rationalism and its blindness to its relation with forms of domination such as slavery, racism and misogyny” (xix). He does not, however, discuss Morrison’s deployment of classical tradition to critique Enlightenment structures.

than the “old women” in *Sula* who “worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and mulatto were one and the same” (52), or than the men of Ruby who enlist the terms of a coal-mining scale in terming themselves “eight-rock” (*Paradise* 193).

Unsurprisingly, it is the least repressed and most “funky” characters in the Morrisonian oeuvre who are also the most indifferent to racial distinctions. In *Solomon* Pilate ridicules the convention of subjecting racial identity to a purifying “science of division” (Plato in Parker, *Miasma* 18). She merges the senses of sight and touch in her configuration: “There’re five or six kinds of black. Some silky. Some woolly. [. . .] And it don’t stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another” (40-41). The implicit imagery of blackness as an amoeba or as a chromatographic ink blot pokes fun at pseudo-scientific constructions of black people as pollutants. It is Morrison’s version of Melville’s “ground-plan of Cetology” in *Moby-Dick* (Melville 140-49).

While in *Tar Baby* it is Son who “didn’t want any discussion about shades of black folk” (156), the correspondence between excessive orderliness, repression and racism is somewhat complicated in that novel by Valerian and Margaret Street’s differing perceptions of both race and “the irrational”. Valerian, who keeps his cool when Son is discovered but who won’t let Margaret go to the cinema with Ondine, is obsessive about manners and decorum. During a meal (at which he also corrects his wife’s pronunciation of “Eurydice”) he bans discussion of body hair as a conversation topic (62), and he is traumatized when his “silly game” of disrupting social hierarchy for Christmas dinner results in a total breakdown of order (209). Margaret, on the other hand, who reacts hysterically to Son (but would have liked to go to the

cinema with Ondine), struggles to impose order on her life. Failing to live up to Enlightenment ideals, she frequently “forgot the names and uses of things”, and has to deal with the “thin terror” and “confusion” this creates (53, 61). When goaded into an argument by Valerian, she throws her wineglass into the middle of the table and storms out, creating a “wine spot” that Sydney rushes to conceal with a “fresh white napkin” (69). This representation of the irrational or disorderly as literally staining prefigures the moment in *Love* when the vulgarity of June’s name causes Heed to bat her lashes “as if someone had spilled red wine on pale velvet: sorry, of course, and no fault, of course, but difficult to clean nonetheless” (25).³⁴

Like *The Bacchae*, the novels problematize excessive passion as well as repression. Baby Suggs declares that “[e]verything depends on knowing how much. [. . .] Good is knowing when to stop” (*Beloved* 87); of course, neither *Beloved* nor Sethe can follow this advice, and instead become “candidates for the lunatic asylum” as the household on Bluestone Road descends into chaos (250). The women’s surrender to the polluting forces of insanity is prefigured by Hagar’s all-consuming love for Milkman. Engaging the terms of *miasma*, Morrison writes that her “passion” is “fever, [. . .] more affliction than affection” (127), while Ruth perceives the girl as a kind of unredeemable Bacchante: “there was something truly askew in this girl. [. . .] Not wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, [. . .] but wild wilderness where there was none” (138). And the description of the community’s indifference born of experience — “they had seen women pull their dresses over their heads

³⁴ A second analogous image of *miasma* in the domestic sphere is in *Song of Solomon*, where the watermark on Ruth Dead’s dining room table “throbbed like fever” (13).

and howl like dogs for lost love” (128) — exemplifies this novel’s dialogue with Ovid’s configurations of corrupting, uncontrollable emotion in the *Metamorphoses*.

As Ted Hughes writes in the introduction to his *Tales from Ovid* (1997), “Above all, Ovid was interested in [. . .] human passion *in extremis* — passion where it combusts, or levitates, or mutates into an experience of the supernatural” (ix-x). Hagar and her great-great grandmother, Ryna, from whom she has inherited the inability “to live without a particular man” (323), recall the spurned women in the Latin poem such as Clytie, who, rejected by “the sun”, starves herself to death and turns into a heliotrope.³⁵ And Morrison also creates a specific connection between her two forsaken women and the *Metamorphoses*. On his hunting trip in the Virginian woods, Milkman hears the sound of a “sobbing woman”, and asks Calvin, “What the hell is that?”. “Echo”, Calvin replies. “Ryna’s Gulch is up ahead” (274). Here the author explicitly alludes to Echo, spurned by Narcissus, of whom Ovid writes, “Shamed and rejected in the woods she hides, [. . .] For all to hear, alive, but just a sound” (III.393-402). This reference enhances the representation of the women

³⁵ Ovid writes: “She pined and languished / As love and longing stole her wits away”, and:
She sat dishevelled, and for nine long days,
With never taste of food or drink, she fed
Her hunger on her tears and on the dew.
[. . .] Though rooted fast, towards the sun she turns.
Her shape is changed, but still her passion burns. (IV.259-75)

Morrison’s feminism explodes her own mythical tenor even as she creates it: Susan Byrd, who relates the legend of Ryna to Milkman, explains that abandoned women “lost their minds” because of “Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?” (323). This typifies the irreverent relationship to classical myth that characterizes the novel as a whole.

characters' irrationality; at the same time, it also implicitly and wonderfully illuminates Milkman's narcissism.³⁶

Hagar and Milkman are temporarily transformed into a statue or frieze on one of the many occasions when she tries to kill him: they become "the paralyzed woman and the frozen man" (131). In this moment, Ovidian in spirit, and through all the identifications between Hagar and Ovid's pining, passionate women, Morrison asks whether to be reduced to and mutated by an essential emotion is to be purified or corrupted. Whether transformative ecstasy is pure or impure is a question at the heart of *The Bacchae*, and just as Ovid associates his tales with Bacchus by their careful placement in relation to his own account of the spread of the Dionysiac cult, Morrison finishes her account of Hagar's funeral with the detail about the "sympathetic wino" who spurted "jungle-red wine everywhere" (319).³⁷ This Bacchic symbol corresponds with the others throughout the oeuvre: Pilate's trade as a winemaker in the same novel (29, 47), Sydney's insurrectionist gesture of drinking Valerian's own wine in front of him in *Tar Baby* (289), Sethe's memory of Mr Garner's failure to grow grapes at Sweet Home in *Beloved* (192), the Dionysiac nature of "the City" in *Jazz* and

³⁶ The echo of Milkman's and Guitar's shouts on the novel's final page call the protagonist's newly-found self-knowledge (when he believes his "thoughts" are finally "unobstructed [. . .] even by the sight of himself") into question (*Song* 277).

³⁷ In Book III of the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Narcissus and Echo immediately precedes that of Pentheus and Bacchus, while in the next book, the three tales of doomed love (including that of Clytie) are told by the daughters of Minyas while they resist joining in with the Dionysiac rites outside Thebes. In an article-in-progress on Morrison and *The Metamorphoses* I discuss the way both authors focus on the relationship between metaphor and metamorphosis. In his study of Ovid, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (1986), Leonard Barkan writes, "Often the business of metamorphosis [. . .] is to make flesh of metaphors" (23). Morrison constructs images as idiomatic transformations, for example in the description that Pilate "was growing roots where she stood" (170), which can be compared with literal transformations in the *Metamorphoses* such as Dryope's, who, when she becomes a tree as a punishment for plucking leaves from a nymph turned into a shrub, "found her feet rooted" (*Met.* IX.352-53).

Connie's increasing dependence on "black bottles with handsome names" in *Paradise* (221).³⁸

To some extent, *Love* constitutes a departure from the seven novels that precede it in that it is less concerned with the dangers of repression than with the way pleasurable indulgence can become corrupting overindulgence. The moderation aspired to by the hotel's motto, "The best good time this side of the law", is not achieved by its founder (133); Cosey becomes an alcoholic prone to debauched orgies on his fishing boat. The omniscient L deplors the cultural obsession with sex, "*the clown of love*" (63; italics in original), and through connecting Bacchic symbolism Morrison suggests that Romen and June's sado-masochistic frenzies are not as far removed from the gang rape of Pretty Fay as the protagonists like to think. In the boy's memory, the hotel's attic where he enjoyed a particularly wild session "smelled like wine" (152), while after Theo "took seconds" from Pretty Fay, "the room smelled of vegetables and rotten grapes and wet clay" (47).³⁹ The "rotten grapes" connote the perversion of human desire, and bring to mind a similar detail in the other novel in which sexual violence is a foremost concern: *The Bluest Eye*. There, when the

³⁸ Examples of the Dionysiac nature of Harlem in *Jazz* include the details that the City "made you do unwise disorderly things" (58), "pump[s] desire" and holds a "fascination" that is "permanent and out of control" (34-35). It is Richard Hardack, in his article on *Jazz*, "A Music Seeking Its Time", who first describes the City and its music as "Dionysian": "This Dionysian 'music that intoxicates them more than the champagne' represents the force of Nature's possession" (454). Morrison's configuration of the City as a site of the Dionysiac revises the conventional association between Bacchic rites and the wildness of the countryside, juxtaposed with an ordered city. Nonetheless, Nussbaum points out that although in Athens "the rites almost certainly lacked many of the violent features of the rites described in the play, their incorporation within the city nonetheless involved the city in mystery and contradiction" (xv-xvi). Harrison stresses that it is surprising to think of Athenian women participating in Dionysiac ritual (397).

³⁹ Morrison makes a veiled allusion to the relationship between repression and over-indulgence that characterizes American culture through the fact that while in school, Romen cannot concentrate on the history lesson about "the Eighteenth Amendment" for fantasizing about June (*Love* 114). The author withholds the information that the Eighteenth Amendment, ratified in 1919, was the one that established Prohibition.

adolescent Cholly embarks on his first sexual encounter, he and his friends walk to “a wild vineyard where the muscadine grew” and the boys pelt the girls with unripe grapes (114). As he kisses Darlene, she smooths out her dress “where the grape stains were heaviest”, but when the white men intrude their “flashlight worms its way into their gut and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile” (116). Under the dominant culture’s voyeuristic gaze, the pure Dionysiac has become impure.

It is significant that it is the men’s torch that primarily sickens Cholly, for throughout the oeuvre Morrison associates bright light with an intrusive, perverse and perverting over-rationality. In *Paradise*, when the Roman Catholic Consolata confesses to her affair with Deacon, “a sunshot seared her right eye” and she loses “the ability to bear light” (242). This exemplifies the way the author — recalling D’Alembert’s description of the Eighteenth Century as “*l’age des lumières*” (Kramnick ix) — deploys the imagery of light to question the morality of the Enlightenment project itself.

In the introduction to his 1943 edition of *The Bacchae*, E.R. Dodds writes that Euripides “has given [Pentheus] the foolish racial pride of a Hermione and the sexual curiosity of a Peeping Tom. It is not thus that martyrs of enlightenment are represented” (xliii).⁴⁰ But as part of her sceptical take on the Enlightenment, Morrison does indeed represent the characters who most fervently defend reason as both racially proud and as “Peeping Toms”. In common with both Ovid’s and Wole Soyinka’s versions of the Pentheus/Dionysus story, which emphasize and extend the voyeurism of the

⁴⁰ This observation is quoted by Martha Nussbaum in her introduction to C.K. Williams’s translation of the play (xxvii).

Euripidean protagonist, Morrison repeatedly portrays purportedly-enlightened, moralistic characters as perverts.⁴¹ As Jesse has observed, there is much of Pentheus in the Morgan brothers of *Paradise* (12), and in that novel Morrison constructs the Rubean men's assault on the Convent as a moment of voyeuristic titillation: "at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light" (3). The attackers violate the building with the same "flashlights" that they previously turned on the young people at the Oven (273); in the chapel one man "runs a frond of light from his Black and Decker under each seat" (11), while three others "observe defilement and violence and perversions" under "long slow beams" of their own torch (11, 12). It is no surprise that they formerly visited the place to buy "a string of peppers" or a "gallon of barbecue sauce" (3); both literally and metaphorically they depend on the Convent for their spice.

Other perverted martyrs of enlightenment in the Morrisonian oeuvre include Schoolteacher in *Beloved* (70), who observes Sethe while his nephews assault her, and, less horribly but no less significantly, both Freddie and Macon in *Song of Solomon*. Freddie watches Ruth as she breastfeeds Milkman in the Dionysian sanctuary of the study, where an "evergreen pressed against the window and filtered the light" (13), while Macon spies on the singing Pilate, Reba and Hagar through the window of their home: "he liked looking at them freely this way" (30). The fact that he is lurking in the "four huge pine trees" in

⁴¹ In both Arrowsmith's and Williams's translations of *The Bacchae*, it is Dionysus who initiates the idea that Pentheus should come and watch the rites (*Bac.* trans. Arrowsmith 230; trans. Williams 49). But in Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides*, it is Pentheus who volunteers the suggestion: "I long to see them at their revels" (70), a wish which Dionysus later works up, "Is your wish still white-hot for a peep / At the forbidden?" (76). In *The Metamorphoses* Ovid unambiguously constructs Pentheus as a pervert: "the noise / of long-drawn howls that echoed through the air / Excited Pentheus"; "his impious gaze / was fixed upon the mysteries" (III.713-14).

his sister's yard associates him with Pentheus, who in Arrowsmith's *Bacchae* suggests to the disguised Dionysus that he "could hide, [u]nder the pines and watch" the ecstatic women "quietly", and who finally gets a good view from a pine tree's top (817). Such Euripidean echoes are fundamental to Morrison's specific critique of what she calls "the enlightenment of a few based on the dark oppression of many" ("Rediscovering" 16), and to her exposure of the impurity and irrationality of a purportedly purifying and rationalizing dominant culture.

There are two moments in the Morrisonian oeuvre which explicitly draw attention to the collaboration (that is everywhere implicit) between conceptions of racial, moral and intellectual purity: one in *Song of Solomon* and one in *Paradise*. In the earlier novel, Morrison begins her account of Corrie's love affair with the dissolute Porter by analysing the woman's euphemistic description of her cleaning job. "Amanuensis" is what she calls herself, and "since it was straight out of the nineteenth century, her mother approved" (187). Though working as the State Poet Laureate's "maid", Corrie prefers the Latinate synonym for "secretary", and Ruth approves because "the rickety Latin word made the work her daughter did [. . .] sound intricate, demanding and totally in keeping with her education" (187). These details comprise a perfect illustration of the dignifying power of classicism. Ruth reinforces her own position within the dominant culture by flashing the word to her "lady guests"; "they tried to remember its sound, but still couldn't find it in the dictionary" (188). The label purifies the demeaning fact that Corrie, like most of her contemporaries, spends most of her time cleaning up after a white person.

Through Corrie's predicament the author also makes wider political comment. For Corrie is a graduate of the liberal arts college, Bryn Mawr, and, as Morrison informs us:

Her education had taught her how to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization—or in her case, the civilizing of her community. And if marriage was not achieved, there were alternative roles: teacher, librarian, or . . . well, something intelligent and public-spirited. [. . .] High toned and high yellow, she believed [. . .] she was a prize for a professional man of color. (188)

The ironies in this passage are multiple. Morrison's use of the word "enlightened" of course connotes the Enlightenment; she exposes the fact that while the Eighteenth Century and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) may be the foundation of political advances for twentieth-century white women, opportunities for black women in the 1960s were still far more proscribed.⁴² Sympathetic to Corrie's plight as well as critical of her disingenuity, Morrison observes that "after her graduation she returned to a world in which colored girls [. . .] were in demand for only one kind of work" (189).

There is a tangible anger in the authorial details that "Bryn Mawr had done what a four-year dose of liberal education was designed to do: unfit [Corrie] for eighty percent of the useful work of the world", and that she was now qualified to "contribute to the civilization" or to "civilize" her community (188). Corrie's degree had presumably included a grounding in Classics (which would have enabled her comparison of men in kitchens to dragons' teeth), and

⁴² Dan Orrells suggested to me the importance of the *Vindication* in this context.

Morrison's observations correspond strikingly with Caroline Winterer's description of the nineteenth-century transformation of the university Classics curriculum into a conservative, civilizing force. Winterer points out that the moment Classics became conflated with "culture" and distanced from business and politics was the very moment women were encouraged to study it, and she cites Bryn Mawr among her examples (*Culture* 119). It has to be relevant, too, that Morrison herself was a Classics minor at Howard just a decade later than the fictional Corrie attended Bryn Mawr. There is a striking affinity between the language of Howard's official class descriptions in the *Bulletin of Morrison's "minoring" years*, the language with which the author critiques Corrie's education, and the ideologies that Winterer illuminates. "The important contributions which classical antiquity has bequeathed to Western civilization [. . .] cannot be ignored in a liberal education", declares the *Howard Bulletin of 1951-53*, "for this heritage lies at the root of our own civilization" (Howard 85).⁴³

Corrie's liberal education has failed to secure her "a professional man of color", and a close analysis of her chosen job title reveals that it, too, is treacherous. It is fortunate that Ruth Dead's "lady friends" cannot find "amanuensis" in the dictionary (188), for had they done so they would have discovered its etymology: it is derived from "*a manu*", meaning a "slave at hand", together with the suffix, "-ensis", meaning "*belonging to*" (*Shorter Oxford*). So in an attempt to be as "high toned" as befits "high yellow" skin,

⁴³ Howard is of course not a conventional liberal arts college and in many ways is at the opposite end of the spectrum to Bryn Mawr; Morrison juxtaposes the two in *Song of Solomon* when noting that the "professional man of color" in fact found Bryn Mawr "too elegant", and that "Fisk, Howard, Talledega, Tougaloo" was his "hunting territory" (188). Nonetheless, Morrison has complained about the conservatism of the Howard of her undergraduate years.

Corrie inadvertently describes herself as the Poet Laureate's readily-available slave. As she does with the state motto of Michigan, Morrison demonstrates that Latin is indeed "rickety" (*Song* 187), but it is rickety less in the dignifying venerability that Ruth attributes to it than in the instability in which its radical potential lies.

Morrison highlights the symbiosis between classicism and ideologies of racial and moral purity a second time through the school nativity play in *Paradise*. While the citizens of Ruby are not intellectual — Misner despairs of their lack of interest in "newspapers and different kinds of books" (208) — they set great store by the school's annual performance of the Bethlehem story transformed into a re-enactment of the Disallowing that precedes the foundation of Haven. The drama's fusion of classical theatrical conventions with African-American congregational traditions of testifying unequivocally reinforces the founding ideology of Ruby.

The play derives its power and authority from stylized elements that recall Greek tragedy: the inn-keepers wear masks, while the seven refuge-seeking couples move together in a "slow two-step" and "chant" in choric fashion (208, 211). That the children "form a ring" at the play's end indicates Ruby's self-sufficient, exclusivist introversion. And Morrison's use of the present tense to describe the performance at once indicates the citizens' wish that the themes should appear universal and timeless, and reveals their stagnation. Pat Best notices that with each year's re-enactment, the number of "holy families" decreases (215). She realizes that for a family to retain its status in the town, "generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too" (217). "'God bless the pure and holy' indeed", she reflects

bitterly (217), and she is “disgusted” by the “deep weeping pleasure the audience took from the play” (214). But while the performance clearly moves its audience, Morrison ensures it does not move her readers by three times interrupting its momentum to portray Pat and Richard’s heated argument. She exposes the true fragility of Ruby’s conservatism by undercutting it with the teacher’s and pastor’s disagreements over Billie Delia’s sexual habits, the Civil Rights Movement, how black history should be taught in the school, the Du Bois/Washington debate, and the significance of Africa in contemporary Black American life. This technique contrasts with that of Ellison in *Invisible Man*, who through Homer A. Barbee’s Founder’s Day speech at the narrator’s college makes a similar point about education, classical tradition and the dominant culture by very different means.⁴⁴

The fact that Ellison’s sharecropper whose account of his incestuous acts with his daughter so captivate Mr Norton is called “Trueblood” illuminates the final irony about racial and moral purity that Morrison explores in *Paradise*. In his study of American nativism, Walter Benn Michaels shows that “the homosexual family and the incestuous family emerge as parallel technologies in the effort to prevent half-breeds” (*Our America* 49), and in the final novel in the

⁴⁴ Instead of disrupting Barbee’s speech, Ellison allows his speaker an uninterrupted virtuoso performance that is beguiling to both the student audience and the novel’s readers. In the “vine-covered and earth-colored” chapel that recalls the theatre of Dionysus (*Invisible Man* 110), Barbee extols the Founder’s life story in a style that comprises elements of African-American preaching, classical rhetoric, Greek tragic speech, and epic re-telling. As the narrator recalls with bitter hindsight, it was “here upon this stage” that “the black rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God’s own acting script” (111). At the time, however, the Invisible Man is as enthralled by this powerful blend of Christianity, classicism and American ideology as are the citizens of Ruby by the school play. Other classical resonances in this episode include: the narrator’s recollection that students take their seats in chapel with “faces frozen in solemn masks” (*Invisible Man* 111); Barbee conjuring up an image of the Founder as “this black Aristotle, moving slowly, with sweet patience” (120) (which is of course ironic in light of American pro-slavery deployments of Aristotle that I have already discussed); and the Founder being “hidden in a wagon-load of cotton, in the very center of the fleece” (122). Barbee’s own blindness of course connects him both to his epic-poet namesake and to Tiresias (133).

trilogy Morrison portrays the citizens' preoccupation with racial homogeneity reaching its logical conclusion through her suggestion of incest in the town. As several critics have observed, the fact that Jeff and Sweetie Fleetwood are cousins may account for the sickness of their children and the "odor of illness in their house" (57).⁴⁵ And the theme of incest reinforces the analogy between Ruby and Athens that I have already discussed. For though in Ancient Greek culture incest is "one of the supreme horrors of the imagination that define by contrast the norms of ordered existence", something that "lies in a sense beyond pollution, because it is beyond purification" (Parker, *Miasma* 57), it is nonetheless a fact that for Athenian women "marriage to a half-brother by the same father or to an uncle or cousin was permitted" (Berger). Similarly semi-incestuous relationships are allowed in Ruby, where "many [. . .] practiced what Fairy DuPres called 'takeovers'. [. . .] Billy's mother was wife to her own great-uncle" (197).

In *Invisible Man* Mr Norton is at once "a symbol of the Great Traditions" and, Ellison strongly hints, has had incestuous relations with his "too pure" daughter (43, 41). Similarly, incest joins voyeurism in Morrison's work as an impurity to which an obsession with purity leads. And this affinity between Ruby and Athens highlights just one of the ways in which the classical world, so often invoked in America as a purifying force, is of course no less polluted than is the culture it is deployed to cleanse.

⁴⁵ Dalsgard writes: "Apparently a logical result of Ruby's self-enclosure, incest—and hence, ingrowth and degeneracy—corroborates in the exceptionalist community's perfect aspirations" (242). And Jones writes of the thematic connection to *Absalom, Absalom!*, "both Faulkner and Morrison take [. . .] exclusiveness to its ultimate and extreme conclusion: incest" (6). It is interesting to note that as a graduate student Morrison viewed incest as a theme that defines Greek tragedy. In a section of her Master's thesis which discusses Faulkner's engagement with classical drama, she writes "the fact that incest plays such an important part in [these] novels is evidence that Faulkner patterns these histories after the Greeks" (24).

III. iii The Rage for Revenge

Derek Walcott has argued that “[i]n the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters” (“Muse” 36). Morrison determinedly enacts what he calls “the confrontation with history” and yet she shares with him his perception that “the rage for revenge is hard to exorcize” (“Muse” 36; “Twilight” 10).⁴⁶ While her work repeatedly portrays both black and white recourse to revenge, it is a process that she represents as a flawed means to moral purification. In the pages that follow I show how her deployment of the terms of *miasma* and her engagement of the relationship between crime and revenge as *The Oresteia* and *The Bacchae* configure them enable her critical perspective on the concept of “justice” as it is variously understood in American experience.

In her essay on canon formation, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”, Morrison declares that she, “at least, [does] not intend to live without Aeschylus” (5). Her dialogue with *The Oresteia* is significant — and has attracted brief mention from critics — in the explorations of murder and atonement that *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* comprise. But it is also fundamental to the critiques of cyclical violence that *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz*,

⁴⁶ There is surprisingly little scholarship comparing the work of Walcott and Morrison; this may be because Morrison’s classicism has not been sufficiently acknowledged. The most important extant essay is Jonathan White’s “‘Restoration of our Shattered Histories’”, in which he argues that Walcott’s “‘darkness whose terminus is amnesia’ has affinities with what Toni Morrison called the stirring of ‘rememory’ in her own great acts of remembering the past in *Beloved*” (297). In doctoral theses Natalie King and Ann Harris both consider Walcott and Morrison together, but in their abstracts neither specifically mentions classical tradition.

Paradise and *Love* enact. Morrison explores the same conception of crime as a pollutant that structures the Aeschylan representation of Clytemnestra's killing of her husband and Orestes's reciprocal killing of his mother. As I discussed in Part I, since the African-American novelist and her work exist in a very different relationship to the American dominant culture than did the Greek tragedians and their work to the Athenian one, her allusiveness is inevitably ambivalent and revisionary.

The usefulness of *The Oresteia* to Morrison's own project is in part due to the fact that in the Greek trilogy (as they are in the representations of black life within her own novels) "personal" and "political" violence are always and already inextricably intertwined. Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon in revenge for his sacrificing of Iphigenia, Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to achieve the requisite winds for the sailing to Troy, and the Greek attack on Troy is itself an act of revenge for Paris's abduction of Helen. While Sethe's murder of Beloved must be the ultimate act in which personal and political motivations are inseparable, Morrison also implies that the community's oppressed condition in *Sula* explains their alienating of the eponymous character, or that the disappointing realities of life for blacks in 1920s Harlem is a factor in Joe's affair with and subsequent murder of Dorcas in *Jazz*. This commonality between the Greek plays and the African-American novels is counterbalanced by the author's oeuvre-wide critique of the American legal system as black people experience it, to which a scepticism about Athena's acquittal of Orestes, and about Aeschylus's celebration of the establishment of the Areopagus, is integral. Morrison's novels show that the American implementation of justice has more in common with the irate recourse to force epitomized by Pentheus in

The Bacchae than with the ideal of rational law which *The Eumenides* endorses and to which the US aspires in its rhetoric.

In the *Agamemnon*, the murderous Clytemnestra claims that “the savage ancient spirit of revenge” has acted through her, and Aegisthus declares over Agamemnon’s body that it is a “brilliant day” for “vengeance” (Ag. trans. Fagles 1530, 1605-06). The fact that the pair kill the “black, impure, unholy” Agamemnon in the bath emphasizes the purifying element of the act, but that “the bath swirls red” indicates the new pollution that they have incurred (Ag. trans. Fagles 218, 1131). In *The Libation Bearers*, while the Chorus optimistically equates justice and vengeance, Orestes is immediately aware that his “victory” in killing of his mother is “soiled” (*L.B.* trans. Lattimore 1017). And in *The Eumenides* Athena intervenes in the infinite cycle in which “each charge meets counter-charge” (Ag. trans. Fagles 1588). She establishes in her law court the “first trial of bloodshed” (Ag. trans Fagles 695), re-assigns the Furies to a new role as guardian spirits of Athens, and redefines the concept of justice. In his celebration of the democratic advances of fifth-century BCE Athens, Aeschylus is to some extent prophetic, in that, as Robert Parker writes, the cultural preoccupation with “murder-pollution” did indeed recede as the new legal system took hold (*Miasma* 126-28). By the Fourth Century, Parker writes, “murder-pollution had outlived its utility”, and “the function of ‘purification’ [. . .] had been taken over by legal process” (*Miasma* 128, 322).

It is not hard to understand the appeal of *The Oresteia* to Enlightenment-bred America, a nation in which the Greek façade of the Supreme Court connotes the ideal of the “Equal Justice Under Law” that is engraved on its architrave. While D.H. Lawrence, William Faulkner and

Eugene O'Neill have engaged the "primitive" or pre-*Eumenides* elements of the myth, both Fagles's and Lattimore's translations of the Pythia's opening speech in the final play bring dominant American ideology to mind. Fagles describes the Athenians who led Apollo to Parnassus as "the highway-builders, sons of the god of fire who tamed / the savage country, civilized the wilds" (*Eum.* 13-14), while Lattimore calls them "the builders of roads", who "changed / the wilderness to a land that was no wilderness" (*Eum.* 13-14).⁴⁷ The commentaries by these American classical scholars likewise reveal their sense of an analogy between the Athens portrayed in *The Eumenides* and their homeland. Lattimore observes that the myth's resolution "merges into the history of civilization at Athens, which represents in fact the world's progress" (Introduction 2), while Fagles and Stanford write of "an Athens radiant with civic faith and justice" (14). of "a new order", and of the trilogy as "our rite of passage from savagery to civilization" ("Reading" 16, 20).⁴⁸ It is presumably these scholars' "civic faith" in their own nation's political and judicial systems that enables their unambivalent celebration of *The Eumenides*.

⁴⁷ D.H. Lawrence writes in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* of the "Orestes-like frenzy of restlessness in the Yankee soul" (41). In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner engages *The Oresteia* in his novel of multiple vengeance and an obsession with racial purity by calling Sutpen's illegitimate daughter by a slave, now the housekeeper, Clytemnestra. Eugene O'Neill models *Mourning Becomes Electra* on *The Oresteia* but ignores the resolution of *The Eumenides*, leaving Lavinia alone with her ghosts at the close of the third and final play, *The Haunted*. And in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* a critical perspective on *The Eumenides* may well inform the following conversation:

What is the American fetish about highways?
 They want to get somewhere, PaPa LaBas offers.
 Because something is after them, Black Herman adds.
 But what is after them?

They are after themselves. They call it destiny. Progress. We call it Haints.

Haints of their victims rising from the soil of Africa, South America, Asia. (135)

⁴⁸ Fagles and Stanford even conflate lines of the *Agamemnon* with Julia W. Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic", the anthem of the Union Army in the Civil War. Of Clytemnestra's lines "But you are Zeus when Zeus / tramples the bitter virgin grape for new wine" (Ag. trans. Fagles 971-72), Fagles and Stanford write, "Zeus-Agamemnon has arrived to trample out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored" (35).

In his *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) — a study of sacrifice, scapegoating and revenge — René Girard assumes a universal, empowered subject as his reader. His analysis of the effects of legal process accords strikingly with Parker’s analysis of the demise of “murder-pollution” in Athens. “Our judicial system rationalizes revenge”, he writes. “The system treats the disease without fear of contagion and provides a highly effective technique for the cure and [. . .] the prevention of violence” (*Violence* 22).⁴⁹ If an effective legal system eliminates the pollution of crime and the imperative for private revenge, then the inverse is also true: a persisting conception of crime as a pollutant that provokes direct vengeance suggests that a legal system is ineffective. Thus the recurrent representation in Morrison’s novels of crime as a miasmatic force that propels individuals to seek violent revenge can be read as an exposure of African-American alienation from American justice.⁵⁰

In *Song of Solomon* Guitar Bains speaks in the language of Aeschylus’s Clytemnestra in his articulation of white violence as a contamination that (in the absence of meaningful legal process) can only be purged by revenge. But Morrison also deploys the terms of *miasma* and a sceptical allusiveness to *The Oresteia* to protest the injustices to which white America has subjected black in

⁴⁹ See also Girard’s observation:

Vengeance is a vicious circle whose effect on primitive societies can only be surmized. For us the circle has been broken. We owe our good fortune to one of our social institutions above all: our judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance. The system does not suppress vengeance; rather, it effectively limits it to a single act of reprisal, enacted by a sovereign authority specializing in this particular function. (*Violence* 14)

⁵⁰ In the essay “Bigger and O.J.”, which forms part of the anthology on the O.J. Simpson case edited by Morrison and Lacour in 1997, Ishmael Reed rehearses all-too familiar facts about “racism in the criminal justice system”:

Black youth are five to ten times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth for committing the same crime, [. . .] blacks are receiving mandatory five-year sentences for possession of crack cocaine while white crack possessors are not, and [. . .] there exists a disproportionate number of black prisoners on death row. (171)

the trilogy, even though the central crimes and pursuits of revenge in these novels are intra- rather than inter-racial. Given the recurrence of murder in Morrisonian plots, the fact that representation of judicial proceedings is virtually non-existent in her novels is striking. Absenting the law courts is one means by which she discredits them. At the same time, she shows that despite the enlightened aspirations it professes, in the guise of legal process or in the name of “democracy” the dominant culture wreaks a vengeance that is as irrational as Pentheus’s attempt to deploy force against Dionysus and as primitive as the *Agamemnon*’s “ancient spirit of revenge” (*Ag.* trans Fagles 1530).

In *Paradise*, Richard Misner solicits contributions towards the legal defence of four teenagers who have been charged with “whatever [. . .] the prosecution could ferret out of its statutes to level against black boys who said No” (206). He is amazed by the Founding Fathers’ negative response: “I don’t hold with violence” came from “men who had handled guns all their lives” (206). The hypocrisy of the moralistic, and the disordered violence on which the maintenance of “law and order” depends, are recurring themes in the Morrisonian oeuvre. Her allusions to Aeschylus and Euripides in *Paradise* expose the corrupt and corrupting practices of a nation that claims to act in a purifying capacity both at home and abroad.⁵¹

“[H]e who has wrought shall pay” declares the Chorus of the *Agamemnon*, “that is law” (trans. Lattimore 1563). But, “[t]he problem for

⁵¹ In her portrayal of America as a vengeful nation Morrison once again sets herself at odds with Henry Adams, who observes of the year 1902 that “Americans ignore tragic motives that would have overshadowed the middle-ages; and the world learns to regard assassination as a form of hysteria [. . .]. Three hideous political murders, that would have fattened The Eumenides with horror, have thrown scarcely a shadow on the White House” (*Education* 1100).

those left alive is what to do about revenge”, says L in *Love*, “how to escape the sweetness of its rot” (139). As my analyses of *Song of Solomon*, the trilogy and *Love* reveal, these novels ultimately articulate viable means to atonement that eschew both the legal processes from which African-Americans have historically been alienated and the infinite violence of revenge.⁵²

In *Sula*, Ajax discovers the wrongfully arrested Tar Baby in his cell, “badly beaten and dressed in nothing but extremely soiled underwear” (133). The ensuing fracas results in the “arraignment” of the men, but the phlegmatic Ajax regards “such messes with the police” as “the natural hazards of Negro life” (133). There is no such nonchalance in *Song of Solomon*, however, where “each man [. . .] knew he was subject to being picked up as he walked the streets” (101), and where, in the aftermath of Emmett Till’s murder, Guitar rages that “there ain’t no law for no colored man except the one that sends him to the chair” (82).⁵³ “There were no questions about who stomped [Till]—his murderers boasted freely”, Morrison writes (*Song* 80). In this novel’s exploration of the black male response to recurring racially-motivated violence and injustice, she initiates the analysis of the relationship between justice and retribution in the Civil Rights Movement that she continues in *Paradise* and *Love*.

⁵² The “rage for revenge” also tortures Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, who becomes ludicrous in his impotent vengeful rage, declaring for example that he will “go back and kill Bledsoe” (194).

⁵³ Morrison herself was twenty-four years of age when, in the summer of 1955, fourteen-year-old Till was beaten, shot and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi for saying “Bye, baby” to a white woman, and when in September of that year the men arrested for his murder were found innocent after an all-white jury had debated the case for one hour (Wilkinson 85). Brenda Wilkinson notes how the attorney for the defendants, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, made an appeal to the ideology of racial purity in their summation for the jury. “I’m sure that every white Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men!”, the defending lawyer said (Wilkinson 85).

Guitar is impassioned and articulate about black people's legal disenfranchisement. Explaining the situation to the indifferent Milkman, he points out that when "white people kill black people" they say, "Eh, eh, eh, ain't that a shame?", and that "nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts" (154). "Where's the money, the state, the country to finance our justice?", he asks his friend. "Do we have a court?" (160). The speaker's separation of blacks and whites into "them" and "us" indicates his sense of alienation from the America that is supposedly his birthright. In his view, "the only thing left to do is balance it" (154); "if there were anything like or near justice when a cracker kills a Negro, there wouldn't have to be no Seven Days" (160).

The critic Leslie Harris indicates the affinity between Guitar's vengeful outlook and the "unenlightened" Greek worldview when she describes the Seven Days as a "Fury-like society" (72). But scholarship has not discussed the extent to which the character's idiom recalls the archaic conception of murder as a pollution necessitating revenge that *The Oresteia* expounds. The activist men of the Blood Bank deploy "blood" — the visible pollutant in murder — to express their rationale and purpose. "You want to spill blood, spill the crackers' blood that bashed his face in", says Hospital Tommy (81), while Guitar points out to Milkman that "the earth is soggy with black people's blood" (158). Here Morrison has transposed to inter-racial American conflict the inter-familial violence of the House of Atreus, of which the Chorus in *The Libation Bearers* observes, "Through too much glut of blood drunk by our fostering ground / the vengeful gore is caked and hard", and asks, "What can wash off the blood once spilled on the ground?" (*L.B.* trans. Lattimore 66-67, 47). The Seven Days'

preoccupation with blood anticipates Morrison's emphasis on the contaminating fluid in the murders of Beloved, Dorcas and the Convent Women in her later trilogy.⁵⁴

Guitar's conviction that his guerilla group's reciprocal attacks on whites are justified by the need to "keep things on an even keel" and to maintain "Numbers. Balance. Ratio" recalls the insistent choric imagery of the *Agamemnon* (Song 154, 156). In that play the old men of Argos claim that "Justice turns the balance scales" and that "no pain can tip the scales" (Ag. trans. Fagles 250, 567).⁵⁵ Both Morrison and Aeschylus undermine this "primitive" view that vengeance straightforwardly equates to justice. Yet, paradoxically, Guitar also speaks the language of the Enlightenment in his ambition to "help keep the numbers the same" and to "keep the ratio the same" (154-55).⁵⁶ And he matches his sentence structure to the society's principle of "balance": "If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn" (154).

The character points out that the dominant culture deploys scientific rationalism to legitimate the irrationality of racist violence: "They killed us first and then tried to get some scientific proof about why we should die" (157). Yet he shares his enemy's "depravity", justifying the Seven Days' actions on the grounds that white people are "unnatural" and that "the disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (157). Through Guitar's

⁵⁴ In her essay on the O.J. Simpson case, Morrison writes scathingly of the media/public obsession with blood: "The house at Rockingham awash in blood. Great splashes in the foyer, up the stairs, cascading down the edge of a porcelain sink. Smears and globs of it everywhere: car, bedroom, socks" ("Official" xxi).

⁵⁵ Deploying the same image, the Chorus of *The Libation Bearers* observes: "But justice waits and turns the scales" (trans. Fagles 61).

⁵⁶ Patell makes a similar observation, writing of Guitar's "reasonable logic" and "Enlightenment speech" (138).

outlook Morrison demonstrates the actual primitivism of Enlightened racial politics, and also the futility of imitative revenge. Guitar insists that he is “reasonable” (158), but Morrison, who states unequivocally that “counter-racism [is] never an option” (“Home” 4), shares Milkman’s view that the older man is “confused” and “crazy” (*Song* 160, 265).

Morrison returns to the problems of justice and retribution in the struggle for black civil rights in her play, *Dreaming Emmett*. While the script is not available to scholars, Margaret Croyden’s *New York Times* interview makes clear that this work continues the themes and the classical allusiveness of *Song of Solomon*. Croyden explains that the plot centres on “an anonymous black boy who was murdered”, who “seeking revenge [. . .] summons up the perpetrators of his murder, as well as his family and friends. [. . .] But his ghosts refuse to be controlled by his imagination; all see the past in their own way” (Taylor-Guthrie 221).⁵⁷ This sense of the complexity of the past problematizing the “justice” of revenge is also present in the 1977 novel. There, on the night that Milkman and Guitar set out to rob Pilate, the wind from the polluted lake — in which “carp floated belly up” and which gave swimmers “ear infections” — brings a “heavy spice-sweet smell” that “could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra” (184-85). The men think “it was the way freedom smelled, or justice, or luxury, or vengeance” (185), but as a “marketplace in Accra” connotes the slave trade of the West African coast, this smell must primarily connote intra-racial betrayal. Such pollution is the perfect accompaniment to their treacherous crime against Pilate, and at the same time

⁵⁷ *Dreaming Emmett* was performed at SUNY-Albany in 1986 (Taylor-Guthrie 218). I have not been able to read the script; Maria Purves informed me in a letter of 7 April 2003 that it “is not available for private reading”. For a discussion of the play see Peach 7-8.

the allusion to Africans selling Africans complicates the “justice” that Guitar thinks he will achieve with explosives bought with the gold.

Song of Solomon does configure one atonement that does not involve reciprocal violence. The author makes conventional use of the imagery of *miasma* in describing the Butler Place as Milkman finds it: “the house looked as if it had been eaten by a galloping disease, the sores of which were dark and fluid” (19). The simile unambiguously conveys the corruption of the Butler family, and is the logical correlative to the familiar injustices meted out to the black population that the Reverend Cooper describes (231-32). Cooper tells Milkman, however, that as far as vengeance against the Butlers is concerned, “any evening up left to do, Circe took care of” (233). Circe’s mode of revenge turns out to be passive but entirely effective. She boasts to Milkman that she will “never clean [the house] again. Never. Nothing. Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt, will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot” (247).⁵⁸ She literalizes the defilement that the Butlers’ crimes have incurred, without incurring further pollution on herself.

“What to do about revenge” is of course a dilemma that unifies *Beloved*, *Jazz*

⁵⁸ In Circe’s neglect of the Butler Place Morrison may be recalling the Chorus in the *Agamemnon*:

But Justice shines in sooty hovels,
loves the decent life.
From proud halls crusted with guilt by filthy hands,
she turns her eyes to find the pure in spirit. (Ag. trans. Fagles 761-65)

The *Agamemnon* also resonates in the fact that as children Macon and Pilate were “repelled” by “the carpets, the draperies” (*Song* 238).

and *Paradise*, and by the end of the trilogy it is to some extent resolved.⁵⁹ An allusiveness to the Aeschylan Furies is a principal means by which Morrison establishes a dialectic between her own trilogy and *The Oresteia*. Several critics have noted the author's obvious engagement with the Greek trilogy in *Beloved*'s description of 124 Bluestone Road as "palsied by the baby's fury" (5). Otten observes, for example, that "the baby ghost [. . .] has come, like a Greek Fury or a vengeful ghost in a Renaissance tragedy, to exact retribution" ("Melodrama" 294), while Corti rightly surmises that "Beloved would seem comparable to the Aeschylan Furies (41).⁶⁰ But there is much more to be said about the connection between the avenging Beloved, Alice Manfred's "trembling fury" at Dorcas's murder in *Jazz* (76) and Billie Delia's fantasy that the dead Convent women will "return" as Furies in *Paradise* (308). What is important is not the fact of Morrison's allusiveness to Aeschylus, but rather the ambivalent nature of that allusiveness and the radicalism that the ambivalence enables.

⁵⁹ It is also an implicit question in *Tar Baby*, where Jadine, who wants Son to train as a lawyer, insists that, "There is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better. [. . .] That is the only revenge" (274). And once again, though to a lesser extent than in *Sula*, *Solomon* and the trilogy, echoes of *The Bacchae* and *The Oresteia* sound in the conflicts that Morrison explores. The author repeats the detail that the doomed pair's New York hotel room has a "purple carpet", thereby invoking the "tinted splendours" — the purple or crimson robes or carpet — in which Clytemnestra ensnares the returning Agamemnon (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 218, 224; *Ag.* trans. Lattimore 924). And the repeated association between Jadine's desire and a pack of "small dark dogs" equates her feelings for her lover both with the "fleet hounds of madness" who comprise Euripides's Bacchantes and with the Furies in *The Eumenides*, pursuing vengeance "like hounds after a bleeding fawn" (*Tar Baby* 93, 116; *Bac.* trans. Arrowsmith 978; *Eum.* trans. Lattimore 247).

⁶⁰ Corti identifies other echoes of the *Agamemnon* in *Beloved*:

The texture of Morrison's fiction leaves little doubt that she is quite conversant with the world of ancient tragedy. The image of the sow eating her own litter, described by the girl, Denver, recalls the image of the pregnant hare being devoured by the eagle in the choral ode of the *Agamemnon* as surely as the image of the infant Denver 'taking her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister' recalls the blood-stained milk of Clytemnestra's dreadful dream. (62)

But Corti's essay actually centres on Morrison's novel and *Medea*, and does not discuss *why* there might be echoes of *The Oresteia* in the later work.

A second means by which Morrison both unifies her trilogy and maintains a dialogue with *The Oresteia* is the emphasis she places on the staining blood of the novels' murdered characters. As a manifestation of the contamination of both victims and perpetrators, this recalls the Furies' obsession with blood in *The Eumenides*.⁶¹ But while Morrison shares Aeschylus's condemnation of vengeance and cyclical violence, she eschews *The Eumenides*'s recourse to legal process as a resolution of the impasse. Her deployment of the paradigm of murder pollution is itself a refutation of the American judicial system, and each of the three novels seeks an alternative to violent revenge that is also an alternative to a court case. As each novel comprises both murder and its resolution or purification, each can be seen as a revised *Oresteia* in itself — *Beloved* is even in three parts — as well as combining to form an allusive trilogy.

Given Morrison's interest in the facts of Margaret Garner's trial, in which (in the novelist's words) "she was tried for the 'real' crime, which was stolen property" rather than for murder, the absence of detail about Sethe's trial in *Beloved* is striking (Taylor-Guthrie 272). In the recently premiered opera, *Margaret Garner* (2005), Morrison as librettist devotes an entire scene of the second act to Garner's trial. But in *Beloved*, while Sethe rehearses a few memories about her time in jail she makes no mention of appearing in court (182). In an interior monologue addressed to her daughter's ghost, she simply

⁶¹ For example, the Furies say:

His mother's blood spilled on the ground
cannot come back again.

[. . .]

You must give back her blood from the living man
red blood of your body to suck, and from your own
I could feed, with bitter-swallowed drench [. . .]. (*Eum.* trans. Lattimore 261-66)

states “when [. . .] they let me out for good, I went and got you a gravestone” (184). Sethe does not care whether she is guilty or not guilty in the eyes of the law, but is concerned (in Vernant’s words on purifying the impurity of murder in Ancient Greece) “to appease the rancor of the deceased” (*Myth and Society* 125).

Sethe realizes that “rutting” with the stone-engraver to pay for Beloved’s gravestone has not appeased her dead daughter’s “rage”, even though the sex had felt “more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil” (5). But the blood that “pump[s] down” Sethe’s dress and is ingested by Denver at the time of the murder is not the only evidence of the miasmatic nature of the crime (149-50). Denver, whose “tears” that she “dripped into the stovefire” recall the “hearth soaked in sorrow” that the Chorus of *The Libation Bearers* laments, is at pains to hide the fact that her returned sister is a polluted and polluting presence (*Beloved* 17; *L.B.* trans. Lattimore 49). She hides the evidence of Beloved’s incontinence by secretly rinsing sheets and soaking and boiling underwear (54), and a few days later she “wiped up the mess” of her older sister’s vomit (67). Robert Parker writes that the Greek Erinyes (or Furies) are “animate agents of pollution who embody the anger of one slain by a kinsman” (*Miasma* 107). Beloved embodies her own anger: when the community gather to exorcize her they notice “the stench, the heat, the moisture” to which her haunting gives rise (258).

Morrison inherits from Aeschylus the sense of the interaction between personal and political factors in crime and revenge. In her trilogy the novelist adapts this legacy to the specificity of African-American history by highlighting the role of dominant cultural violence and injustice on Sethe, Joe

Trace and the Rubean fathers in their own subsequent intra-racial (and in Sethe's case inter-familial) violence. Sethe incurs pollution by murdering Beloved, but through flashbacks and recapitulation that recall the technique of the Chorus in the *Agamemnon* Morrison also conveys the polluting crimes to which white people have subjected America's black population. Ella's experiences have taught her that "anybody white" could "dirty you" (251); Sethe discovers this for herself when, after hearing Schoolteacher discussing her "human characteristics" and her "animal ones" she cannot stop scratching her scalp (193, 195). Stamp Paid notices that the journalistic record of black suffering is itself polluted and polluting: "the stench stank. Stank up off the pages of the *North Star*" (180), while the stain on the bedclothes from Sethe's bleeding scar is obviously symbolic. The fact that it is her own suffering that motivates her killing of her daughter explains the association between Beloved, seeking revenge on her mother, and the "people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons", seeking their own vengeance (181). The novel *Beloved* articulates "the mumbling of the black and angry dead" (198); it seeks atonement from the dominant culture on their behalf.

Earlier in this thesis I discuss Sethe's *hubris* and her resulting rejection by the community. Her ostracism can be seen as a kind of purification ritual in that, as Parker writes of the formal practice in Athens, "ostracism is a kind of expulsion of the scapegoat in secularized form" (*Miasma* 269). Athenians used the *ostraca*, he notes, to bring the "big men" down, and "to give vent to their own feeling as to which powerful figure the state could best be rid of" (270); in Cincinnati the townsfolk reject Sethe because they are infuriated by her pride

and apparent self-sufficiency. Yet there is a simpler reason, too, for their shunning her. Parker records that in Ancient Greece a murderer is “dangerous or unclean” because he is tainted with “his victim’s anger” (107). Having killed her daughter, Sethe has incurred pollution on herself and so is alienated.

The closing vision of *Beloved* rejects the revenge paradigm, however, and both Sethe and the ghost are purified through ritual that is implicitly Christian rather than archaic Greek. Beloved does not kill or destroy her mother; instead she disappears once the praying and singing women (who meet “at three in the afternoon on a Friday”) have converged on the house (257). When Sethe herself confronts the sound of the singing, she “trembled like the baptized in its wash” (259); Morrison unequivocally invokes the Roman Catholic rite of Exorcism that traditionally precedes that of Baptism.⁶² The novel’s final rejection of vengeance is symbolized by a positive redeployment of the *Agamemnon*’s “net” and “web”. Whereas in the Greek tragedy the recurring motifs symbolize the inescapable and perpetual nature of reciprocal violence, in the novel nets and webs are powerful means to healing.⁶³ For example, Denver creates a “net” of stories with which to “hold Beloved” (76), and within one of those stories is the account of Amy dressing Sethe’s back with “spiderwebs” (80).

⁶² Until the 2003 *New Yorker* article on Morrison, it was a relatively-little known fact that “when she was twelve years old, [she] converted to Catholicism, taking ‘Anthony’ as her baptismal name” (Als 67-68). There is much more to be said about representations of Roman Catholicism in her work.

⁶³ The imagery of webs and nets punctuates the *Agamemnon* from start to finish; examples include the Chorus Leader telling Cassandra she is “caught in the nets of doom” (*Ag.* trans. Fagles 1047), Cassandra’s vision of the murderous Clytemnestra, “Caught in the folded web’s / entanglement she pinions him” (*Ag.* trans. Lattimore 1126-68) and Aegisthus rejoicing at the sight of the king in what his usurper claims are “the nets of justice” (*Ag.* trans. Fagles 1644). The imagery is recalled in *The Eumenides* when Orestes rehearses Clytemnestra’s crime. Orestes says Clytemnestra “enveloped [Agamemnon] in her handsome net” (*Eum.* trans. Fagles 474), while Apollo later reiterates how “in her gorgeous never-ending web she chopped him down” (*Eum.* trans. Fagles 643).

Yet a faint ambivalence about the African-American desire for revenge persists. In the novel's unsettling epilogue, we learn that *Beloved's* "footprints come and go, come and go". Our feet "will fit" if we step into them, but "take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there" (275). Here Morrison creates a conflicted, tentative reconfiguration of the famous "recognition" between Orestes and Electra in *The Libation Bearers*, to which the fact that Electra's foot fits into Orestes's print is pivotal.⁶⁴ In that play, the reunited siblings go on to plot the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The Christian vision of *Beloved's* end rejects such vengefulness, but the novel's epilogue nonetheless acknowledges the pain of the wronged who can never be avenged.

In *Jazz*, Alice Manfred confronts her impotence in the face of the crimes committed against her:

A man had come into her living room and destroyed her niece. His wife had come right in the funeral to nasty and dishonor her. She would have called the police after both of them if everything she knew about Negro life had made it even possible to consider. (74)

The descriptions of Dorcas's death epitomize the way Morrison configures crime as a pollutant in order to highlight and protest the absence of a meaningful criminal justice system. At the party where she is shot, the dying Dorcas wants "no ambulance; no police, nobody", and "the woman giving the

⁶⁴ At Agamemnon's grave, Electra says:

But see, here is another sign. Footprints are here.
The feet that made them are alike, and look like mine.
[. . .] I step
where he has stepped, and heelmarks, and the space between
his heel and toe are like the prints I make. (*L.B.* trans. Lattimore 205-10)

party said okay because she was afraid to call the police” (209). Instead, Dorcas pollutes the environment. Her blood “stained through [Acton’s] jacket to his shirt”, and she “bled to death all through that woman’s bed sheets on into the mattress” (192, 210).⁶⁵ In the Traces’ home, three months after her death, “the girl’s memory is a sickness in the house” (28). Morrison here reiterates Calchas’s description of the unappeased Iphigenia in the *Agamemnon*: “For the terror returns like sickness to lurk in the house / the secret anger remembers the child that shall be avenged” (*Ag. trans. Lattimore 154-55*).

While Dorcas’s memory haunts Joe, Violet in turn seeks revenge on both her husband and his dead lover. Her assault on the girl’s corpse is a new defiling act: the ushers complain that in going to “mess up the funeral” she manages to “ruin the honorable job they had worn white gloves for” (211, 92). Later Violet is as impotent as Alice; “[t]here is nothing left for her to beat or hit” (28). And Alice’s own response to events completes the circle of contaminated and contaminating wrongdoing and vengefulness. Towards Joe she is seized by the “trembling fury” that I have already discussed (76), while towards Violet, after an initial numbness “feelings, like sea trash expelled on a beach, stark and murky—returned” (75).

Alice has suffered much at the hands of white people as well as black: her sister is “burned” and her brother-in-law “stomped to death” in the East St Louis riots of 1917 (57). This detail about how Dorcas was orphaned and the account of Violet’s dispossession continue the focus on the contribution of

⁶⁵ Felice records that “the mess” was “all that [Acton and the hostess] talked about”; the pair’s concern for cleanliness replaces an appropriate emotional or moral response to Dorcas’s death. In his essay “Wild Women”, Marc Conner discusses the significance of Morrison’s focus on blood and bloodstains in this novel (Conner 345-46).

white violence to black violence that *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* initiate. As in the earlier novels personal and political crime and vengeance are inextricable from each other, and the polluting crimes of whites against blacks highlight the moral ambiguities inherent in black-on-black revenge. *Beloved*'s sense that white people "could dirty you" recurs in the news, so traumatic to the suicidal Rose Dear, about a choir member "mutilated and tied to a log, his grandmother refusing to give up his waste-filled trousers, washing them over and over although the stain had disappeared at the first rinse" (*Jazz* 101). And one powerful black demand for atonement that eschews violent revenge is the Fifth Avenue march protesting the 1917 riots. Morrison configures this as a kind of cathartic purification ritual, in that after Alice listens to "the drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not", she realizes that "the hurt hurt her but the fear was gone at last" (53, 54).

As I discuss in the first part of this thesis, the narrator of *Jazz* is proved wrong in her prediction that the Violet-Joe-Felice triangle will collapse in violence. As in *Beloved*, the novel's ending rejects the revenge paradigm. Alice initially believes she can't give Violet "forgiveness", but recalling the futility of her own violent fantasies against the woman for whom her husband left her, she comes to an understanding with Violet (110, 86). The pair's laughter after Alice burns a shirt leaves them feeling "better. Not beaten, not lost"; the burnt shirt symbolizes reality's modification of the unrealizable moral purity that clean laundry represents throughout the oeuvre (113). Joe and Violet in turn find a kind of absolution in their confessions to Felice. Through answering her direct questions about the motivations for their violent acts, they purge themselves and rediscover the happiness that Felice's name connotes (211, 213).

Morrison's refutation of vengeance and her insistence on alternative means to atonement are most fully expressed in *Paradise*. In this final novel of the trilogy the author returns to and develops the condemnation of a community's scapegoating of vulnerable individuals that *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* comprise.⁶⁶ Through the Rubean Fathers' attack on the Convent women the author exposes the justification of violence on grounds of the exacting of revenge or the upholding of moral righteousness. Building on the implied affinity between the town's ruling class and Euripides's voyeuristic Pentheus, Morrison's engagement with *The Bacchae* enables the plot — unfolding as it does in the 1960s and 1970s — to function as a comment on the hypocritical irrationality of the state's handling of home-based racial conflict and of the war in Vietnam. By associating and finally disassociating the Convent women from both Euripidean Bacchantes and Aeschylan Furies, Morrison shows that moral purity has nothing to do with violent revenge.

Of Ancient Greece, Robert Parker writes that “because pollution and guilt can be closely associated, the imagery of pollution may be used to express moral revulsion” (*Miasma* 312). This is exactly the discourse used of the Convent women by the men who “mapped defense [. . .] and honed evidence for its need” (275). The Fathers complain of their soon-to-be victims “[d]rawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families” (276). The women are “slime” (288), inside the Convent “things look

⁶⁶ As Philip Page writes, “like the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, [the community in *Sula*] need to ‘clean themselves’ on such scapegoats as Shadrack, Sula, and even their own children” (“Shocked” 70).

uncleaned” (12), and, in language that recalls Soyinka’s Pentheus complaining of “[t]he filth, the rot and creeping / Poison in the body of the state” (27), the men claim that the Convent is “diseased” and that it “rots” the town (8, 5).⁶⁷ The Fathers bring Medallion’s scapegoating of Sula to mind in their blaming the women for various “outrages” that themselves embody impurity. Just as Sula, associated with “sick children, rotten potatoes [. . .] and bug-ridden flour”, is blamed for Teapot’s fall down the steps and Mr Finley’s choking to death, so “those women” are blamed for the sickness of the Fleetwood children or the townsfolk’s increasing need for “VD shots” (*Sula* 150, 114-17; *Paradise* 11). Indeed, the description of the Convent dwellers as “detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door” could be a translation of word *katharma* (“offscouring”) that (like *pharmakos*) the Greeks used to describe the scapegoat figure (*Paradise* 4; Parker, *Miasma* 258).⁶⁸

Morrison problematizes the men’s claim that they are acting in a morally purifying capacity in several ways. First, she exposes how the men’s violence is actually motivated by a desire for vengeance. K.D. nurses a “grudge” against Gigi for ending their relationship while Deacon’s guilt about his affair with Connie drives him “to erase both the shame and the kind of

⁶⁷ Soyinka emphasizes the themes of *miasma* and purity in his version of *The Bacchae* by supplementing Euripides’s story with a purificatory flogging ritual, emblematic of the old religion (4-9).

⁶⁸ The fate of both Sula and the Convent women exactly exemplifies the process that Robert Parker identifies in Ancient Greece, in which the “*pharmakos* ceases to be a mere vehicle onto which [. . .] the ills of the community are loaded [. . .], and becomes instead, through his crime, the actual cause of whatever affliction is being suffered” (Parker, *Miasma* 259). Like Oedipus, both Sula and the Convent women are the *agos*, the defilement that must be expelled (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 131), and the misfortunes in Medallion and Ruby can be read as a version of the *loimos* or plague that, as Parker observes, afflicts Thebes at the start of *Oedipus Rex* (*Miasma* 257).

woman he believed was its source" (*Paradise* 278-79). Steward's "rancor", meanwhile, described as a "floating blister in his bloodstream", springs from his conviction that the women murdered Arnette's baby (279). Second, Morrison shows that the women's presence (like Sula's) actually performs a healing function in the community.⁶⁹ The unconscious truth in the Fathers' statement that "everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow" is that, far from the women damaging those they encounter, it is the damaged or "maimed" citizens of Ruby who seek them out (276). The alcoholic Menus, whose "puke" and "shit" the women repeatedly clear up (165), the bewildered Billie Delia and the desperate Arnette are just three members of the town who seek and find refuge at the Convent. The fact that Soane depends on Connie for her "medicine" or "tonic" symbolizes the Convent women's curative rather than contaminating role (112, 167).

Morrison's representation of the men's scapegoating and vengefulness engages the similar tendencies of the nation itself during both the 1990s, when the novel was written, and the 1960s and 1970s, when it is predominantly set. *Race-ing Justice* (the anthology on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill controversy) contains an essay by Wahneema Lubiano which highlights America's tendency to blame African-American women for the nation's ills. Lubiano highlights the media's persistent deployment of black women as "all-purpose scapegoats" responsible for both "the disadvantaged status of African Americans" and "the decline of 'America'" in general (336). The essayist demonstrates that this myth, rooted in the Moynihan Report of 1965, is in 1991

⁶⁹ While the townsfolk view Sula as a blight on their lives, she actually functions as an unacknowledged blessing: "Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified [. . .] they began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes" (*Sula* 117).

strategically invoked by Clarence Thomas in his defence. And in her introductory “Friday on the Potomac”, Morrison previews Lubiano’s themes in a paragraph that clearly anticipates *Paradise*. Her observation that the confirmation process involved “ancient secrets of males bonding and the demonizing of females who contradict them” brings to mind the New Fathers of Ruby plotting round the Oven before the massacre. She also depicts “the state” as a kind of repressed, Pentheus-like pervert: “under the pressure of voyeuristic desire [. . .] extraordinary behaviour [. . .] could take place” (Morrison, “Friday” xviii).

In her introduction to C.K. Williams’s translation of *The Bacchae*, Martha Nussbaum notes that in Richard Schechner’s “famous and controversial” *Dionysus in 69*, “the play became linked with both the ‘sexual revolution’ and the opposition to the Vietnam War” (xxv). Morrison, who moved to New York City in the year that Schechner’s interpretation opened there — 1968 — may well have been conversant with the production and with its identification between Bacchic ecstasy and what Schechner calls “the carnival spirit of black insurrectionists” as well as with the sexual liberation and anti-war movements (“Politics” 217).⁷⁰ Both the Vietnam War and the violent

⁷⁰ In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” Morrison describes 1969, the year in which she began *Sula*, “as a year of extraordinary political activity” (24). It is interesting to consider her juxtaposition of the citizens of Ruby with the Convent women in light of the contrast Schechner draws between the Men of Thebes and Dionysus in his essay “In Warm Blood: The Bacchae”. Schechner describes the two groups as follows: “MEN OF THEBES: Dark, Homefolk, Hard-working, Heterosexual, Clumsy, Pleasure later, ‘Women stay home’, Repressive. DIONYSUS: Blond, Wanderer, Never works, Polymorphous perverse, Graceful, Everything now, ‘Women come with me’, Expressive” (95). It is also interesting that Wole Soyinka, for his part, is scathing about Schechner’s project. In his essay “Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype”, Soyinka writes contemptuously:

The anguish over what is ritual and what drama has indeed been rendered even more abstract by the recent reversion of European and American progressive theatre to ritualism in its ‘purest’ attainable form. [. . .] It is no surprise that towards the close of the sixties, the company which created a New York version of Euripides’ *Bacchae* should draw, amongst other sources, upon an Asmat New Guinea ritual in its search for the tragic soul of twentieth-century white bourgeois-hippie American culture. (6-7)

response to 1960s black agitation comprise an insistent backdrop to the main plot of *Paradise*. In that novel, the state's use of excessive force against a perceived threat in Asia and against the rioters in Watts, Detroit and Newark resonate in the Rubean Fathers' massacre of the Convent women.⁷¹ And Pentheus, who is condemned by Dodds for his "willingness to believe the worst on hearsay evidence" and his "brutality towards the helpless", and is described by Nussbaum as "rigid and militaristic", resonates in all three conflicts (Dodds, Introduction xliii; Nussbaum xxv).

Versions of *The Bacchae* have given varying emphases to Pentheus's embodiment of what Schechner calls the "repressive machinery civilization constructs to keep itself intact" ("Politics" 217). Arrowsmith's Theban king demands "all heavy-armored infantry" and "the fastest troops among our cavalry" against "Bacchic violence" (778-85); he anticipates the hypocritical heavy-handedness of the Johnson administration in Vietnam or the George W. Bush administration in Iraq. Soyinka's supplementary lines in which Pentheus fears a "slave uprising" and orders "the standard drill for a state of emergency" speaks more to the quashing of the race riots (63), while in *Dionysus in 69* one of the actors playing Tiresias interprets the prophet's warning the king about "power" as a diagnosis of "the insanity of those most rational of men, the managerial war-makers" (n. pag.). Morrison in turn shows the irrational rationality of the men who "take aim" with "God at their side" and "[f]or Ruby"

⁷¹ For an account of the "rhetoric of counterinsurgency" characterizing dominant cultural representations of the war in Vietnam and the race riots in Watts, Detroit and Newark in the late 1960s, see Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* 489-577 (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 493). I strongly disagree with Hardack's argument that "[i]nverting Richard Slotkin's model of a white culture defining itself via the violence it perpetrates on the cultures it displaces, Erdrich's and Morrison's displaced cultures resist co-option by regenerating themselves through violence" (462). To my mind, Morrison's condemnation of violence is unambiguous.

(18), and of those responsible for the “body bags” from Vietnam, the “tear gas” in the cities and the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy that so traumatize Gigi (68, 64, 65). The etymology of “Ruby” from the Latin *rubeo*, meaning “I redden” or “I blush” exactly illuminates the relationship between the citizens’ moralistic shame and their descent into hot-blooded, Dionysiac bloodshed. Lone DuPres realizes she has misunderstood the significance of “Apollo’s new handgun” but, in that wonderful phrase, Morrison encapsulates the violent disorderliness of the dominant culture (273).⁷²

When the men invade the Convent their worst suspicions about the women are confirmed by the discovery of Christian iconography “trimmed in grapevines” (4). But the author constructs only a selective affinity between the Convent dwellers and followers of Dionysus. The “dancing in hot sweet rain” that follows their shared confrontations with their trauma is clearly analogous to ecstatic Bacchic ritual (283). Consolata is “fully housed by the god”, Seneca “let go” of her memories of abandonment and Grace “witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt that never should have been stained” (283). These details indicate that (unlike Shadrack’s National Suicide Day March in *Sula*, which is a kind of failed purification ritual) the process is truly cathartic.

Furthermore, the women’s liberating effect on the young people of Ruby during

⁷² Ishmael Reed makes a similar point about “rational” American power in *Mumbo Jumbo*, where his account of the “rational” but violent Egyptian god Set is interrupted by a table demonstrating “U.S. Bombing Tonnage in Three Wars”, which indicates the vast and disproportionate tonnage of the “Indochina War” between 1965 and 1971 (163). Morrison’s novels frequently suggest that it is America, and not the places that America “others”, that is insane and irrational. For example in *Paradise*, in their pre-Convent lives, Mavis fears being murdered by her own children, Seneca is abandoned as a child and employed as a sex slave as an adult, Pallas (ironically enough, considering her name) is raped and thrown in a lake. These real-life experiences are not vastly different from Thérèse’s perception of the USA as a place of insane perversions in *Tar Baby*: “Where women took their children behind trees in the park and sold them to strangers. [. . .] Where it was not uncommon or strange to see people with both penises and breasts” (152). The exiled Son views America as “loud, red and sticky. Its fields spongy, its pavements slick with the blood of all the best people” (168).

K.D. and Arnette's wedding recalls the fact that in *The Bacchae* it is the Asian Bacchantes who draw out the Theban women. But while the newly converted Rubean youth are bloodthirsty in a way that recalls the intoxicated Agave, Morrison does not imbue the Convent women with either the desire for or the revelling in revenge that is so repellent, as Nussbaum points out, in the Asian Bacchic chorus (Nussbaum xii).

In the attitudes of Ruby's rebellious young people, Morrison echoes Schechner's interest in the potential destructiveness of anarchic counterculture. "Total, public, communal, sensual freedom is civilization's death throes", Schechner writes in "In Warm Blood" (107). In *Paradise*, Gigi's realization about her demonstrating days that "the point" of "the fray" was "lost to entertainment and adventure" effects a similar cautionary evaluation of the 1960s "protest" culture (257), and Morrison develops this theme through Christine's negative experience of Civil Rights activism in *Love*. Schechner goes further in "The Politics of Ecstasy", where he argues that "an unrepressive society" can "come perilously close to ecstatic fascism" (228); at the end of *Dionysus in 69* the god himself has become obsessed with power in a manner that recalls Pentheus, ordering his "fellow Americans" to "grab a thyrsus" and "Napalm the decay" (n. pag.). Similarly, the young people of Ruby who interpret "Be the Furrow" as a command to act, in the battle for civil rights, as God's "instrument, His justice [. . .] His retribution" (87), and who paint a blood-nailed fist on the Oven (101), are as blindly thirsty for revenge as are both the Fathers against whom they rebel and the Euripidean Asian Bacchantes.

In a second, eerie echo of Euripides's vengeful Bacchic women, *Paradise* configures an act of revenge on America by the Viet Cong. Just as Dionysus has Agave tear Pentheus apart limb from limb, the bodies of Soane's sons Easter and Scout "flew apart" when they were killed in action. "Thanksgiving, 1968" was "the last time [Soane] had seen them whole" (101); Deacon hides from her the fact that their returned coffins contain "a collection of parts that weigh half what a nineteen-year-old would" (112). Yet the massacred Convent women, unlike the Viet Cong and unlike the assaulted Dionysus and his followers, have no interest in revenge on their attackers, and in this divergence Morrison revises both *The Bacchae* and *The Oresteia*.

Toward the novel's end, Billie Delia imagines the murdered women returning, Fury-like to avenge themselves on the people of Ruby: "When will they reappear" she wonders, "with blazing eye, war paint, and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? [. . .] She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors" (308). Billie Delia's attitude recalls that of Sula, who though criticizing her townsfolk for being "spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web", obsessed with "the wayward stranger who trips into their net", is nonetheless locked into the same avenging mindset as the community she despises. (*Sula* 120). She tells Nel that half the town "need killing" and the other half deserve "a drawn-out disease" (*Sula* 96).⁷³ But the final pages of *Paradise* discredit such urges for reciprocal violence. Billie's fantasy is dispelled by the description of each resurrected woman absolutely at

⁷³ In this extended metaphor and in the positioning of "web" as interchangeable with "net", Morrison again invokes the recurring imagery of *The Oresteia*.

peace, getting on with her future, refusing even to dignify revenge by contemplating it. And, like every other Morrison novel, the work departs from *The Eumenides* in that the legal system is once again dismissed as an irrelevance: the men of Ruby are relieved that the absence of bodies results in the continued absence of “white law” from their town (298).⁷⁴ In the final play of Aeschylus’s trilogy the Furies become the “Kindly Ones”, the Guardian Spirits of Athens. But the Convent women never give Ruby another thought; it is left to the minister, Richard Misner, to help his congregation make the most of their “second chance” (297).

The closing vision of Morrison’s trilogy is overtly Christian in its refutation of revenge.⁷⁵ The repentance and conversion of Deacon Morgan, the fact that the massacred women rise from the dead and the feminized “madonna and child” that Piedade and Consolata represent on the final page of *Paradise* unequivocally (if unconventionally) endorse doctrines of forgiveness and redemption. The novel’s positing these doctrines as an alternative to either vengeance or legal process makes explicit the implicit Christianity of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, and it anticipates the concerns of *Love*.

⁷⁴ Sharon Jessee recognizes Billie’s casting of the women as Furies, but does not comment on the fact that they do not actually act in that capacity (10). There is an interesting revision of *Mourning Becomes Electra* in *Paradise*. O’Neill calls his second play “The Hunted” and his third play “The Haunted”. In *Paradise*, after the women’s “loud dreaming”, Morrison writes, “if a friend came by, [. . .] she might realize what was missing: unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted. Or hunted either, she might have added. But there she would have been wrong” (265-66). For further examples of the recurring disaffection with “white law” in *Paradise* see 33, 64 and 134.

⁷⁵ The novel follows the same trajectory as Girard’s *The Scapegoat* (1982), which finally argues:

In future, all violence will reveal what Christ’s passion revealed, the foolish genesis of bloodstained idols and the false gods of religion, politics and ideologies. The murderers remain convinced of the worthiness of their sacrifices. They, too, know not what they do and we must forgive them. The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be time enough. (212)

In his article “Genesis, Oedipus and Infanticidal Abjection” Samuel Kimball applies Girard’s theory of scapegoating to the community’s ostracism of Sethe in *Beloved* (Kimball 46), but I have not encountered any prior critical discussion of its relevance to *Paradise*.

Morrison's dialectic with *The Eumenides* continues in *Love* in the conflict between Romen and Theo. In the characters' experience of shame provoked by the gang rape of Pretty-Fay, the basketball court functions both literally and metaphorically. Romen's schoolfriends humiliate him during the game following his rescue of the girl: "nobody refused him court time but he never got a pass [. . .]. Finally they just tripped him and walked off the court" (48).⁷⁶ And L observes the guilty Theo in his father's café, "*dribbling air balls in his dream court behind the register*" (67). "*Not a bad way to work off shame*", she remarks, "*Quick, anyway. Takes some people a lifetime*" (67). Instead of atoning for their guilt through the judicial process that Athena establishes, it is through basketball that Romen is confronted with and Theo tries to purify himself of shame. The author expresses her by-now habitual cynicism about the American legal system through substituting one "court" for another.

In the first part of this thesis, I analyse the most recent novel's parody of revenge tragedy. May is configured as a mock-version of Hamlet's father's ghost, while L wonders whether Heed and Christine will die "*one vomiting on the steps still holding the knife that cut the throat of the one that fed her the poison*" (*Love* 82, 9-10; italics in original). The oeuvre-wide exploration of revenge as a contaminating rather than a purifying process also finds expression in *Love* through a series of briefly-illuminated identifications between the central women characters and key female figures in Greek mythology.

⁷⁶ Later, in his shame, Romen hears the "trumpet" (marking an on-court foul) "sputtering in his head" (49). This can be read as an ironic revision of the trumpet blast in *The Eumenides*: when Athena opens the court she demands, "Let the stabbing voice of the Etruscan trumpet / blown to the full with mortal wind, crash out / its high call to the assembled populace" (*Eum.* trans. Lattimore 567-69).

Morrison's engagement with human and divine protagonists in the Trojan War — the conflict that precipitates the events of *The Oresteia* — comprises a new development in her investigation of crime, atonement and moral purity.

When describing June's dyeing of Heed's hair, Morrison includes the detail that at the Correctional "coloring privileges" had been "taken away" when "Fawn practically blinded Helen with a blast of Natural Instinct" (123). This is the kind of sentence — at once easily-missed and attracting attention for its apparent irrelevance and contrived feel — that in Morrison's writing typically comprises coded information. Fawn's over-zealousness with the "Natural Instinct" recalls the fact that in Roman legend "fauns are among the followers of Bacchus" (Radice 116); here is a Helen of Troy who is not passively abducted but is "blinded" by passion. The detail associates June with the mythical Helen, and colours Heed, through the dye, with the same association. Heed is identified with Helen a second time when, immediately following her honeymoon with Cosey during which he let her buy "Parisian Night lipstick", the enraged Christine calls her former playmate a "ave-slidagay" — their code word for a "slave" (128-29). The lipstick's name associates Cosey with the Trojan Paris, and Christine's insult invokes not just the African-American past but Helen's slave status in Troy.

Morrison's allusiveness is of this characteristically unschematic nature throughout the novel. There are scattered affinities between the "Cosey women" (Heed, Christine, May and now June [9]) and the goddesses who compete for Paris's golden apple (Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena). Through Christine's and May's separate association with Athena, and through June's affinities with all three goddesses, Morrison enlists the rivalry and vengefulness

between the deities which is a convention in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid* and *The Metamorphoses*.

The comparison of the revenge-frenzied Christine to Athena draws attention to the flaws of the fictional character. Athena's appearance in "full armor" in *The Eumenides* is indicative of her association with the military strength that she proffers as a reward to Paris (trans. Lattimore 18). Christine, by contrast, wears a "fake military jacket" and a "Che-style-beret" which indicate both her failure as an activist and the impotence of her anger towards Heed (97). The character is disassociated from Athena a second time through her negative experiences of the legal system. In her attempt to secure Cosey's inheritance for herself she hires a lawyer but her former "entanglements with the law" — including several run-ins with brutal and prejudiced police — "convince her that Gwendolyn was not to be trusted" (90). This exposure of the reality of "the law" is reiterated in the implied affinity between May, a crazed Athena and the violent vengefulness of American criminal justice. In life May "[took] to wearing" an army helmet, while later her ghost became "helmeted and holstered" just as "her beloved death penalty was back in style" (97, 82). As Manley Gibson's time on death row in *Paradise* also demonstrates, American punitive measures recall the unreformed Furies rather than the vision of the Aeschylan Athena (257, 309).⁷⁷

Attributes of each competing Greek deity manifest themselves in June; they combine with her identity with Helen and her "Amazon hair" to make her

⁷⁷ As she does in *Paradise*, Morrison also alludes to the vengefulness of American foreign policy through the vengefulness of individuals. Heed tells June that Cosey's house is "[her] Vietnam" (129), while L observes that the day Cosey announced his choice of bride "was the opening day of May's personal December 7" (137). In this novel, however, the analogies also comment on the grandiose, exaggerated self-conceptions of the characters.

a composite of classical female forces (*Love* 23). Her sexual appetite and seductive powers bring Venus to mind, but “June” also connotes “Juno”, the Roman equivalent of Hera, wife of Jupiter, whose reward of empire is spurned by Paris. June does in fact reward Romen with empire, in that he becomes a colonizing imperialist through their sexual encounters that occur all over town: “[t]he plan (hers) was to make it everywhere. To map the county with grapple and heat” (115). And in her own mind June acts as the peace-making Athena of *The Eumenides* between Christine and Heed: “she could make it happen, arrange harmony when she felt like it”, she believes, “siding with each antagonist, she had become indispensable to both” (120). As it turns out, however, in her selfishness she is nearly fatal to both.

It is finally only the omniscient narrator, L, who successfully plays a divine role in this novel. Obviously associated with Venus through her name, “Love”, and through her watery birth (64), she is also an effective Athena. Vida recalls that when Heed and Christine fight at Cosey’s funeral, “Once again L restored order, just as she always had” (34).⁷⁸ It is she who recognizes that Heed, May and Christine are ultimately scapegoats, “sacrifices” rather than successful avengers (141), and that in his bequest to Celestial it is Cosey himself who has wreaked “vengeance” (201). L claims that her forged menu “worked just fine”, and ultimately it is this ploy that brings about the reunion between Christine and Heed (201). Searching for proof of their rightful legacy, the two women confront each other in an “attic” strewn with “spiderweb trellises” and “cobwebs” (153, 175). These details encapsulate the oeuvre’s

⁷⁸ The phrase “restored order” evokes conventional teaching about tragedy. Morrison also uses it in the comparison of Aunt Jimmy’s funeral to a Greek tragedy in *The Bluest Eye*: “there was the restoration of order in nature at the graveyard” (112).

exploration of the legacy to America of pre- and post-Enlightenment Athens as *The Oresteia* configures them. And the forgiveness and reconciliation to which Heed's fall gives rise are the enduring means to atonement that all the later novels champion.

Love effects new syntheses between love and wisdom and between the irrational and the rational. This epitomizes the redemptive potential inherent in the transformed Christianity and transformed classicism that Morrison's novels visualize as an alternative to vengeance through either violence or legal process. The oeuvre unequivocally rejects Puritanism, with its vengeful God and its repressiveness that becomes perverse. It also rejects the opposition of the "Apolline" and "the Dionysiac" and thereby rejects the identification of Enlightened America with Apollo. But unlike Nietzsche and unlike Ishmael Reed in his wake, Morrison does not see Christianity as inevitably über-rational, rationalizing and oppressive.⁷⁹ From Hagar's funeral to Baby Suggs's preaching and the Convent women's dancing, the author's Christian rituals involve irrationality and ecstasy. From the description of the guilt-ridden Convent girls going to visit Consolata "like maidens entering a temple or crypt" to the fact that Heed and Christine's treasured "Celestial Palace" reconciles the prostitute Celestial with the Pallas Athena of order and wisdom, the novels

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, for example, writes that "[f]rom the start, Christianity was, essentially and fundamentally, the embodiment of disgust and antipathy for life, merely disguised, concealed, got up as the belief in an 'other' or a 'better' life" (8-9). Nussbaum explains that "Nietzsche's own time, as he saw it, had a particular need of recovering [the] Dionysian element, since Christianity had taught the modern European to despise the body and its energy" (xxvi). Reed's contempt for Christianity is ubiquitous; in a particularly Nietzschean vein, he writes, "In North America, under Christianity, many [of the African race] had been reduced to glumness, depression, surliness, cynicism, malice without artfulness, and their intellectuals, in America, only appreciated heavy, serious works" (96).

embrace the impure as the pure (*Paradise* 222; *Love* 188).⁸⁰

III.iv The Restoration of Africa

In *Love*, Sandler Gibbons rejects the deceptions of nostalgia. “What was the point in remembering the good old days as though the past was pure?”, he wonders. “He knew for a fact that it was simply stifled” (147). Morrison’s novels expose not just America’s obsession with racial and moral purity but also its valorization of a pure intellectual tradition or pedigree that underpins that obsession. Her demonstration of what she calls “the similarity” between “Greek tragedy [. . .] and African religion and philosophy”, and her deployment of an emancipatory Ancient Egypt, reveal the extent to which Africa’s various presences have been “stifled” in dominant constructions of classicism and the culture it supports (“Unspeakable” 2). Morrison’s rejection of a purified and purifying Graeco-Roman inheritance is fundamental to the transformation of America that she envisions. Her recontamination of the past sets her alongside Gilroy, Roach, Walcott, Reed and others who insist on the empowering impurity of circum-Atlantic tradition.

In the novel *Sula* the eponymous character indulges in an extended

⁸⁰ Morrison’s comparison of the Convent women to “maidens entering a temple or crypt” destabilizes Nietzsche’s juxtaposition between “the dithyrambic chorus” and “the virgins who solemnly enter the temple of Apollo” (Nietzsche 43). It is interesting that when “Pallas Truelove” from *Paradise* is joined to the “Celestial Palace” of *Love*, the pairing forms a kind of chiasmus, indicating Morrison’s challenge to the juxtaposition between love and wisdom. The author presumably does intend her “palace” to sound as “Pallas” in *Love*, given that Athena may have taken the name “Pallas” from a childhood playmate whom she accidentally killed (Kearns). The descriptions of the interior of the Celestial Palace on pages 188 and 190 of *Love* configure it as a kind of sanctuary or “home” akin to Wild’s home in *Jazz* and like the cottage of Baucis and Philemon that I describe in my Introduction.

fantasy about her lover, Ajax. In her imagination she “*scrape[s] away*” the layers of his skin, transforming him from a living being to first a “*gold*” and then an “*alabaster*” statue, and reducing him finally to “*soil*” (130-31; italics in original). Once he has left her she recalls his skin:

So black that only a steady careful rubbing with steel wool would remove it, and as it was removed there was the glint of gold leaf and under the gold leaf the cold alabaster and deep, deep down under the cold alabaster more black only this time the black of warm loam. (135)

This symbolic vision brings to mind paradigmatic motifs of cultural hybridity or layeredness in other African-American texts, such as the “velvet-over-stone, granite-over-bone, Afro-Anglo-Saxon contour” of Tod Clifton’s cheek in *Invisible Man* (Ellison 363), or the iron, bronze, sycamore, ebony, ivory, silver and gold boxes within which the Book of Thoth is supposedly hidden in *Mumbo Jumbo* (Reed 197). My specific contention is that through Sula’s revelation of the chthonic blackness that the whiteness of the conventional classical statue covers up, Morrison asserts the African origins of classical culture. As I go on to discuss, inscribing herself within a genealogy that includes Frederick Douglass, Pauline Hopkins, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey (and that anticipates Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*) she insists on the influence of Egypt on Greece and Rome.⁸¹ The alabaster of the statuesque Ajax represents the dominant culture’s strategic “whitening” of classical tradition; in

⁸¹ In a 1981 interview with Thomas LeClair (in which she also discusses the Egyptian references in *Tar Baby*) Morrison alludes to “that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization” (Taylor-Guthrie 121). As I go on to discuss, for accounts of Douglass’s, Du Bois’s, and Blyden’s interest in Egypt see Gilroy 56-71 and 209; for Marcus Garvey’s see Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa* 130-34, and for Hopkins’s see Carby, *Reconstructing* 155-62.

her own strategic deployments of Egypt Morrison exploits the radical potential of a “blackened” or “re-blackened” tradition.

Through Sula’s transformation of Ajax from a person through a statue to clay, Morrison enacts a canny reversal of several myths of origin or artistic production in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The story of Pygmalion comes immediately to mind: Morrison’s vignette clearly plays with the politics of race and gender implicit in Ovid’s representation of the sculptor who, in celibate disgust at the sexual impropriety of the Propoetides, creates a “snow-white ivory” statue whom Venus brings to life to be his lover (*Met.* X.240-304).⁸² But Sula’s fantasy also reverses the actions of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who “repopulate the world” after the flood with stones that are metamorphosed “like the first rough-hewn marble of a statue” (*Met.* I.365, I.406). Deucalion is the son of Prometheus, and he explicitly invokes the Promethean creation of man from “moulded clay” that comprises the third Ovidian myth with which Morrison engages here (*Met.* I.364). “Thus earth, once crude and featureless, [. . .] / Put on the unknown form of human kind”, writes Ovid (*Met.* I.86-87). Sula’s multi-layered meditation disrupts the received hierarchies of Western intellectual heritage through the inversion of classical creation myth.

Some readers may resist my interpretation of Ajax’s imagined earthiness as a reversal of Ovidian processes, arguing that it comprises a Eurocentric concealment of an African cultural reference. For as John Mbiti writes in his *Introduction to African Religion* (1975), “in many parts of Africa [. . .] it is believed that God used clay to make the first man and wife”, and hence “God has the name of Potter or Moulder in many areas” (84-85). Alice

⁸² Brody discusses the Pygmalion myth in *Impossible Purities* 60-61.

Walker invokes this African “notion that the first human beings were themselves made out of clay” in her 1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (216). But both the fact of the similarity between the African and the Greek creation myths, and any resistance to my classical interpretation of the passage in *Sula*, are pertinent to my argument. It is impossible to determine whether Sula’s fantasy ultimately alludes to classical or to African myth; it clearly depends on both. This dual frame of reference exemplifies Morrison’s recurring insistence on the affinity between Graeco-Roman and African cultural legacies that both the Eurocentric hegemony of many centuries and some Afrocentric literary criticism of recent decades have been reluctant to acknowledge.

As I have already cited in my Introduction, in a 1985 interview Morrison describes Greek tragedy as “extremely sympathetic to Black culture and in some ways to African culture” (Taylor-Guthrie 181). Before discussing the separate but related issue of her strategic configurations of Egypt, my concern is to explore her novels’ illustration of this “sympathy” between Greek and West African culture. To borrow Gilroy’s description of his own project in *Black Atlantic*, the fact that her classicism so often simultaneously functions as her Africanism “undermine[s] the purified appeal of either Afrocentrism or the Eurocentrism it struggles to answer” (190).

In the essays that comprise *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Wole Soyinka’s primary motivation in comparing Yoruba and Greek cultures is to clarify the specificities of the African one. In doing so, however, he highlights some of the “fascinating instance[s] of structural parallel[s]” between

the two worldviews that Morrison's novels assume ("Morality" 14).⁸³ For example, when discussing the importance of "cosmic *totality*" in African religion, he holds "Platonic-Christian tradition" responsible for the "erosion of Earth in European Metaphysical scope", pointing out that "the pagan Greek did not neglect this all-important dimension. Persephone, Dionysus and Demeter were terrestrial deities" ("Morality" 3). And he cites Carl Kerényi's essay, "The primordial child in primordial times" in his discussion of the affinity between Greek and African conceptions of time; in both "traditional thought operates not a linear view of time but a cyclic reality" ("Morality" 10).

Soyinka is of course scathing about the "instances of strong scholarly nerve" that claim "Yoruba religion is derived from the Greek" ("Morality" 13-14). "I never heard my grandfather talking about Greeks invading Yorubaland", he said in 1988 (Hardwick, "Decolonizing" 9). But, as Hardwick argues, "the intertextuality of Soyinka's theatre questions the kind of compartmentalism which regards either Greek or Yoruba tradition as prior" ("Decolonizing" 9). And an analysis of thematic continuities between Morrison's work and his 1964 play, *The Strong Breed* (with which Morrison is indisputably familiar) suggests that she, likewise, is interested less in the issue of priority or derivation than in

⁸³ I am grateful to Rhonda Collier for pointing out the relevance of these essays to my argument. Passages that typify Soyinka's process of comparing and differentiating Greek and Yoruban culture include the following: "Our course to the heart of the Yoruba Mysteries leads by its own ironic truths through the light of Nietzsche and the Phrygian deity; but there are the inevitable, key departures" ("The Fourth Stage" 140); or,

That Greek religion shows persuasive parallels with [. . .] the Yoruba is by no means denied; the Delphic Oracle and the Ifa Corpus of the Yoruba are a fascinating instance of one such structural parallel. But the essential differences in the actual autochthonous myths of the gods themselves provide clues to differences in the moral bias of the two world-views. ("Morality" 14)

See also Soyinka's "Drama and the African World-view" for a discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities between African theatre and "the pagan beginnings of Greek theatre" (40).

the potential that is inherent in the “sympathy” between classical and West African worldviews.

In 1972, in her early days as a trade editor at Random House, a little-known Toni Morrison edited and published a little-known anthology, *Contemporary African Literature*. This book, which includes work by Achebe, Senghor and Fugard, has clearly remained important to her because in 2003 she gave a copy of it to the *New Yorker* journalist, Hilton Als, and she drew his attention to its table of contents during their interview (Als 70).⁸⁴ One of the two anthologized plays is an excerpt from *The Strong Breed*, a work in which Soyinka dramatizes the tragic potential and moral ambiguity inherent in traditional African purification ritual. The plot centres on Eman, a “stranger” in the village, who protests the Elders’ decision to scapegoat the “idiot” Ifada as part of their festival marking the beginning of the new year (80).⁸⁵ The Elders then hunt down and kill Eman instead, thereby incurring the contempt of the “subdued and guilty” villagers (119). References to “wholesomeness” and “unwholesomeness”, “disease” and “contamination” punctuate the play (84, 86, 88, 106). There are clear affinities between the “revulsion” expressed towards Ifada and the community’s attitude to Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (83), while the play’s exploration of group hostility towards an outsider, and of the guilt

⁸⁴ Though Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy are listed as the official editors of the work, Toni Morrison is listed as the “project editor” (v). In his 2003 *New Yorker* “Profile”, Hilton Als describes the anthology as “one of the first books she worked on” (70), and points out that it was “groundbreaking” at that time because for many of the authors anthologized it was “their first publication in America” (70). He also observes that “not many” bought the work (70). It is now out of print.

⁸⁵ Soyinka himself fuses African and Greek tradition in his *Bacchae of Euripides*, which includes a new year purification ritual that Soyinka grafts on to the Euripidean plot. “Someone must cleanse the new year of the rot of the old or the world will die”, says the Herdsman (4). “The city must be cleansed”, says the Soyinkan Tiresias. “Filth, pollution, cruelties, secret abominations – a whole year’s accumulation” (10).

incurred by those claiming to act in a purifying capacity anticipates *Sula* and *Paradise*.

As John Mbiti documents in his *Introduction to African Religion* and his *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), a belief in the many causes of contamination or defilement that in turn gives rise to a range of purification rituals is widespread in traditional African culture.⁸⁶ While Morrison's frequent use of the term *miasma* indicates her interest in the classical context of the concept, the fact that her configurations of scapegoating simultaneously engage an African worldview indicates the affinity between the two cultures. The novels insist on the impurity or hybridity of America's intellectual heritage.

Given that in the "Non-Fiction" section of *Contemporary African Literature* Morrison excerpts Mbiti's "The Concept of Time" from his *African Religions and Philosophy*, she must also be familiar with his chapter, "The Concepts of Evil, Ethics and Justice" in the same work (Makward 392-402; Mbiti 204-15). Here, Mbiti records the traditional African belief in the "living-dead", spirits who "if they are not properly buried, or have a grudge [. . .] take revenge or punish the offenders" (204-05). This, together with the observation that "the pollution of the individual is corporately the pollution of those related to him" clearly comprise one context in which Morrison configures the vengeful ghost of *Beloved* and the contaminated household in *Bluestone Road* (Mbiti, *African Religions* 206). In addition, Mbiti's portrayal of societal penal codes that include "death for offences like practising sorcery and witchcraft, committing adultery and murder" sheds interesting light on the Morrisonian

⁸⁶ See, for example, *Introduction to African Religion* 90-92, 115, 119, 137-39, 152, 170-78; and *African Religions and Philosophy* 115, 151.

oeuvre's exploration of vengefulness and violent "justice" (Mbiti, *African Religions* 211). The double frame of reference within which Morrison articulates her critiques of the violent means to moral purity illuminates a satisfying irony about the dominant culture's recourse to revenge and to other processes of cultural purification. Enlightened America has much in common not just with pre-enlightened Greece but also with the Africa against which it repeatedly seeks to define itself.

It is to state the obvious to say that critics have long been interested in Morrison's engagement with African culture. Therese Higgins, for example, in *Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore* (2001) roots the "ghosts" in *Beloved* in "the cosmology of ancient Africa" (29). She specifically associates *Beloved* with the vengeful ancestor spirits in Mende culture, and argues that the women's noise at the exorcism of *Beloved* mirrors the noise women make at traditional African burials (29, 39).⁸⁷ This is of course true and important, but it does not negate the co-existence of the author's engagement with *The Oresteia* and Greek conceptions of revenge. Likewise, Vashti Cruchter Lewis's essay, "African Tradition in Toni Morrison's *Sula*", and Gay Wilentz's "An African-Based Reading of *Sula*" highlight African resonances in that novel which do not invalidate my own highlighting of classical references in the same work.

Requiring more urgent attention, perhaps, than the presence of both African and Greek cultural legacies in Morrison's work is the reluctance of critics to discuss or even illuminate that double presence. For the most part, the

⁸⁷ As Jenny Terry writes, "the figure of *Beloved* herself bears relation to African beliefs about the dead returning to trouble their families. As Gurleen Grewal identifies, 'Beloved is what the Yoruba would call 'Abiku', a 'wandering child', 'the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother'" (102). Chikwenye Ogunyemi observes that "Wole Soyinka in *Aké* [. . .] and Toni Morrison in *Beloved* exploit the abiku/ogbanje phenomenon" ("Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas" 663).

extant work on her classical allusiveness ignores her Africanisms, while those interested in her Africanism ignore her classicism.⁸⁸ Exemplifying this second tendency, the opening paragraph of Kathleen O'Shaughnessy's essay on *Song of Solomon* does make one comparison between "ancient Greek drama" and "the community as formal chorus" in the novel (125), but the rest of the essay assumes an exclusively African context for Morrison's deployment of the device. Discussing the same device in the same novel, the self-defining "Afrocentric" Gay Wilentz makes no mention of the author's repeated invocation of the *Greek* chorus that I highlight earlier in this thesis ("Civilizations Underneath" 65).⁸⁹ The critical polarization that I outline here is lamentable because it conceals Morrison's claim to both African and European tradition. It reinscribes a notion of intellectual purity that ultimately serves the dominant culture and that her novels themselves contest.

In *Possessing the Secret Of Joy* Alice Walker goes one step further than Morrison in that she explicitly fuses Greek and African retributive processes. On trial for murder in an African courtroom, Tashi-Evelyn observes, "I feel the furies, the shrieking voices wrap their coils around my neck" (216). This fusion implicitly asserts the validity of the theory of Marcel Griaule about the Dogon people that is earlier explained to Tashi-Evelyn by Pierre: "some people think that [. . .] the Dogon are from a civilization even older than theirs, and that this

⁸⁸ One critic who does mention Morrison's simultaneous deployment of classical and African tradition is Shelley Haley in her essay on *Beloved* and *Medea*, especially on 183-85. Haley mentions Bernal's *Black Athena*, but does not highlight Morrison's explicit interest in that work.

⁸⁹ Wilentz implicitly assumes that African and European cultures are incompatible. She writes, for example, that in *Song of Solomon* "Morrison can be seen as an Afrocentric tale teller who overturns Western Biblical and cultural notions by revealing the legends and folkways of her community" ("Civilizations" 62).

civilization spread northward, from central Africa up toward ancient Egypt and the Mediterranean” (Walker 166).⁹⁰ It is obviously not within the scope of my project to evaluate Griaule’s thesis, any more than it is possible to assess whether or not the claims of Bernal’s “Revised Ancient Model” about “Egyptian and Phoenician colonization of Greece [. . .] in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC” are true (*Black Athena* 2). My concern here is rather to explore how Morrison’s own interest in the relationship between Egyptian and Graeco-Roman cultures, and her admiration for what she calls Bernal’s “stunning investigation of the field”, inform the nature and effects of her classical allusiveness (“Unspeakable” 7).

“The White man will never admit his real references”, says Buddy Jackson in *Mumbo Jumbo*. “He will steal everything you have and still call you those names” (Reed 194). Morrison makes the same point in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”, introducing her discussion of Bernal by urging on the moment “when Western civilization owns up to its own sources in the cultures that preceded it” (2). And in *Tar Baby* the author explicitly enlists a transformative configuration of Egypt as an ancestral civilization. There, the tree spirits who discover Jadine sinking in the mud are “arrogant, [. . .] knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses’s crib” (184). The fact that these women can “hold together the stones of the pyramids and the rushes of Moses’s crib” constructs them as a potent fusion of Israeli slaves and Pharaonic culture. Paul Gilroy has argued

⁹⁰ I am grateful to my supervisor, Helen M. Dennis, for bringing Walker’s use of Griaule to my attention. In its combined allusions to West African, Egyptian and Greek tradition, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980) obviously shares Morrison’s and Walker’s concerns.

that African-American “identification with the Exodus narrative [. . .] seems to be waning” and that “blacks today appear to identify far more readily with the glamorous pharaohs” (207). But Morrison characteristically avoids making that distinction; instead she identifies with a combination of the two. This doubleness at once draws attention to the actual symbiosis between dynastic wealth and slave labour in Egyptian cultural production and has the paradoxical resonance of newly-invented myth.⁹¹

Gilroy analyses the insistence of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and Edward Wilmot Blyden that “the roots of European civilization lay in African sources” (130). His assertions that “the appeal of Egypt as evidence of the greatness of pre-slave African cultures [. . .] has had a special significance within black Atlantic responses to modernity”, and that Egypt is useful for showing “that the path [to civilization] began in Africa not Greece”, are obviously central to my project (60). But it is interesting that, despite his frequent mention of Toni Morrison and his championing of *Beloved* as an exemplary articulation of the black Atlantic’s “living memory” (198), he does not discuss her own interest in Egypt or in the work of Bernal. Before highlighting her significant but little-mentioned position within the genealogy of what I am terming African-American “Egyptianists”, and before discussing

⁹¹ Langston Hughes allies Egyptian, Roman and American slavery in his poem, “Negro”:

I am a Negro: [. . .]
I’ve been a slave:
Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.
I’ve been a worker:
Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building. (*Collected Poems* 24)

The ambiguous phrase “under my hand” claims for African America the ancestry of both the Pharaonic dynasties and the Israeli slave labour.

her specific contribution to that tradition, it is useful briefly to outline the main debates about Egyptian civilization with which her work engages.

Theories about Egypt's rightful claim to be what Morrison's tree spirits call "the first world of the world" range from the radical to the conservative (*Tar Baby* 185). At one end of the spectrum are Afrocentrists such as Jacob Carruthers, who (heavily influenced by Cheikh Anta Diop) urges "the replacement of Greek and Latin with Mdw Ntr as the classical language" (40); at the other are classical scholars such as Mary Lefkowitz who, despite being the most outspoken of Bernal's many critics, nonetheless concedes that "the evidence of Egyptian *influence* on certain aspects of Greek cultures is plain and undeniable" ("Introduction" 6). There are three main claims put forward by Bernal (and by others before him) that provoke controversy: that the Egyptians colonized Ancient Greece, that the Greek Eleusinian and Dionysiac Mysteries are Egyptian in origin, and that the Ancient Egyptians were "black".⁹² But many of those who refute Bernal's claims about the precise nature and role of this North African culture simultaneously applaud his exposure of what he calls "the fabrication of Ancient Greece" in Western intellectual tradition.

Guy MacLean Rogers, for example, who is Lefkowitz's co-editor in *Black Athena Revisited*, writes that "Bernal's reconstruction of how some European scholars [. . .] in an atmosphere of racism and anti-Semitism, attempted to root out the contributions of the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians

⁹² Bernal discusses Egyptian colonization of Greece in *Black Athena* 75ff; Egyptian origins of Greek ritual on 69ff, and argues that the Ancient Egyptians were black on 240-46. For discussion of the theory of Egyptian origins of Eleusinian rites see Jane Ellen Harrison 571, and of Dionysian rites, see Kerényi, *Dionysos* 52-125, especially 68. For a discussion of theories about the skin colour of the Ancient Egyptians see Wiesen, "The Contribution of Antiquity", and for a refutation of the claim that they were black see Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa* 30-32, and Snowden, "Bernal's 'Blacks'".

to early Greek civilization seems to me to be beyond dispute” (“Multiculturalism” 431). And Mario Liverani begins his contribution to the Lefkowitz/Rogers collection by endorsing *Black Athena*’s premise that “the ancient history of the eastern Mediterranean world” has been “biased by imperialism and is now in need of thorough revision” (422). Morrison in turn reports being “struck” by Bernal’s account of this intellectual “*process*” and its “*motives*”. The motive “involved the concept of purity, of progress”, she summarizes, while the process “required mis-reading, pre-determined selectivity of sources, and — silence” (“Unspeakable” 7; italics in original). My contention is that her own re-instatement of Egypt combined with her ubiquitous allusiveness to Greece and Rome problematizes these “motives” and reverses this “process”: it destabilizes “purity” and “progress”, and breaks “silence” by its own re-readings.

Gilroy shares Morrison’s interest in *Black Athena*’s exposure of what he calls “the hellenomaniacal excision of Africa from the narrative of civilization’s development” (59). Somewhat surprisingly, however, neither Gilroy nor Bernal fully articulate the specific dominant American cultural context that African-American “Egyptianism” such as Morrison’s confronts.⁹³ As Richard G. Carrott demonstrates in *The Egyptian Revival* (1978), and as John T. Irwin examines in *American Hieroglyphics* (1980), the decipherment of the Rosetta stone by Champollion in the 1820s gave rise in America to a widespread architectural and literary engagement with Ancient Egypt. Irwin’s discussion of “Emerson, Poe, Thoreau, Melville and Hawthorne” indirectly reveals how these authors

⁹³ Bernal does mention the Masons, and indirectly cites Irwin on hieroglyphics as “a major influence on mid- and late-19th-century American writers” (*Black Athena* 268).

appropriated the hieroglyphic to their consideration of Puritan hermeneutics (3), while Carrott's discussion of the Washington Monument, designed in 1833, illuminates the deployment of Egypt in the expression of dominant American ideology (82). Carrott's analysis of the Revival architecture's "reduced formal vocabulary" that "provided a final expression for Romantic classicism" reveals the mainstream construction of Egypt as a kind of poor but pure sibling to Greece and Rome, enlisted to the same cultural ends.⁹⁴

Carrott notes that in nineteenth-century America the Egyptian style is most commonly found "in cemetery gates and prisons" (81); New York City's notorious "Tombs" is only the most famous example of this convention (153). The scholar interprets this tradition as an expression of "the incorruptible righteousness of law and order" (120), and the implicit identification of Egyptianness with Enlightenment values corresponds to Bernal's account of that movement's veneration of a "rational" and ordered Egypt (26). This construction reaches its apogee in the Masonic tradition, and Mozart's *Magic Flute* (1791), "crammed full of Egyptian-Masonic symbolism", epitomizes the association between Egypt and "pure" Enlightened rationalism (Bernal 180).⁹⁵

⁹⁴ As Irwin's discussion shows in his discussion of the deployment of the myth of Osiris in *Moby-Dick*, Melville's engagement with Egypt was widespread and complex (Irwin 295). Willa Cather deploys Egypt as a "poor but pure" classical sibling to Greece and Rome in *My Ántonia*, where Jim observes of the train conductor that "[e]ven his cuff-buttons were engraved with hieroglyphics, and he was more inscribed than an Egyptian obelisk" (9), and in a famous passage, Cather describes the plough standing out against the sunset as "heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun" (183).

⁹⁵ Some lines from *The Magic Flute* (librettist Emanuel Schikaneder) illustrate the association of Egypt with purity, light and rationalism. Outside the Temple of Wisdom, Tamino says:

There portals, these columns prove
That skill, industry, art reside here;

[. . .]

I will boldly pass through that portal;

Its design is noble, straightforward and pure. (Mozart 25)

The Chorus of Priests respond, "O Isis and Osiris, what bliss! / Dark night retreats from the rays of the sun" [. . .] (Mozart 25). This is the Egypt parodied by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, for example when he writes of "an Egyptian rigidity and coldness" (88), and by Reed in his portrayal of Set in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Carrott's description of American adaptations of Egyptian style as comprising "a kind of architectural *Ovid moralis *" is instructive (133); as were the Greece and Rome on which America was even more dependent, Egypt was morally as well as racially purified in the service of the dominant culture.

Besides the general provocations to African America that the "excision" of Egypt from classical tradition together with its usefulness to the dominant culture comprises, there are also historically-specific American deployments of Egypt that necessitate the black redeployment of that culture. These include the nineteenth-century conception of the Mississippi River as "the American Nile", which gave rise to the naming of its valley cities Cairo, Karnac, Thebes, and Memphis (Carrott 50), as well as the fact that after the Civil War, "obelisks and stone pyramids" appeared across the South as part of its "memorialization" of "the recent past" (Blight 77). David Duke's recent championing of the Liberty Place Monument in New Orleans — described by Joseph Roach as "a twenty-foot-high granite obelisk [. . .] burnished white in the imposingly funereal tradition of circum-Atlantic amnesia" — is an extreme recurrence of the same kind of appropriation (Roach 240).

These various American configurations of Egypt give a certain urgency to African-American "Egyptianism" and to Morrison's place within it. The metaphor with which she describes Milkman's shock at flooring his father in *Song of Solomon* perfectly expresses the dismantling of the false, dominant cultural Egypt that her novels enact. "There was the pain and shame of seeing his father crumple [. . .]", Milkman realizes. "Sorrow in discovering that the pyramid was not a five-thousand-year wonder of the civilized world, [. . .] but

that it had been made in the back room at Sears, by a clever window dresser, of papier-mâché, guaranteed to last a mere lifetime” (69).

Morrison’s redeployment of Egyptian heritage continues in *Beloved*, where the name “Sethe” brings to mind the Egyptian god Set or Seth. As Reed illustrates in *Mumbo Jumbo*, as the power-crazed, über-rational murderer of his brother Osiris, Set has much in common with the power-crazed, über-rational aspects of American governance. “Sethe”, denoting the protagonist of a novel that challenges Enlightenment values in so many ways, reconciles the “exceptional femaleness” and “sacred properties” of the Egyptian spirits of *Tar Baby* with the prevailing image of Set as “the 1st man to shut nature out of himself” (*Tar Baby* 184; Reed 162). The name also engages the Abbé Terrasson’s novel of 1731, *Sèthos*, which as Bernal discusses “became the standard Masonic source of information about Egypt” (*Black Athena* 180). Terrasson’s work depicts an imperialist Prince Sèthos who, in the century before the Trojan War, “travels around Africa and Asia setting up cities and establishing laws”; the novel is notable for its detailed and repeated insistence on “the great superiority of Egypt over Greece” and of the former’s many cultural legacies to the latter (Bernal, *Black Athena* 180). Morrison’s “Sethe” simultaneously engages this assertion of Egypt’s classicism and protests the racism of the white Masonic movement that Bernal discusses and that is

parodied by Reed.⁹⁶

In the rural South of Joe Trace's memory in *Jazz*, the community still identifies with the Israelite presence in Egypt; the character recalls "the voices of the women [. . .] singing "Go down, go down, way down in Egypt's land" (226). But the inhabitants of 1920s Harlem identify with the Egyptian hegemony: Morrison mentions five times that the beauty products Joe sells are branded "Cleopatra" (24, 29, 38, 94, 119), while Violet fantasizes about her father making one of his miraculous reappearances in Rome with "a tin of Frieda's Egyptian Hair Pomade" in his pocket (100).⁹⁷ This identification can be usefully understood as an empowering "performance" of Egypt. In his analysis of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, Roach writes that "Trickster-Zulu is not an African retention but a circum-Atlantic reinvention" (25), and Morrison's characters' allusion through their physical appearance to a fabricated Egyptianness constitutes the same process. *Jazz* performs the "Nu Nile" for which the hair treatment in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* is named (*Bluest Eye* 39; *Sula* 3).

In *Invisible Man* the African-American emancipatory tradition of "Ethiopianism" — drawing its inspiration, as Blight notes, from the prophecy

⁹⁶ Bernal writes, "There is little doubt that many Masons have been racist. [. . .] With their focus on Egypt they needed to make a drastic separation between the 'animal' Blacks and the noble Egyptians" (243). Reed parodies the racism of the Freemasonry movement in *Mumbo Jumbo* 192-95, where he also asserts the anteriority of Black masonry. The same claim is made by an anonymous article in *Colored American Magazine* which is discussed and protested by Lefkowitz in *Not Out of Africa* (129). Lefkowitz discredits both the Masonic and African-American Egyptianist interest in Terrasson's work, emphatically stating the novel's falseness (*Not* 110-11). But Bernal concedes this himself: "With a relatively shallow pretence, Terrasson claimed that his work was that of an unknown Alexandrian of the 2nd century A.D." (*Black Athena* 179).

⁹⁷ Historically, Cleopatra was descended from the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty. To claim her as black is criticized on grounds of factual inaccuracy by Lefkowitz (*Not Out of Africa* xiv). But given that "the Ptolemies were both Egyptian pharaohs and Greek monarchs" (Thompson), Cleopatra epitomizes the cultural fusion of Greece and Egypt, and African-American identification with her can be understood as a strategic performance.

of Psalm 68 that “princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia” — is exhausted and impotent (Blight 322).⁹⁸ But Morrison’s representation of a Harlem in which “racks of yellow headscarfs; strings of Egyptian beads” are on sale reinvigorates the convention (*Jazz* 63). Morrison’s configurations restore the energy of Du Bois’s *Star of Ethiopia* pageant performed at New York’s National Emancipation Exposition of 1913. Blight describes this staging of “all modes of black memory”, with its Egyptian-temple backdrop, as “a story of tragedy, transcendence, and redemption, of romantic African origins and American transformation” (377).

Morrison plays with the idea of “romantic African origins” in *Paradise*. In that novel, Richard Misner’s fantasy of returning to “a real earthly home” neatly puts the Western intellectual tradition in perspective: he dreams of going back “past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows” (213). And the author again asserts the African origins of civilization in the representation of Connie and Deacon’s affair. The couple’s passion restores nature to “the original world designed for the two of them” (229), and the place where they make love — “a burned out farmhouse” by “two fig trees growing into each other” — invokes a classical myth of the origins of Africa itself (230). Beyond the entwined trees’

⁹⁸ The most explicit “Ethiopianist” sentiment in *Invisible Man* is expressed by one of the mentally ill patrons of The Golden Day: “soon Ethiopia shall stretch forth her noble wings!” (81). And later, during the dispossession of the old couple, the narrator finds “a small Ethiopian flag” among the strewn possessions (271). In his ensuing speech he says that “these old folks had a dream book, [. . .]. It was called The Seeing Eye, [. . .] The Secrets of Africa, The Wisdom of Egypt—but the eye was blind, it lost its luster” (280). For an account of the turn-of-the-century African-American movement of “Ethiopianism”, see Blight’s chapter “Black Memory and Progress of the Race”, in *Race and Reunion* 300-37. Blight writes, “In Pan-African thought by the late nineteenth century, the terms Egypt and Ethiopian had become synonymous with Africa and Africans, as well as a source of devotion to a theory of human development and the redemption of African peoples and cultures” (321-22).

allusion to the Ovidian Baucis and Philemon, of specific relevance here is Connie's comparison of the house to one "built on the sand waves of the lonely Sahara", and the likening of the ruins to "a statuary of ash people" (233-34). For in *The Metamorphoses*, the global fire that breaks out when Phaethon loses control of the solar chariot both turns the Ethiopians black and forms the Sahara desert (*Met.* II.232).⁹⁹ The Greek myth configured in Latin verse assumes the Greek world's anteriority to the African, but *Paradise* reverses this order by asserting that it is the burned-out, Sahara-like place where the lovers have sex that comprises "the original world" (229).

The fact that Joe Trace trips over "black roots" while looking for his mother in *Jazz* symbolizes the fact that ultimately Morrison's novels concern themselves less with a nostalgic return to African roots than with the reconfigurations of that continent's cultures in America (*Jazz* 179).¹⁰⁰ The productive co-existence of Africa and Christianity in Richard Misner's worldview reflects Morrison's interest in the intersections between Ancient Egyptian and Christian cultures. In the following discussion of her contribution to the Van der Zee/Billops/Dodson collaboration of 1978, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, and of the use of a text from the Nag Hammadi library in the epigraphs to both *Jazz* and *Paradise*, it is useful to bear in mind Bernal's

⁹⁹ Ovid writes:

Then Phaethon saw the word on every side
 Ablaze — heat more than he could bear.
 [. . .]
 The Aethiops then turned black, so men believe,
 As heat summoned their blood too near the skin.
 Then was Sahara's dusty desert formed,
 All water scorched away. (*Met.* II.232-35)

It is worth remembering here Snowden's point that "the Greeks and Romans classified as Ethiopians several physical types of dark and black peoples inhabiting different parts of Africa" (*Blacks in Antiquity* vii).

¹⁰⁰ Gilroy's reformulation of "roots and rootedness" as "the homonym routes" is useful here (19).

observation that before the Eighteenth Century “the tension [. . .] between Christianity and the Egyptian ‘twofold’ philosophy was not [. . .] an ‘antagonistic’ one” (*Black Athena* 191). It is also worth remembering that, as Mbiti points out, Christianity “came to Africa before it reached Europe”, and that “it is believed in Egypt that Christianity was first brought there by St Mark [. . .] in the year 42 A.D.” (*Introduction* 182, 180).

Critics have paid little attention to the remarkable book, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, that Morrison cites as her source for Dorcas in *Jazz*.¹⁰¹ This hybrid text combines James Van der Zee’s photographs of “the Harlem rituals of death” — corpses prepared for their funerals — with poetry by Owen Dodson, commentary by Camille Billops and a Foreword by Toni Morrison (Van der Zee 1). Billops asserts that the mourning rites “have parallels with those of the ancient necropolis of Egypt” and “are in continuum with those on the Nile of four thousand years ago” (Van der Zee 1). What is interesting about this claim is that, except for in the architectural style of the church in the first photograph, there is no explicit Egyptian iconography in the pictures themselves (Van der Zee 7). The representation of these Christian ceremonies as Egyptian is for the most part a performance of 1978, anticipating Morrison’s strategy in *Jazz*.¹⁰² Billops asserts that “Mr Van Der Zee helps the undertaker wash the body” while “Mr Dodson helps the priest cleanse the soul” (Van der Zee 1), and the invocation of Egypt similarly intensifies rather than pollutes the

¹⁰¹ Morrison mentions this source in a 1985 conversation with Gloria Naylor (Taylor-Guthrie 207).

¹⁰² Billops writes: “Death is the moment called quittin’ time, when we freeze in place like tomb figures or ancient wall paintings or photographs on a mantelpiece in Harlem” (Van der Zee 1). This comment clearly influences Morrison’s depiction of Dorcas’s photograph on the Trace’s mantelpiece in *Jazz*. It is interesting to note that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston writes of Tea Cake’s burial that “Tea Cake rode like a Pharaoh to his tomb” (281).

Christian purificatory rites. And the final sentence of Morrison's Foreword resonates powerfully in my project as a whole. "THE HARLEM BOOK OF THE DEAD", she writes, "[. . .] enlightens us as only memory can" (n. pag.). Her choice of verb reflects the redefinition of "enlightenment" that her novels' engagement with Greek, Roman and Egyptian traditions effect.

Paul Gilroy notes that Egypt has "provided the symbolic means to locate the diaspora's critique of Enlightenment universals outside the philosophical repertoire of the West" (60). Morrison achieves the same process through quoting from "Thunder: Perfect Mind", one of the Coptic Gnostic texts of the Nag Hammadi library, in her epigraphs to *Jazz* and *Paradise*. As well as enlisting the philosophical and political radicalism of these texts to endorse her own themes, in allying her work with this collection she reiterates her interest in the interactions between Ancient Egyptian religion and Judæo-Christian tradition and between Greece and Egypt.¹⁰³ It is significant that one of the many paradoxes in "Thunder: Perfect Mind" exactly expresses the inseparable nature of Greek and Egyptian identity with which the novelist is concerned: "I am the wisdom [of the] Greeks / And the knowledge of [the] barbarians. / I am the one whose image is great in Egypt / And the one who has no image among the barbarians" (Parrott 299; translator's parentheses).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ In his introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, James Robinson writes that "primitive Christianity was itself a radical movement" (3), and that "the focus of this library has much in common [. . .] with the more secular movements of today, such as the counter-culture movements coming from the 1960s" (1).

¹⁰⁴ The full quotation reads:

Why then have you hated me, you Greeks?
Because I am a barbarian among [the] barbarians?
For I am the wisdom [of the] Greeks
And the knowledge of [the] barbarians.
I am the judgement of [the] Greeks and of the barbarians.
I am the one whose image is great in Egypt
And the one who has no image among the barbarians. (Parrott 299)

There could hardly be a less “pure” body of work than the Nag Hammadi texts. As James Robinson explains, the library “involves the collecting of what was originally a Greek literary productivity by largely unrelated and anonymous authors spread through the eastern half of the ancient world” (Introduction 13). The texts were “originally composed in Greek” but were then translated into Coptic, and Coptic, being “the Egyptian language written with the Greek alphabet” itself epitomizes hybridity (Robinson, Introduction 12-13). The very existence of this language testifies to what Bernal calls “the triangular relationship between Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Christianity” (30), and to the cultural syncretism to which first Greek and then Roman conquests of Egypt gave rise. Morrison’s engagement with Coptic Gnosticism exemplifies the re-reading (or re-writing) of “sources” that the “fabrication of Ancient Greece” has necessitated (“Unspeakable” 7).

James Robinson documents the fact that, “with the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity of the more conventional kind, the survival chances of Gnostic Christianity, such as that reflected in the Nag Hammadi library, were sharply reduced” (Introduction 5). While the fate of Gnosticism is symbolized by the burial of these texts, the fate of the traditional Egyptian religion under Roman rule lurks in the background of *Love*. I have already illuminated Morrison’s engagement with Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* through her protagonist, Romen, whom Christine refers to as “that Gibbons boy” (24). It is interesting that while Theo is the leading gang rapist in *Love*, Gibbon’s work devotes several pages to the violent exploits of Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria from 385-412 CE, described as “an active and ambitious prelate, who displayed the fruits of rapine in monuments

of ostentation” (Gibbon 247). The historian documents a “bold, bad man” whose “pious indignation was excited by the honours of Serapis” and who “offered insults” to the “ancient chapel of Bacchus”, and there follows a detailed account of the Patriarch’s destruction of the Temple of Serapis in 391 CE (231-33). In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison tells us that Soaphead Church, who embodies perverted Enlightenment puritanism, “noticed Gibbon’s acidity, but not his tolerance” (134). Gibbon’s condemnation of the intolerant Theophilus attests to his own intolerance of those unable to accommodate difference, ancient tradition and cultural impurity — the very concepts that Morrison’s work in turn affirms.

In *The Bluest Eye* Soaphead Church’s mixed-race grandmother strives, as a young woman, “to separate herself in mind, body and spirit from all that suggested Africa” (133). Morrison’s writing comprises this impulse in reverse: she reconnects classicism — and the America that it supports — with its origins in and with all its interactions and affinities with Africa. Sula’s uncovering of the black material that makes up the alabaster statue thus symbolizes the effect of Morrison’s own work. And it also highlights the concerns of one of the author’s important literary ancestors in the genealogy of African-American “Egyptianism”: Pauline Hopkins. Although neither Bernal nor Gilroy make any mention of her, Hopkins’s work repeatedly asserts the African origins of classical culture. As Hazel Carby has discussed, in her novel *Of One Blood* (1902), and in her *Colored American Magazine* article on black women educators, Hopkins traces “the light of civilization from Ethiopia to Egypt, to Greece, to Rome” (Carby, *Reconstructing* 156). And the anonymous Magazine article “Venus and Apollo Modelled from Ethiopians” (attributed by Carby to

Hopkins) points out that the “most famous examples of classic beauty in sculpture [. . .] were chiselled from Ethiopian slave models” (“Venus” 465; Carby, *Reconstructing* 159); this fact obviously resonates strongly in Sula’s fantasy about Ajax. Morrison’s “Egyptianism” thus not only secures her own place within a tradition, but draws attention through its dialogue with Hopkins (and with Reed, of whom scholars surveying this genealogy have also made no mention) to some of that tradition’s less-heard voices.

III. v The Reinvention of Tradition

The restoration of Africa to classical tradition that the Morrisonian oeuvre effects, and the restored or reinvented worldview that this enables, are perfectly encapsulated by one of Cholly’s recollections on the church picnic in *The Bluest Eye* and by the description of the fleeing Convent women in *Paradise* (18). In the early novel, one of Cholly’s few happy memories of childhood includes going on a “July 4” church picnic where he shares the heart of a watermelon with his friend, the old man Blue Jack (104). As an adult Cholly still recalls the sight of the man who broke the watermelon, and Morrison configures this “figure etched against the bright blue sky” as a kind of transformed Atlas. “The father of the family lifted the melon high over his head”, she writes, “his big arms looked taller than the trees to Cholly, and the melon blotted out the sun” (104). The boy “wondered if God looked like that” before remembering that “God was a nice old white man”; this then must be the

“devil”, “holding the world in his hands [. . .] the strong black devil, [. . .] blotting out the sun and getting ready to split open the world” (105).

In classical tradition Atlas is variously an unsuccessfully rebellious Titan, condemned to hold up the sky, or (as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) a giant turned to stone by the Medusa’s head, and thus transformed into Mount Atlas in present-day Morocco (IV.664-65). He is conventionally represented, somewhat paradoxically, as holding up the globe or carrying the world on his shoulders, and in recent centuries he has functioned as a symbol of endurance. Morrison’s summoning of Atlas to a church picnic reconnects Christianity with Africa, while the ironic description of the tall man as a “black devil” further destabilizes the dominant cultural “whitening” of that religion.¹⁰⁵ And her revised conception of the classical figure, symbolically “blotting out the sun” with a watermelon, comprises a challenge to Enlightenment rationalism and repression. In Graeco-Roman tradition Atlas is cowed by the Olympians into becoming a pillar of world order, forced to keep the sky and the earth apart. The Atlas on the church picnic, on the other hand, “split[s] open the world”, enabling Cholly and Blue to share “the nasty-sweet guts of the earth” (105). This chthonic experience comprises a sensation of such “joy” that Cholly can still remember it (105).

Morrison’s ambivalence about tradition finds similar positive expression in her description of the soon-to-be-massacred Convent women in *Paradise* as “bodacious black Eves” (18). The word “bodacious” is an African-American

¹⁰⁵ The restoration of Africa occurs not just through the North African mountain but also through the fact that the legend of Atlantis, the land over which Atlas ruled before being punished by the Olympians, is an Egyptian one, and, interestingly, one that Robert Graves describes in 1955 as “current in folk-tale [. . .] among the Yorubas in West Africa” (Graves I.146).

coinage meaning “extreme”, “excessive” or “grand” (Major 50). Its derivation from the Bantu word *botesha*, combined with its Latinate ending and its rhyming with a Latin-derived word of related meaning, “audacious”, make it a perfect expression of the composite cultural heritage of African America. And the phrase “bodacious black Eves” functions simultaneously as a patriarchal, moralistic insult and as an assertion of feminist liberation. In the Ruben fathers’ minds the women are “bodacious” in the sense of “outrageous”, and they are “Eves” because they tempt men into fallenness. But the sprinting women, “giving up none”, are also “bodacious” in the sense of “grand” or heroic (18). The fact that they are “Eves” enlists both the status of the Bible’s first woman, and the “celestial Eve and fleshly Eve” of the Sethian Gnostic texts with whom Bentley Layton identifies the persona of “Thunder: Perfect Mind” (48). Even in one short phrase, the author exploits the potential of tradition to the full.

As I hope this discussion has demonstrated, Morrison’s work ultimately reinvents tradition not as an instrument of conservatism but as a resource of radicalism. Her novels are motivated by her conviction that “the past has to be revised” (Taylor-Guthrie 264), and while she answers Adrienne Rich’s plea “to know the writing of the past [. . .] differently than we have ever known it” she goes beyond Rich’s desire simply “to break its hold over us” (Rich 35). Rich’s sense of tradition as oppression recurs in Hazel Carby’s definition of the concept as a purified and purifying force that aims “to create unity out of disunity and to resolve the social contradiction, or differences between texts” (“Ideologies” 127). But the transformed and transformative classicism of

Morrison's novels makes them a significant contribution to the reconceptualization of tradition as something defined by its impurity. As Gilroy terms it, tradition is "the living memory of the changing same" (198). And the implications for American culture of Morrison's revision of the past are profound.¹⁰⁶

Derek Walcott has defined tradition as "alert, alive, simultaneous" ("Muse" 42). "What is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things", he says, "but the faith of using old names anew" ("Twilight" 9). Morrison's reuniting of classical tradition with Africa enables her to "use old names anew", in that her "Ajax", "Circe" and "Apollo" express not just the Greek legacy to America but also the African legacy to Greece. In Faulkner's "The Bear", the ledger of Carothers McCaslin's slaves records the corruption of classical names given by slave-owners: "Roscius" and "Phoebe" have become "Roskus" and "Fibby" (252; 252-254). Reflecting on the change of his own name from "Lucius" to "Lucas", Lucas believes that by "simply taking the name and changing, altering it, making it no longer the white man's but his own" he becomes "himself selfprogenitive, and nominate, by himself ancestored" (269). But Morrison destabilizes the certainty that such names were ever exclusively or originally "the white man's". Her own use of classical names, like that of Pauline Hopkins before her, makes her characters not "selfprogenitive", which is after all a process of "orphanization" akin to that

¹⁰⁶ Morrison's impulse to revise the past is illustrated by the fact that during her recent tenure as Guest Curator at the Louvre (October 2006-January 2007) one of her projects has been to identify "un parcours" or route through the collections of Ancient Egyptian, Assyrian and Greek artefacts which highlights, in the accompanying leaflet's words, "l'expérience de l'altérité dans les civilisations anciennes".

celebrated in dominant American ideology, but participants in a newly-restored tradition.¹⁰⁷

The most radical vision of the Africanness of classicism, and thus of classically-derived America, finds expression in Ishmael Reed's wry transformation of "Congress" to "Kongress" (*Mumbo Jumbo* 97). The irony that every aspect of the classical tradition by which the nation has defined itself is either derived from, has affinities with or is the product of an interaction with African culture is worth savouring. It makes doubly if not triply resonant Morrison's engagement with tragedy and epic, with mythical characters such as Kore or Dionysus, and with political and historical analogies between America and the Graeco-Roman world that I discuss in the first two parts of this thesis. Yet politically-motivated resistance to the idea of America's inheritance from Africa is real and documented. It is revealing that Mary Lefkowitz, the most outspoken critic of Bernal's thesis, uses the fact of America's classical origins to explain why it matters that the origins of classicism are not African. "Any attempt to question the authenticity of ancient Greek civilization is of direct concern to people who ordinarily have little interest in the remote past", she writes in her introduction to *Not Out of Africa*. "Since the founding of this country", she continues, "ancient Greece has been intimately connected with the ideal of American democracy" (6). Exactly why is a challenge to what she calls the "authenticity" of Greek civilization such a threat to American ideals?

¹⁰⁷ In a private conversation with Morrison at the Toni Morrison Society Conference in Lorain, Ohio, in September 2001, I asked the author why she used classical names for her characters. She said she "took them from the registers of slave ships". Classical names in Hopkins's novels include the central characters of "Sappho" in *Contending Forces* and "Venus" in *Hagar's Daughter* (1901-02). Morrison uses the term "orphanization" in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken": "Finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature has value, but [. . .] can lead to an incipient orphanization of the work in order to issue its adoption papers" (10).

Lefkowitz's perspective exemplifies the process by which (in Walcott's words) the classics have become "whitened" or "bleached-out", one which has characterized American intellectual tradition since the nation's foundation (Bruce King 504).¹⁰⁸ It has been illuminating to discover during research for this thesis, that the Roman playwright Terence on whose whiteness Jefferson pins his argument about the mental capacities of different races and thus his defence of a racially-pure America, was not in fact "white" at all (Jefferson 142).¹⁰⁹ As Frank Snowden points out in his *Blacks in Antiquity*, "the dark- or black-skinned Terence arrived in Rome as a slave from Carthage" (188), and it is Terence's Africanness that enables Phillis Wheatley to invoke him as a role model in her poem, "To Maecenas" (11).¹¹⁰ Wheatley's identification with the Roman playwright is a pertinent reminder that, as David Wiesen (building on Snowden) observes, while the Graeco-Roman world undoubtedly exercised a "nationalistic dislike of foreign people" its population was nonetheless "heterogeneous", and "the modern concept of race, in the technical sense of that term, did not exist in antiquity" (Wiesen 192-93). Morrison's classicism engages that heterogeneity while exploiting the irony that American dominant

¹⁰⁸ In a 1990 interview, Walcott said:

The Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean. If we looked at them now, we would say that the Greeks had Puerto Rican tastes . . . Because the stones were painted brightly. They were not these bleached stones. As time went by, and they sort of whitened and weathered, the classics began to be thought of as something bleached-out and . . . distant. (Bruce King 504; Hardwick, "Decolonizing" 6)

¹⁰⁹ Jefferson writes of Rome, "their slaves were often their rarest artists. [. . .] Epictetus, [. . .] Terence, and Phaedrus, were slaves. But they were of the race of whites" (142).

¹¹⁰ In "To Maecenas", Wheatley writes:

The happier Terence all the choir inspir'd
His soul replenished, and his bosom fir'd,
But say, ye Muses, why this partial grace,
To one alone of Afric's sable race, [. . .] ? (11)

It is of course a wonderful irony that Jefferson should invoke Terence to discredit Wheatley. It is also worth noting that even Lefkowitz concedes that "it is certainly possible that Terence was black" (*Not Out Of Africa* 31).

culture deploys the impure ancient world to justify its own ideologies of racial purity.

The construction of the classics or “Classics” as morally edifying and intellectually pure that Winterer documents — and that Morrison illustrates through *Corinthians Dead*’s “liberal education” and decision to call herself an “amanuensis” — comprises a parallel irony. The end of *Mumbo Jumbo* depicts PaPa Labas giving an annual university lecture on “Jes Grew”. As I cite as an epigraph to this thesis, the convening “Black professor” exhorts him “to come clean with those students. They must have a firm background in the Classics. Serious works, the achievements of mankind” (217). Morrison’s engagement with the classical world restores the point that there is nothing inherently pure or purifying about the subject-matter of Graeco-Roman literature, and also that classical texts themselves are always derivative works of reinterpretation, and thus epitomize hybridity.¹¹¹ Her work exemplifies Gilroy’s insight that tradition “can no longer function as modernity’s polar opposite” (188). Yet it is interesting that despite academic Classicists’ embrace of postmodernist vision and techniques in recent decades, the image of “the classics” as an ordering and ennobling force persists. John Shields, for example, reinscribes this image in the closing sentence of his 2001 work, *The American Aeneas*. “Lifting the siege of America’s classical origins will expedite construction of a fully traversable path through [. . .] ostensibly chaotic whirlwinds”, he writes, “and will lend

¹¹¹ An instructive lesson on the actual moral “impurity” of classical texts is to be found (as Norman Vance observes in his essay, “Ovid in the Nineteenth Century”) in *Don Juan*, where the protagonist’s mother struggles to find a literary work for her son to read that is at once classical and moral (N. Vance 217). Lorna Hardwick describes the inevitable hybridity of the Homeric poems: “Homeric epic emerged from the interaction of sea-borne cultures in which traces of stories, legends and myths, sometimes overlapping, were crafted together and given new form and direction in a Greek context” (“Walcott’s *Philoctete*” 111).

new dignity to the American self or selves” (362).

In his essay on Tutuola, Achebe and Reed — “European Pedigrees/African Contagions” — James Snead draws attention to the “radically heterogeneous and eclectic” nature of “Western” canonical texts (233). “*The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, Don Quixote, or Faust* would seem the last possible proof-texts for any separationist or exclusionary brand of racial or cultural hubris”, he writes (233). And the syncretistic nature of Morrison’s own writing refutes the claim to any African-American exceptionalism or pure intellectual tradition that a text such as Gates’s *Signifying Monkey* attempts to assert. Snead’s redefinition of “universality” as comprising “contagion” — “a benevolent *contagion* [. . .], a shared awareness of shared energy” articulates a process at the centre of the Morrisonian project. “[C]ontagion represents the existence of recoverable affinities between disparate races of people”, Snead writes (245). Morrison reconfigures the dominant-culture-serving concept of *miasma* as an empowering “contagion”; racial, moral and intellectual impurity is not just inevitable but is fraught with potential.

The power of impurity is unequivocally asserted in the closing visions of *Jazz, Paradise* and *Love*. In the penultimate chapter of *Jazz*, the deluded narrator mentions three times within one-and-a-half pages that the springtime daylight is “pure” (196-97). The disturbance she feels about Felice visiting Violet is mirrored by her disturbance at the “ash falling from the blue distance down on these streets” and by the “sooty film” that is “gathering on the windowpanes” (198). Yet this sullying ash, anticipating the Ovidian ashen-Sahara simile in *Paradise*, actually represents the acceptance of impurity and

imperfection that enables the Traces' future. On the last page of *Paradise*, in turn, "sea trash gleams" in the tableau that Piedade and Consolata form.

"Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal", Morrison writes (318).

And at the end of *Love*, too, is a detail that reinforces the process of recontamination that Morrison's work effects: at Cosey's grave, L and Celestial sing "one of those down-home raunchy songs" while Celestial covers "with the folds of her red dress" the gravestone's attempt to purify the past with "*the insult: 'Ideal Husband. Perfect Father'*" (201; italics in original). But it is in *Song of Solomon* that the perfect symbol of the Morrisonian process can be found. There, while working as a laundress, the youthful Pilate does not clean what she is given, but instead, from her tender split knuckles, "ran blood into the rinse tubs" (145). Just as Morrison as novelist restores the impurity of culture, in *Solomon* the rationalizing Roman governor who washes his hands of "Christ's serious anarchy" is transformed into a woman who restores the staining blood of racial heritage, of passion, and of life (*Bluest Eye* 134).

Morrison configures Pilate in the terms of a second image that is central to her novelistic project. Like her Papa and like "Africans", Pilate can "close her face up like a door" (*Song* 54); presumably, then, the character also embodies the door that can be opened to the "race-specific yet nonracist home" which the author aspires to construct ("Home" 11). As I stated at the outset of this thesis, Morrison attests to feeling "intellectually at home" in Greek tragedy ("Unspeakable" 3). In turn her novels envision a new kind of home, a transformed America to which a restored version of classicism and a restored or reinvented conception of tradition are the keys. "The novel", she says, "should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and

points the way” (“Rootedness” 341). And in her hands it indubitably does.

Conclusion: Aesop, the Classics and American Studies

A return to Morrison's recent interest in Aesop comprises an instructive concluding discussion to this project. In *The Ant or the Grasshopper?*, *The Lion or the Mouse?* and *Poppy or the Snake?* the African-American author engages with contemporary American culture through what is at once a reinvention of a classical genre and a restoration of its obscured radical power. The trajectory that Aesopic fable has followed — from its emergence in Ancient Greek oral tradition to its twenty-first-century reconfigurations in the *Who's Got Game?* series — both encapsulates the central themes of my thesis and is indicative of significant untapped potential in the field of American Studies.

As Laura Gibbs documents in the introduction to her recent Oxford World Classics translation, *Aesop's Fables* (2002), there is no “original” version of the tales.¹ Rather, they evolved as a “body of popular knowledge”, common currency long before they were first written down in the anonymous Greek collections of the third century BCE and in subsequent Latin renderings (Gibbs xi, xxxii). In classical times a constant in this impure and ever-changing tradition was that the fables always served a “didactic purpose”; they also fulfilled an overtly political function, in that “as a form of public discourse [they] were used by the orators of Greece and Rome and were a subject of rhetorical study” (Gibbs xii, xx). Nonetheless, the meaning of individual tales was not always unambiguous. Gibbs cites the example of “The Fox and the Eagle” in which the moral spoken by the fox within the story is contradicted by the moral appended by the narrator after the story, giving rise to “a sustained

¹ This edition was published in London and New York in 2002, one year before the first title in the *Who's Got Game?* series appeared.

moment of unresolved tension” (xvii). Nor did the fables necessarily endorse the political status quo; Robert Parker defines the genre as one in which “the weak could tactfully but firmly admonish the mighty” (*Miasma* 261).

During its passage to modernity the Aesopic tradition has repeatedly served an explicitly ideological function. For example, a significant component of what Laura Gibbs calls “the medieval Latin Aesop” is the collection of heavily “Christianized” or *moralisé* parables by the thirteenth-century scholar and cleric, Odo of Cheriton (Gibbs xxvii-xxviii). And four centuries later, Roger L’Estrange’s English translation of 1692 begins “the notion of a children’s Aesop”, proclaiming its aim to “*initiate the Children into some sort of Sense and Understanding of their Duty*” (Gibbs xii; italics in original).² Gibbs herself does not chart Aesop’s transatlantic journeys, nor the tradition’s development in the American setting, but it is perhaps unsurprising that scholars of American classicism repeatedly attest to the popularity of “Aesop as behaviour modification” in the schoolrooms of the colonies and the new nation. Reinhold, Winterer and Shields all separately document the importance of the fables in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammar school curriculum. “It was customary for young people to be exposed very early to Aesop’s Fables”, Reinhold writes, “many of which were available” (149). The fables were “baldly moralizing”, Winterer writes, “befitting a study that was intended to encourage ethical behaviour and to teach grammar” (*Culture* 11).³

² In his *Aesop Without Morals* Lloyd Daly writes, “The Aesopic fables have been pap for children in schools for so many hundreds of years that it is perhaps difficult to think of them in any other light” (12).

³ See also Shields 27. Reinhold quotes Samuel Croxall, translator of the popular *Fables of Aesop and Others* (1722), who in 1786 explained that the stories “make out a proper Behaviour for us . . . and demonstrate to us, by a Kind of Example, every Virtue which claims our best Regards, and every Vice which we are most concerned to avoid” (149). Reinhold also describes the L’Estrange translation as a “popular version” (167).

In *The Founders and the Classics* Carl Richard documents the appeal of Aesop to the Revolutionary fathers. Jefferson once “suggested that the American colonies adopt a classical motif, a father presenting the aesopic bundle of rods to his sons (the thirteen colonies)” (49), while in 1775 Thomas Paine signed an essay “Esop” (205). It is perhaps the consistent identification between Aesop and white male power that prompts Arthur Huff Fauset, writing a century and a half later on “American Negro Folk Literature” in the *New Negro*, to discredit Aesop and to disassociate it from African-American culture. “[A]ny folk-lorist knows that the African folk fable of indigenous growth outmasters Aesop over and over”, he writes. “Africa in a sense is the home of the fable; the African tales are its classics” (243). Yet even the most perfunctory glance at the nature of the tales and of the legendary Aesop’s life explains Toni Morrison’s perception of the fabulist’s subversive potential.

There is no validated evidence about the existence of a historical Aesop. But the anonymous Ancient Greek novel, the *Life of Aesop*, constructs a character whose appeal to Morrison is obvious.⁴ The *Life*’s protagonist is a notoriously ugly slave living on the island of Samos. Born unable to speak, having acted piously towards a priestess of the Egyptian goddess Isis he is granted the power of speech by Isis herself, along with storytelling skills by the Muses. Due to his sharp intelligence Aesop is purchased by the philosopher Xanthus; the slave goes on to provoke and outwit his master, and to humiliate his master’s wife, at every turn. Having won his freedom on intellectual merit Aesop travels in Babylon and Egypt, and he finally dies at the hands of the

⁴ My summary is based on the first English translation of the *Life of Aesop*, by Lloyd Daly, published in 1961. Daly describes the account as “obviously fictional and romantic” (*Aesop Without Morals* 19). According to Gibbs, the novel may date from the first century BCE, but almost certainly relies on earlier prototypes (ix).

Delphians, whom he insults by telling that their ancestors were slaves. The account is humorous, bawdy and irreverent, and the Aesop depicted here has much in common with the trickster figure of African and African-American folklore.

The spirit of Morrison's *Who's Got Game?* series is clearly indebted to the anti-authoritarian tenor of the *Life of Aesop*. For example, *The Ant or the Grasshopper?* — which is arguably the most successful of the Morrisons' rewritings — comprises an unambiguous challenge to the work ethic and capitalist ethos promoted by the Aesopic "The Ant and the Cricket" (Gibbs, Fable 126). In the Gibbs translation the ant, who has stored his grain carefully all summer, refuses to share any with the reckless cricket. "Since you sang like a fool in the summer, [. . .] you had better be prepared to dance the winter away!", says the self-righteous ant. "*This fable depicts lazy, careless people who indulge in foolish pastimes*", states the epimythium (Gibbs 66; italics in original). But in Morrison's tale the grasshopper makes a powerful case for the indispensable role of art and the artist. Simultaneously rebuffing his friend and endorsing consumerist culture, Kid A (the ant) tells Foxy G (the grasshopper) "I planned ahead and stored things up / you wasted time on those funky wings", but Foxy G replies, "Your house is clean, but where is your dream? / Know what I mean?" (n. pag.). Through the panicked expression on Kid A's face as Foxy G walks away, and through the enduring question, "Who's got game?", the text destabilizes the American dreams of individual progress and acquisition. Morrison thus restores the radical Aesop in her challenge to dominant ideology.

There are other aspects of Aesopic legend and the *Life* that must also have a specific resonance for Morrison. Given her general interest in the interconnectedness of Africa, Greece and Rome, she is doubtless aware of the likelihood that “the *Life* was written by a Greek-speaking Egyptian, in Egypt” and that “the language in which the *Life* is written is [. . .] about the only thing about it that is Greek” (Daly 22).⁵ Furthermore, the *Who's Got Game?* series gains political clout from the fact that (as Frank Snowden documents) “Aesop, according to some accounts, was Ethiopian” (*Blacks in Antiquity* 188). While Mary Lefkowitz of course refutes this claim, even she concedes that “ancient accounts of his ‘life’ say that he was dark [. . .] and flat-nosed” (*Not Out of Africa* 31). Whether or not a “real” Aesop existed, and whether or not he was African, is ultimately irrelevant to the Morrisonian project. The legendary Aesop reverberates in her retellings of his tales, simultaneously working against the whitening of classical tradition and the Americanness that that whitened tradition has underpinned.

It is regrettable that Gibbs, a Berkeley PhD still working in the American academy, does not consider what happens to Aesop when he crosses the Atlantic. My research for this thesis has thrown up Donaldson confining Lucretia to the same European borders, and Lerner and Rudd separately failing to take adequate account of the significance of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the American setting. To borrow Joseph Roach’s phrase, such adherence to national and continental boundaries “has foreclosed the exploration of certain

⁵ Daly writes, “Some of the more obvious signs of this are the prominence of the Egyptian goddess Isis in the story and the particular brand of hostility it shows toward Hellenic learning” (22).

historic relationships in a particularly invidious way” (183).⁶ With this in mind, it is my hope that both the example of Aesop and my entire study of Morrison highlight the need for further scholarship on the classical tradition in transnational and Black Atlantic contexts. As should by now be clear, it is work that has important implications for American Studies as a whole.

In summary, this thesis has demonstrated the indisputable and fundamental role of Morrison’s engagement with classical tradition in her overall project. While critics have hitherto focused on the most obvious allusive elements of individual novels, this investigation is the first to show that an ambivalent but sustained deployment of America’s Graeco-Roman heritage is central to the oeuvre’s radical politics. Reading the author’s classicism as a means by which she dismantles the dominant US culture, I have highlighted the subversive effects of her dialogue with Homeric myth and the Ancient Greek tragedians, with Virgil, with Ovid, with classical historiographical, religious and political conventions, with the cultural exchanges between European and African civilizations, and with America’s pragmatic use (or suppression) of all of these in the formation of its identity.

Organized into analyses of Morrison’s challenge to three interconnected national mythologies, my work has simultaneously illuminated the novelist’s interactions with American literary forebears whose work is also classically-informed. In Part I I have shown that it is her negotiations of tragic paradigms

⁶ Roach makes this comment in the context of urging a circum-Atlantic rather than national approach to literature in English: “No taxonomy is innocent, of course, but the deeply ingrained division within English studies between American literature, on the one hand, and English or British literature, on the other, has foreclosed the exploration of certain historic relationships in a particularly invidious way” (183).

such as the downfall, the tragic hero and the chorus, as well as her final rejection of calamitous tragic vision, that enable her critique of the ideology of the American Dream. Part II demonstrates that the oeuvre comprises an exposure of the nation's total dependence on classical tradition in the mythologized versions of its history that range from narratives of its "discovery" to cultural rememberings of slavery, the Civil War and ensuing social change. I have shown, at the same time, that in its representations of the Civil Rights Movement the novels exploit the visionary potential of newly-deployed, palimpsest-like allusions. And in Part III I have drawn attention to Morrison's use of the discourse of *miasma* in her challenge to dominant constructions of racial, moral and intellectual purity. As well as demonstrating that her engagement with *The Oresteia* is far more widespread than critics have previously thought, I have shown that her interest in the African elements of classicism affords her a significant position in a genealogy of African-American "Egyptianists". Her own insistence on the potency of cultural impurity, I have argued, enables her reconstitution of the Graeco-Roman foundations on which the nation rests, and thus her reconfiguration of America itself.

The flyleaves of Morrison's *Who's Got Game?* series describe the rewritings of the fables as "AESOP LIVE!". This thesis has demonstrated that Morrison's novels comprise both American classicism and classic Americanism "live" – as subject, that is, to multiple metamorphoses. For while in "What is a Classic?" T.S. Eliot writes reverentially of "the two dead languages", stating that "it is important that they are dead, because through their death we have come into our inheritance" (28), I have shown that Morrison's work both

constructs and depends on entirely different conception of the Graeco-Roman past. In her Nobel Lecture of 1993 she declared that “a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis” (13); she contrasted this “paralysis” with the “nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties” of language that is “living” (15). My study has revealed the significant extent to which her novels achieve their own “mid-wifery properties” through their classicism.

In conclusion, then, I have shown that the critical anxiety surrounding the subject of Morrison and classical tradition is at best unwarranted and at worst insidious. I have illuminated a perspective on her work that is important and new. And as my reading of her oeuvre sheds new light, too, on the writers with whom she is in dialogue, I have initiated a process of re-evaluation that is on-going.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in parenthetical references:

<i>Ag.</i>	Aeschylus, <i>Agamemnon</i>
<i>Bac.</i>	Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>
<i>Eum.</i>	Aeschylus, <i>Eumenides</i>
<i>L.B.</i>	Aeschylus, <i>Libation Bearers</i>
<i>Met.</i>	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>

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