BLACK WOMEN AND THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL LIBERATION IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY* AND TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

by

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(Under the Direction of Barbara McCaskill)

ABSTRACT

For the Black community in Haiti and the United States, Christianity has often been cited as a source for spiritual connection, healing and liberation. It has been romanticized--and at times rightfully so--as a source for communal development and preservation within these communities. In this thesis, I explore Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and how these authors engage in a subversive dialogue across the Americas about the role of Christianity in the lives of Black women. Specifically, I propose Danticat and Morrison illuminate how the Black community appropriates Christianity to reinstitute gender hierarchy and gender oppression. Critical to the investigation of this matter is the role of the Virgin Mary as the ideal standard for womanhood.

INDEX WORDS: Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, women, Christianity, Vodou, Candomblé, Virgin Mary

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INTRODUCTION

BLACK WOMEN AND THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL LIBERATION IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY* AND TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

The literary critic bell hooks wrote: "What had begun as a movement to free all black people from racist oppression became a movement with its primary goal the establishment of black male patriarchy" (hooks 18). hooks is referring to the Civil Rights Movement; however, her statement reflects a larger issue for the African diasporic community because this was not merely the attitude of a movement, this was an ideology entrenched in one of the most important and longstanding institutions in African diasporic life: religion. Implicit in hooks's statement is the idea that oppression begets oppression and the reinstitution of hegemonic power paradigms. Although Black men and Black women in Haiti and the United States both suffered under a brutal system of slavery, the experience of the Black man was often privileged over that of the Black woman.

Black men were emasculated by slavery and, as hooks notes, the theory has been espoused that they suffered a particularly damaging humiliation by not being allowed to fulfill their rightful role as "head" of the family (hooks 20). In order for Black men to regain a sense of authority and power, they had to maintain power and dominion over their communities. Christianity provided not only the institutional authority, but also the moral authority for reinstituting gender hierarchy and gender oppression within the Black community in Haiti and the United States. Because of the legacy of slavery and Eurocentric patterns of patriarchal control, Christianity became a source of oppression and disruption of Black female identity.

Black women were further marginalized within the Black community, and the community at large, when they failed to adhere to patriarchal notions of the virtuous woman.

I contend that in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), both authors engage in a subversive dialogue across the Americas—Haiti and the United States—about the hegemonic Christian religions appropriated by the Black community to create an ideal of Black womanhood. In an attempt to erase the imagery associated with the sexually degraded and objectified Black woman, the Black community adopts a standard for Black women associated with the Christian ideal of a White woman, the Virgin Mary. Through Christian idealism, Danticat and Morrison reveal how Black women are caught in the cross-current of racism and sexism which often times perpetuates the denigration and enslavement of Black women. Danticat and Morrison suggest that Black women must re-member their stories and centralize them within the communal and societal context. For Black women, retelling their stories will allow them to redefine their identities and to liberate themselves from gender oppression.

The Atlantic slave trade created one of the most dehumanizing and oppressive systems of labor the world would ever see.[1] Africans were uprooted from their countries and stripped of their families and cultures, only to be brought to the Americas where they moved from being subjects—humans—to objects—property of their slave master. As property, slaves were given new identities based on the nationality of their master; however, no matter their master's background, slavery in the Americas meant a system of free labor in the master's house or in the master's cotton, rice, sugar or tobacco fields under backbreaking and inhumane conditions.

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[1] For a discussion on the slavery system that resulted in the Americas as a result of the Atlantic slave trade, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 3-48. For a discussion of the effects of the slave trade on Black women, see bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: black women and feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 15-49.

Black women were particularly vulnerable in the slave system: not only did their bodies belong to the slave master for labor; they also belonged to the slave master for sex.[2] As the literary scholar Hazel V. Carby notes, the plantation society and the system of slavery were tied to the oppression of White women and the control of their bodies; however, equally if not more important to the system was the control of Black women's bodies (Carby 24). White women suffered a type of privileged oppression; whereas Black women suffered a double oppression because of race and gender that left them particularly vulnerable to men:

> As a slave, the black woman was in an entirely different relation to the plantation patriarch. Her reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mother. (Carby 25)

In *Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order* (2008), historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains that subjugation and exploitation were not merely the realms of White men: "Slaveholding [White] women who were elitist and racists . . . in some essential respects . . . were more crudely racist than their men" (35). Christianity played an important role in the reinforcement of these antagonistic relationships. It was one of the instruments used to control Black bodies and to support hegemonic and binary relations: Black/White and male/female.

Christianity occupies a complicated space in the lives of slaves in the Americas. Slavery was an instrument of western imperialism and capitalism; however, Whites used Christianity to mask the immorality of a system dependent on human bondage and degradation. According to the historian Albert J. Raboteau, Christianity was used as a justification for slavery (96). Slave masters could proclaim a sense of righteousness and superiority because: "the grace of faith

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[2] For further readings on the plight of Black women during slavery, see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) 16-35 and Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984) 33-56.

[was] made available to Africans, who otherwise would die as pagans" (Raboteau 96). The Christian principle of salvation was used as a means of indoctrinating slaves into submission and obedience. However, amongst Black people in Haiti and the United States, the rhetoric of Christianity takes on a wholly different dimension.

Institutional Christianity has served as a source for spiritual connection, communal development and cultural preservation for Blacks in Haiti and the United States. Religious services offered slaves one of the few instances where they were granted the space and freedom to gather en masse. In religious spaces, slaves were able to marry the old religious traditions from Africa—drumming, gesturing and dance—with the new traditions of their Haitian and American Christian experience—God, the Bible and gospel hymns—to create a new space where they could reconnect with their spirits and escape, albeit briefly, from the physical and mental torture of slavery. Thus, Christianity has played an important role for slaves in the fight against oppression and racism. Beyond being a space for spiritual connections, one of the most oft-mentioned and much mythologized facets of Christianity for slaves in the Americas is the idea that historically it has been a source for resistance and rebellion.

According to scholar Terry Rey, Catholicism and worship services afforded Haitians a public and private means of appropriating Christian iconography and impregnating it with their native African traditions and meanings. Black Haitians used Christianity as a means to worship but also as a means to communicate and to incite insurrection. Likewise, in the United States, Blacks had a complicated relationship with Christianity. According to Albert J. Raboteau, Christianity allowed slaves the opportunity to develop their own moral code sometimes represented by "[t]he principle 'Us against them'—the in-group use of indirection and the development of masks to conceal true feelings" (Raboteau 297). For slaves, "religious faith

sometimes sustained the decision of slaves to flee or revolt" and prayer was often an "effective symbol of resistance because both masters and slaves believed in the power of prayer" (Raboteau 305, 308). Slaves utilized religion politically as a means to gather, communicate and survive.

Slaves also used religious meetings as a means to recruit other slaves and to organize rebellions against slavery (Raboteau 147). The accoutrements of religious ceremonies—songs and gestures—became means of communications amongst slaves to reflect meeting times and to transmit messages about the master, as well as routes of safety for runaway slaves. For example, the prologue to the Haitian Revolution was led by two slaves, Boukman and Makandal, who were known as powerful Vodou priests who invoked Vodou, the religion of their African and French existence in Haiti, as the source to incite insurrection against French rule (Dayan 29-31). Haiti became the first free Black country in the Americas. Nat Turner, born a slave in Southhampton Virginia, was an ardent Baptist and known to be a prophet. Based on a call from God, Turner led one of the bloodiest slave revolts in American history:

> I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. (Gray 11)

Turner's Christian faith manifested itself in the appearance of the "Spirit." The "Spirit" reveals that the "Serpent," White people, is a source of destruction and that it is time for the "last," Black people, to be the first. Turner uses his Christianity as a source to garner support for rebellion against White people. Christianity for slaves in the United States became enmeshed in the idea that it functioned as a unifying communal force, a site of freedom from dogmatic oppression and racism.

I suggest that the role of Christianity within the African diasporic communities of Haiti and the United States is more complicated than the ideals perpetuated by resistance and

liberation stories. What is often missing from the liberation theology of religion within these communities is the way in which Haitians and African Americans appropriate patriarchal practices of Christianity and reinstitute these ideals within communal religious spaces and practices to often repeat patterns of racism and sexism. I contend that Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* subvert the patriarchal view of religion as a liberatory and healing place for women. Both authors mine religion within the African diasporic communities in Haiti and the United States to explore how women are doubly marginalized within both Haitian Catholicism and Christianity practiced by Black people in the United States. Danticat and Morrison interrogate alternative sites of religion—Vodou and Candomblé — connected with the African roots of these communities, as an alternative for Black women—and the community at large—to explore issues of identity and to disrupt patriarchal discourse on history and leadership, as well as a means to attain spiritual connection, healing and power.

Danticat's and Morrison's writings reflect the importance of memory and history within the African diasporic community. Their writings enact a multilayered dance in which the authors seek to remember, shift and retell stories that are missing from national histories. Often, Black women's histories and stories are occluded by the communal Black story. Morrison and Danticat seek to deconstruct and destabilize national and communal histories by shifting Black women into the center of the discourse, thereby affording them the opportunity to tell their stories. While they each engage in themes of slavery, ancestors, marriage, war, abuse, education and religion, Morrison provides perspectives from both genders; whereas, Danticat's engagement is from the perspective of a multigenerational female family. Nonetheless, it is this polyvocal engagement that allows the reader the opportunity to examine the various stories of the women without the singular lens of a patriarchal or hegemonic religious rhetoric.

In Toni Morrison's novels *Paradise*, *Song of Solomon* (1987) and *Beloved* (1988), she often explores memory in relation to the historic trauma of slavery. In *Paradise,* a community of Black people is stripped of their positions of power and prominence, as well as their lands, because of the racist vestiges of slavery. As they search for a place to belong, they encounter racism and rejection from Black and White people, which shapes their own brand of racism and sexism. The trauma of slavery has caused the Dead family in *Song of Solomon* to forget. The Dead family has lost their sense of selfhood because they are disconnected from the ancestor, Macon I, who was killed by Whites for his land after the Civil War, and Solomon, the ancestor who escaped slavery and returned to freedom by flying away. In *Beloved*, the horror of slavery leads Sethe to kill her daughter rather than allow her to suffer the humiliation of subjugation and rape. Whether these characters are silent about these events or whether they create communal dramas over them, over- or under-engagement with the past without contextualization and healing leads to a legacy of repetition. For these characters, a failure to appropriately engage with their ancestors and their histories dooms them to repeat cycles of oppression, abandonment and disconnection.

I contend that in *Paradise*, Morrison's focus on religion and women gives readers an opportunity to recontextualize how and why women's lives and identities have been shaped through religion. Central to Morrison's work is the role of collective memory. Morrison is not an author overly-engaged with feminist rhetoric, nor does she believe in focusing on one aspect of the Black community; however, in *Paradise*, she provides readers with an extensive examination of institutional religious oppression of Black women and of how Black women exist

at the margins of a community in which they are the life blood.[3] I will focus on the use of religious ceremony and space in the novel as a means of exploring the way women are defined in terms of a communal identity as opposed to an individual female identity. I argue that the communal is the locus for defining male identity, based on the patriarchal paradigm of gender roles and power and the need to define maleness as being the leader, provider and protector of females. Morrison turns to an African-based religion, Candomblé, as an opportunity for women to explore a means of reconstructing identity and gaining agency. I argue Candomblé is not simply an alternative to Christianity; rather, Morrison's use of Candomblé reflects the Black communities' hybrid existence in America and the opportunity for acceptance, diversity and inclusion.

Likewise, Danticat is also a novelist who explores national histories and the ways women have been written out of or about in national discourse. Danticat engages her characters in the retelling of events in which their stories have been silenced or misappropriated. Although a native of Haiti, Danticat was educated in the United States and has lived here since the age of twelve. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat takes the reader between Haiti and the United States, two countries that share a similar legacy of slavery. Similar to Morrison, Danticat shares how the silence of past traumas is visited on future generations. The Cacos, the family of women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, suffer a legacy of sexual abuse. For Danticat, the trauma to be retold is not merely slavery but also the nationalist struggle for power and control by the Black Haitian community. Women's bodies become caught in the crossfire for control, which I argue is an extension of the colonial legacy of Catholicism. Danticat's exploration and retelling shift the binary conflict from male/female to female/female. Women are perpetrators as well as victims

[3] For a discussion on Morrison's view on Black feminist criticism and writing on the Black community, see Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," ed. Mari Evans, *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 339-345.

of sexist ideology. Danticat reveals how Christianity perpetuates the perpetrator/victim psychology that becomes a generational communal practice. She explores how religion is a disruptive and healing space for women.

The Benin area off the West Coast of Africa is a unifying site for alternative religious ideology and practices in the novels *Paradise* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Benin was the cradle of the slave trade and the source from which Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomble′ evolved. The Africans in the Benin area largely consisted of Dahomeans and Nigerians who comprised such ethnic groups as the Fon, Yoruba and Kongo (Rey 32). Haitian Vodou derives from the religious traditions of the Fon, Yoruba and Kongo—amongst other ethnic African groups—who worshipped "an all powerful being known as Vaudoux" (Murphy 10). The religious traditions of the various ethnic African groups in Haiti were by no means monolithic; yet, according to Terry Rey, they held a spirit of "generosity of inclusion" (33). Rey writes, "The enslaved Africans came to Hispaniola, obviously, with a decidedly African religious habitus, one tolerant of religious diversity and change to a degree unrealized among Semitic religions, with their traditions of exclusivism and absolutist truth claims" (Rey 33).[4]

This adaptability of African religions included room for the Catholicism of the colonizer—as well as native indigenous traditions of Hispaniola. The result of this cross mixture of religious and cultural influences is Vodou. Haitian Vodou combines the traditions of its African past: food, sacrifice, drumming, dance, rapture and song, with elements of Catholicism such as prayers, acknowledgment of Catholic saints and the use of Catholic iconography in worship rituals. Vodou's critical elements in relation to Danticat's work are its tradition of resistance, invocation of the spirit, healing rituals and the inclusion of women in positions of

[4] Hispaniola is the name Christopher Columbus gave to the island which consists of present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

religious leadership as represented by the iconic spiritual force Erzulie and her multiple representations.[5] Erzulie is an African-based lwa, or spirit, who takes on multiple representations as she is reincarnated in Haiti. In "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," the scholar Joan Dayan acknowledges that most scholars recognize at least three representations of Erzulie: "Erzulie-Fréda, the lady of luxury and love . . . as Erzulie-Dantor, the black woman of passion identified in Catholic chromolithographs . . . and . . . Erzulie-gé-rouge, the red-eyed militant of fury and vengeance" (6). While Dayan recognizes these representations of Erzulie, she contends that they do not capture the complexity of a goddess who often "goes beyond false dichotomizing, as she prescribes and responds to multiple and apparently incoherent directives" (Dayan 6). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* readers are confronted with the juxtaposition of the Virgin Mary with Erzulie to critique the ways in which patriarchy is used as a weapon by men, but most importantly, by mothers to control their daughters. A mother's identity, her value and her class status are tied to presenting a daughter for marriage as pure as the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary is a confining symbol of womanhood. Danticat uses Erzulie to explore an alternate site for defining womanhood. Erzulie is the Vodou equivalent of the Virgin Mary; however, she is a symbol of liberation. She is a transcendent power who is not subjugated by men or women.

The coast of West Africa is also the locus of Candomblé, a religion of initiation and divination. Like Vodou, Candomblé also involves food, sacrifice, song, dance and communal participation as a means of nourishing the spirit. Candomblé perhaps descends more directly from Africa than any other African religion, because early practioners sought and created the sense of African spiritual and ceremonial elements within their new communities in Brazil.

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[5] Erzulie's name is spelled multiple ways: Ezili, Maitress Erzulie, Erzulie Dantor, Erzulie Fréda and Erzulie-gé-rouge. Erzulie's different names represent different aspects of her strength and power; but, she represents the same lwa or Vodou spirit. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat refers to her as Erzulie, so I will use Erzulie when referencing her in this thesis, unless I am quoting directly from a scholar.

What developed was a cultural hybrid that reflected African roots but also Catholic and Amer-Indian cultures. Candomblé is rooted in the concept that "nações" or nations are critical to the preservation of community and a connection with Africa (Murphy 48). Family is an integral part of Candomblé but family is not merely a focus on blood relatives; rather, family is religious family. In certain instances, people forsake their biological families for the zeal of sacrifice of community building within Candomblé families.

Morrison presents two sources of communal and spiritual growth within the African diaspora: Christianity in Black America and Brazilian Candomblé. In a town where blood, color and trauma are the sources of the spiritual identity of the inhabitants, Morrison presents a second African diasporic idea of communal spiritual identity based more on relationships, reconnection and healing as opposed to bonds of blood. Candomblé has been described as "the cult of matriarchy" (Matory 189). According to the scholar Marie Griffith, women are its lifeblood: "In Candomblé, women are a primary link to that memory of slavery and to the engagement of its continuing meaning for the present: the mães-de-santo who founded and led many of the oldest extant terreiros, their successors, and the initiates and devotees who form the rising generation of caretakers of the religion" (12). Candomblé is considered matrilineal and mães-de-santo are extremely powerful within Candomblé nations where they are responsible for healing, guiding initiates' extensive and time-consuming divination processes and residing over the terreiros—Candomblé temples.

I certainly do not suggest that Candomblé is strictly a women-centered religion and that Morrison is simply making a binary argument about the supremacy of male-centered versus female-centered religions. In fact, J. Lorand Matory argues that there is ample evidence to suggest that men maintain as many positions within Candomblé and the same type of authority

within Candomblé as do women (189). I want to stay away from this type of binary argument because it reinforces sexist religious ideals and it promotes an essentialized view of Africa as a hegemonic religious system based on matriarchy. Implicit in this type of matriarchal discourse surrounding Africa is the legitimation of matriarchy as the sole source of religious leadership and spiritual connection. I merely contend that Candomblé is a "female-friendly" religion which historically has offered women agency, equal participation and power. I contend that Morrison seizes on Candomblé as a religion rooted in the ancestors and healing as an opportunity to expand Black female identity and agency.

Toni Morrison originally intended for *Paradise* to be entitled *War*.[6] I will explore the idea that both Morrison's and Danticat's novels engage in a type of religious warfare that highlights the tension that exists between the adopted Western Christianity of African Americans and Haitians versus Candomblé and Vodou, African diasporic religions of Brazil and Haiti which reflect African origins as well as the hybridity of a new identity born in the Americas. I contend that Morrison and Danticat subvert the moral mandate of Western Christianity by exposing the legacy of patriarchy, disruption and oppression which permeates religious ideology among African Americans and Haitians. I also argue that Morrison and Danticat expose how Eurocentric patriarchal religious practices are appropriated by marginalized communities, Black men and Black women, to repeat patterns of abuse and oppression against Black women.

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[6] Jeffrey Zia, "Toni Morrison: The Salon Interview" Salon 2 Feb 1988 <http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998/02/cov_si_02int3.html>

CHAPTER 1:

Calling on the Two Marys: Erzulie and the Virgin Mary

Haiti is a nation tangled chiefly in two religions—Catholicism and Vodou. Catholicism and Vodou are reflected in the country's very evolution. In 1492, Haiti was initially colonized by the Spanish under the moral mandate and protection of the Virgin Mary. Later, during the eighteenth century, African slaves invoked the Catholicism of the Spanish and the French, in conjunction with their native African Gods and beliefs, to overthrow their French colonizers. Despite the colonial agenda, which utilized Catholicism as a weapon for submission and obedience, slave communities in Haiti synthesized Christian principles with their African religious ideology in order to access spiritual connection and healing, preserve culture and protest oppression. Although Vodou emerged as a significant religion within Haiti, Catholicism still remains a dominant religious institution deemed the religion of cultural legitimacy. Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* situates itself in the religious legacy of Catholicism and Vodou in Haiti. I contend that Danticat exposes a type of religious warfare that highlights the tension that exists between the adopted Western Christian religion of Catholicism versus the Vodou religion connected to Haitians' African roots.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat offers a critique of the way patriarchal Catholic ideology shapes identity for Black women and circumscribes them to certain gender roles. Danticat's critique of Catholicism is complicated by the fact that she shifts the discussion of this religion from the classic binaries of Black/White or male/female to Black women versus Black women. In the case of the novel, the power paradigm focuses on the mother/daughter

relationship. In this chapter I will explore how Danticat subverts the moral mandate of Catholicism by exposing it as a site of disruption and oppression for women. I argue that Danticat exposes how Eurocentric patriarchal religious practices are appropriated by marginalized communities, in particular Black women, to repeat patterns of abuse and oppression against Black women. Critical to my study of Danticat is the way she crafts religious iconography—the duality of Erzulie versus the Virgin Mary—to address how religion is a site that mandates a domestic ideal of womanhood. Finally, I argue that Sophie Caco, one of the protagonists of the novel, gains a sense of agency and spiritual liberation by engaging in Vodou.

The novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* explores the Caco family, a female-centered family representing four generations of Haitian women. The matriarch of the family is the widowed Ife Caco, who is the mother of Atie and Martine, grandmother to Martine's daughter Sophie, and great-grandmother to Sophie's daughter Brigette. The women of the Caco family, as well as women in Haitian society, are expected to live up to an ideal established by the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary typifies a domestic representation of woman as innocent, submissive, maternal, sacrificial and virginal. These qualities are important to a woman's ability to attract a husband in Haitian society. Out of a need to maintain virginity and therefore remain marriageable, female sexuality must be controlled, and in Haitian society it is deemed the role of mothers to control their daughters' sexuality. The Caco family passes on the generational legacy of testing, which involves a mother inserting her small finger into the vagina of her daughter "to see if she is still whole" (136). In addition to the physical violation of testing, "the mothers also listen when you pee, to find out if you're peeing too loud. If you pee loud, it means you've got big spaces between your legs" (136). Testing is designed "to preserve their honor" so that women will be

desirable marriage material (208). The women of the Caco family thus become both victims and instruments of a ritual steeped in embodying the purity of the Virgin Mary.

I propose that Sophie's resistance to Martine's continued "testing" clearly reveals a longing to break from a tradition of psychic trauma that perpetuates violence against women and demands complete submission of female identity to a national, male-centered idea of womanhood. Further, Sophie's battle against testing is reflective of the larger battle between the French and the African slaves and the religions invoked by each to claim ownership of Haiti. The battle for Haiti's independence is symbolic of Sophie's battle to end generational trauma and gain a sense of identity and agency.

The tension between the Caco family members has its roots in the colonization of Hispaniola and the development of Haiti. It can be argued that religious warfare gave birth to modern Haiti. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, armed with "papal sanction of their mercantilist undertakings," seized control of Hispaniola on behalf of the Spanish (Rey 27). Columbus's appropriation of the island of Hispaniola in effect declared Catholicism as orthodoxy for the island. Hispaniola's colonization by the Spanish is impregnated with imagery and ideology associated with the Virgin Mary. The Santa Maria was the ship to run aground in Hispaniola, for example, and Columbus would name the first locale in Hispaniola after the Virgin Mary, as well as several other following locales (Rey 124). For the Spanish, the Virgin Mary represented the ultimate mother, the symbol of purity, virtue, sacrifice and submission. The Spanish would use this ideology to indoctrinate the imported Africans into morally sanctioned submission to their role as slaves.

The arrival of the French on the island would extend Catholicism's hold on the slaves. The French instituted the Code Noir, which amongst other things defined and codified the

activities of slaves and forbade them from practicing any religion other than Catholicism (McAlister 86). Slaves received severe punishment for violating the *Code Noir*. They were beaten, tortured, and denied food and clothing for violating the code (Dayan 212). In certain instances, after a beating, a slave may have his wounds "allegedly" cauterized with the use of lemon, pepper or salt (Dayan 206). The agenda of the Catholic colonizers in Haiti was to indoctrinate the African slaves into Christianity as a means of oppression and control. Although the Code Noir codified the treatment of slaves, arguably, it was this attempt by the French colonizers to maintain order and control of the African slaves which created the opportunity for the greatest threat to that control, Vodou.

In the African diaspora, the institution of religion often becomes a site for African slaves to preserve elements of their past identity while negotiating new identities within a new homeland. Religion also creates a space where under the subterfuge of worship, slaves can develop strategies to resist the oppressive practices of colonialism. Vodou represents a site of this type of cross-cultural convergence and resistance. Vodou is the Creole religion that arose out of the religious spirituality of the African slaves, as well as out of Catholicism forced upon them by the Spanish and French. Although there is debate over whether Vodou is a syncretic religion, I am persuaded by Albert J. Raboteau who maintains that "syncretism must not be pushed too far" as the African elements of Vodou are not eclipsed by Catholicism; instead, they run parallel with it (24, 25). Terry Rey goes so far as to argue that while Vodou incorporates elements of Catholicism, its essence is more African than Catholic (Rey 215). Vodou ideology is largely connected with spirituality and healing. It involves invoking the spirit through religious ceremonies that include prayers, cleansing, initiation, possession, dance, drumming and community involvement. Vodou shares Catholicism's monotheistic belief in one God, which the

Vodouisants refer to as Bondye; however, unlike the God of Catholicism, Vodouisants do not share the Catholic belief that Bondye is approachable.[7] Thus, Vodouisants focus on praying to lesser spirits, known as lwa, who are African. The lwa are represented by males and females such as Papa Legba, Damballa and Erzulie.[8] The lwa and Catholic saints are an area where the fluidity of the African-based religion reveals itself.

The female lwa in Vodou tradition are venerated as equals to the male lwa. In particular, in Vodou, the Virgin Mary is recognized; however, it is in conjunction with Erzulie. According to scholar Leslie Desmangles, "Ezili represents the cosmic womb in which divinity and humanity are conceived . . . She is a symbol of fecundity, the mother of the world who participates with masculine forces in creation and maintenance of the universe" (131).[9] Like the Virgin Mary, Erzulie is a symbol of universal motherhood and humanity; however, her identity goes beyond the confines of virtuous mother. Erzulie has multiple representations. She is represented as Erzulie Freda, a beautiful mulattress who loves flamboyance and extravagance. She is Maitresse Erzulie, characterized by the need for extravagant love, affection and gratification. There is also Erzili Danto, who is married and "renowned[ed] for her capacity for violent anger and militant protectiveness of her children" (Rey 202).

The French colonizers attempted to outlaw the religious practices of the African slaves through the Code Noir. For the slaves, religions such as Vodou allowed them to continue their cultural beliefs and maintain their languages as well as their familial structures. The French needed to foster a system of fear, obedience and submission, and African religious practices

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[7] Bondye is the supreme God; the Creator of the Universe. "Vodouisants" refers to practioners of Vodou. Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 1-6.

[8] Papa Legba. Damballa and Erzulie are lesser Gods, below Bondye. Papa Legba is considered the gatekeeper to the spiritual realm or messenger to the high God. Damballa is the serpent or python God. Blassingame, *Slave Religion*, 19, 23, 24.

[9] Desmangles uses the spelling "Ezili" for Erzulie.

undermined the goals of slavery. Since slaves were not allowed to openly practice their native religions, out of necessity and religious flexibility, they incorporated Catholicism in their religious practice. They were able to use the Catholic Saints as representatives of their lwa. Vodou was their safe space where they could commune with one another and develop strategies to overthrow the colonial powers. Vodou became an important weapon that sparked the Haitian Revolution and the eventual defeat of the repressive agenda promoted by Catholicism. Makandal, a powerful Vodou priest, led slaves to poison their masters. His eventual capture and execution incited "great religious enthusiasm among supporters, many of them believing he had escaped his execution by transforming himself into a fly" (Rey 38). On August 14, 1791, Boukman, another powerful Vodou priest, organized a Vodou ceremony, filled with drumming, sacrifice and a sermon, that helped spark the Haitian Revolution (Rey 38, 39). In 1804, Haiti became the first Black nation in the Americas to overthrow the colonial powers. The story of the Caco women follows over 150 years after the Haitian Revolution; yet, their family dynamic is illustrative of Catholicism's colonial legacy and the political tumult surrounding control and occupation of the country.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Danticat illuminates how life for Haitian women like the Caco is still marred by the patriarchal discourse of Catholicism. Catholicism proved doubly problematic for Black women, since it promoted a patriarchal agenda heavily invested in the idea of the Virgin Mary in order to promote an imperialist agenda of exploitation, expansionism and capitalism. The goal of the Spanish and French colonizers was to expand the wealth, land and power of the empire. In order for men to be conquers, someone had to stay behind and tend to the home and promote the domestic agenda of family. Imperialism fosters a patriarchal paradigm that privileges men as dominant and women as subordinate. Catholicism empowers

the imperialist agenda through the representation of the Virgin Mary as wife and mother. The Virgin Mary submits herself to the will of God with no questions asked. This agenda extends to modern Haiti which attempts to promote nation through a patriarchal family including a wife and mother who is pure, dutiful and self-sacrificing. A woman's identity is thus defined in her relation to husband, as a dutiful wife, and in relation to her family, as self-sacrificing mother. Danticat challenges the patriarchal construction of the Virgin Mary as the legitimate site for Haitian women to define motherhood.

One of the ways Danticat subverts the idea of the Virgin Mary as the standard of motherhood is by critiquing the idea of agency involved in the process of becoming a mother. Martine represents a standard of motherhood exemplified by the Catholic gender role of motherhood. In some ways, Martine's conception of her daughter, Sophie, is similar to the Virgin Mary's conception of Jesus. Like the Virgin Mary, Martine was young and a virgin when she became pregnant. Both women represent symbols of purity and chastity. Mary was not raped; rather, she was simply impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, Martine never saw the face of the man who raped her and despite the violence of the act committed against her, Martine never characterizes the event as rape; she simply tells Sophie, "But it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field and put you in my body . . . I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me" (61). Martine's road bears a certain symmetry to that of the Virgin Mary. For both women, conception is not something they control; in fact, how they become pregnant is of little consequence. What is important for these women is their obligation to bear and raise their children, particularly a girl child. Martine as a representation of the Virgin Mary sacrifices herself for the duty of motherhood.

The Virgin Mary standard further complicates the idea of mothering for the Caco women because it reduces the idea of motherhood to a gender role associated with one's biological mother. When the novel opens, Sophie is living with her aunt Atie in Haiti while her mother, Martine, lives in New York. The Mother's Day Mass is upcoming and Sophie attempts to give her aunt Atie a Mother's Day card to honor and celebrate her maternal role. Atie rejects the card and she later determines to send Sophie to her mother, Martine, in New York because "[a] child belongs with her mother, and a mother with her child" (14). For Sophie, Martine has been nothing but a "picture on the night table" (8). In the picture "[Martine] waved from inside the frame with a wide grin on her face and a large flower in her hair" (8). The picture is a manifestation of the way Sophie perceives Martine:

> She would chase me through a field of wildflowers . . . When she caught me, she would try to squeeze me into the frame so I could be in the picture with her. I would scream and scream until my voice gave out, and then Tant Atie would come and save me from her grasp. (8)

The picture is a metaphor for the mother/daughter relationship in Haitian society. The picture represents the idea that no matter where the mother is or what her relationship has been with her daughter, daughters belong to their mothers. Sophie recognizes that a biological relationship gives Martine the right to disrupt Sophie's world and how she defines it. Sophie attempts to escape having her life contained by this woman in the photograph when she turns to Tant Atie, the woman she has known and loved as a mother.

The opening scenes of the novel are critical to understanding the Haitian paradigm of the mother/daughter relationship. I argue that the mother/daughter relationships between Sophie and Martine, Martine and Ife, and Ife and Atie can be described in terms of gender performance. The feminist theorist Judith Butler describes the process of gender performance in this way:

> In the place of original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural based history of received meanings subject to a test of imitative practices which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction. (Butler 502)

According to Butler, womanhood is not an expression of individuality and agency, but more an expression of national and cultural constructions of womanhood. Women are defined in relation to national and cultural constructions which they learn to embody or rather perform. Gender performance for the Caco women is built upon Catholic standards of motherhood. Motherhood is constructed by a patriarchal norm which promotes virtue, duty, sacrifice and possession rather than love. Atie loves Sophie, and she has been the true mother figure in Sophie's life. Sophie's resistance to live with her birth mother, Martine, represents a rejection of the narrow construction of motherhood. Sophie's dream reflects her inherent resistance to this ideal, the loss of her sense of agency and the usurpation of her identity. Martine's command "I want my daughter" and Atie's acceptance of the same reflects that they are a generation that accepts the national construction of motherhood and their identities within the national construct of the mother/daughter paradigm (16). Sophie's impending forced removal from Atie's life prompts a final "nightmare where [her] mother would finally get to take [her] away" (24). Sophie's nightmare foreshadows the upcoming legacy of trauma, violation and violence that she will suffer at the hands of Martine and the complicity of Martine as an agent of oppression.

Martine begins her performance as mother as soon as Sophie steps off the plane in New York. Martine tells Sophie, "'You are my little girl. You are here.' She pinched my cheeks and patted my head. 'Say something,' she urged. 'Say something. Just speak to me. Let me hear your voice.' She pressed my face against hers and held fast" (41). Martine's actions are overwhelming for Sophie and she is only able to muster a nod to these mothering actions.

Martine even attempts a maternal gesture of picking Sophie up to put her in the car; but Sophie is an eight year-old child: "She tried to lift my body into the front seat but she stumbled under my weight and quickly put me back down" (41). Martine's actions toward Sophie shift from motherly affection to aggression and possession. She tells Sophie, "I will never let you go" (49). In the final scene of Part One of the novel, Martine asks Sophie, "'You're a good girl, aren't you?' By that she meant if I had ever been touched, if I had ever held hands or kissed a boy. 'Yes,' I said. 'I have been good'" (60). Martine is asserting her right to possess and control Sophie. She tells Sophie,

> When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure. (Danticat 60-61)

Martine's identity as a mother is vested in Sophie's chastity. As a mother, Martine must insure Sophie's purity because Sophie's purity reflects on her performance as a "good" mother; equal in stature to the Virgin Mary. She establishes that Sophie does not have ownership of herself or her body because it first belongs to her mother and then to her husband. Martine, Atie and Ife are unable to separate their individual identities from the national identity of womanhood. Ife explains to Sophie, "'If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame me my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me'" (156). Haitian women have a precarious hold on their ability to be accepted in society. In order to maintain a sense of security, religious idealism demands that they objectify other women; thus, these women are forced into a state of constant subjectivity reinforced by women.

Sophie begins the shift away from the colonial mindset for the Caco women. She challenges the rigidity of womanhood as defined by Catholicism and she invokes the Vodou of

her ancestors to craft an alternative narrative of motherhood. When Martine asks, "Am I the mother you imagined?" Sophie muses,

> As a child the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets and lots and lots of French perfume. She never had to work for anything because the rainbow and the stars did her work for her. Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn. (Danticat 59)

In the novel, Sophie refers to Erzulie as "Erzulie, our goddess of love who doubled for us as the Virgin Mother" (Danticat 113). I contend that Erzulie and the Virgin Mary may share universal meanings of motherhood; however, their relationship to one another is more reflective of the contentious relationships involved in Haiti's struggle for independence—Spanish/French, Europe/Africa, Catholic/Vodou and poor/elite.

Historically, the Caco have preserved their identity in association with what Danticat refers to as the "virginity cult." In order for Ife to insure that her daughters—Atie and Martine—can attract suitable husbands, she must insure their virginity by testing them—a practice that she also had to endure. The fortunes of Atie and Martine reflect how the act of testing can neither assure a woman's virtue nor guarantee that she will be chosen for marriage. Atie's suitor chooses to marry someone else, and Martine is raped by a member of the Tonton Macoute.[10] Atie never marries anyone and out of her loneliness, she becomes an alcoholic. Her virginity was insured but when she is not chosen by her suitor, she is martyred to the family in the role of caregiver, first to Sophie and then to Ife. She was a mother to Sophie but because the biological mother is privileged in Haitian society, she is marginalized for her lack of reproduction.

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[10] "Tonton Macoute" means boogeyman. In Haitian folklore, the Tonton Macoute would capture bad children, put them in his bag and take them away from their families. The Tonton Macoute also refers to a militia group under the Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier's regime. Members of the Tonton Macoute would beat, rape, kill and kidnap those who opposed Papa Doc. For further discussion, see Terry Rey, "Junta, Rape, and Religion in Haiti, 1993-1994." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 15. 2 (1999): 73-100

Martine's testing by Ife and subsequent rape are even more problematic because she has been doubly violated. Although Martine suffers sexual violence twice, the notion of virginal purity is so deeply ingrained in the Haitian ideal of motherhood, Martine automatically reverts to her understanding of what it means to perform as a mother when it comes to Sophie. Whether it is the act of testing, being chosen for marriage or the violence of rape, each act is a representation of how women are objectified and ascribed value only in relationship to men.

The act of testing scars Atie and Martine and they recognize it as their family legacy. In *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, the literary critic Myriam J.A. Chancy writes, "It is because she has internalized the ideology of female inferiority that Sophie's mother is capable of abusing her daughter" (121). Sophie's sexual awakening is a threat to Martine's identity as a mother. Martine knows no other way of being a mother. If she does not deliver Sophie to her unknown future husband as a virgin, then this would disrupt her narrative of motherhood and hence her narrative of herself.

Sophie refuses to be confined by the Virgin Mary standard. Vodou principles allow her to gain agency and recraft the future of the Caco women. The first time Martine tests Sophie she "mouths" the words of the Virgin Mother's Prayer, "Hail Mary . . . so full of grace. The Lord is with You . . . You are blessed among women . . . Holy Mary. Mother of God. Pray for us poor sinners" (84). However, while mouthing the prayer Sophie invokes the Vodou concept of "doubling" to distract herself from being tested. While "doubling" is not particular to Vodou, Sophie's consciousness associates it with the "vaudou tradition" that had been invoked by her ancestors (155). For Sophie, like her ancestors, "doubling" is a coping mechanism that will help her endure pain and trauma. During testing, she imagined "pleasant things . . . The lukewarm noon breeze through bougainvillea. Tante Atie's gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils"

(155). Sophie's doubling allows her to mount a passive resistance to Martine. She continues to submit to testing; however, she uses doubling to take her away from Martine and toward Tante Atie, the woman who has been the nurturing mother in her life. She mounts her final act of resistance against her mother and Catholic rigidity and sacrificial bleeding when she reflects upon Erzulie's power to transform.

Sacrificial blood flows throughout the novel. Virginal blood flow is a sign of female purity; however, the text reveals a criticism of a sacrifice which devalues women in favor of men. In the novel, Danticat provides two pivotal communal stories surrounding this type of sacrifice in order to destabilize the romanticism and machismo surrounding virginal purity.

While in Haiti, Sophie reflects upon a communal story about a rich man who chose to marry a virgin over hundreds of pretty girls. On their wedding night she did not bleed: "The man had his honor and reputation to defend. He could not face the town if he did not have a blood-spotted sheet to hang in his courtyard the next morning" (155). Since his wife did not bleed, "he took a knife and cut her between her legs," and she wound up bleeding to death. This scene can be juxtaposed with the scene preceding Sophie's self-inflicted violation to highlight the vulnerability and spectacle surrounding the idea of virginity.

Sophie as narrator also recounts a communal story involving a woman "who walked around with blood constantly spurting out of her unbroken skin" (87). After twelve years of bleeding, she consulted Erzulie and recognized, "If she wanted to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being. She could choose what to be, a plant or animal, but she could no longer be a woman" (87). Upon the woman's election, Erzulie changes her into a butterfly.

These stories represent the paradox of womanhood and menstrual bleeding. Clearly, due to menstrual cycles, women are going to bleed. The issue represented in these stories reflects who controls the bleeding and in essence, the female body. In the first story, man controls the woman's body and the woman is sacrificed for the man. In the second story, although the woman gives up her right to be a woman, she is given the autonomy of choice. Likewise, Sophie makes a similar choice when she decides to violate herself, "My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet . . . It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she tested me" (88). The act, although violent, is an act of resistance and liberation. She usurps Martine's control of her body and gains a complicated sense of control over her body. Although she mounts a campaign of independence, she does is it through violence against the female body, which continues the cultural practices that have oppressed women. Danticat reveals how violence against the female body is so embedded in the psyche of these women that Sophie can only imagine liberation from Martine through self-inflicted violence.

Although Sophie suffers from "testing" inflicted by her mother as well as her self-inflicted penetration, I contend that Danticat utilizes Vodou, the religion associated with revolution, spiritual connection and healing, to mount a new narrative for motherhood. The lwa Erzulie guides Sophie on her path toward healing. Erzulie is an lwa attuned to her own needs. She represents femininity and sexuality but also motherhood, loyalty and most importantly for Sophie, healing. She is the essence of female power and freedom. Sophie's return to Haiti is an engagement with Erzulie's spirit and Vodou principles.

Although Ife believes in Catholicism and she attends Mass, Sophie notes Erzulie's presence in the family home: "On an old dresser was a statute of Erzulie, our goddess of love"

(113). After Sophie confronts Ife about the legacy of testing, Ife tells Sophie, "'You cannot always carry pain. You must liberate yourself'" and Ife "took her statute of Erzulie, and pressed it into my hand" (157). In addition to invoking the spirit of Erzulie, Sophie engages in Vodou principles of reconnection. According to Joseph M. Murphy, "[The] process of self-discovery lies behind Vodou spirituality" (40). Sophie is on a journey of self-discovery which began with her trip to Haiti but continues to evolve as she reconnects with her ancestors and customs in an effort to find herself and obtain spiritual fulfillment.

In Vodou, food is important to the initiation process. It is used as an offering to feed ancestors and lwa, and it is also used for the nourishment of the initiate. Sophie's trauma has caused her to abuse food: "I usually ate random concoctions: frozen dinners, samples from global cookbooks, food that was easy to put together and brought me no pain. No memories of a past that at times was cherished and at others despised" (151). She reengages with her past and her family by preparing a traditional meal of "[r]ice, black beans, and herring sauce" for her grandmother and aunt (149). The process ignites her memories: "I was surprised at how fast it came back. The memory of how everything came together to make a great meal. The fragrance of the spices guided my fingers the way no instructions or measurements could" (151). Her healing memories, associated with cooking and food, are also intertwined with a cultural ideology that has caused her great pain: "The men in this area, they insist that their women are virgins" (151). Vodou promotes an engagement with both painful and healthy memories as a way of reconciling the spirit. Sophie must tap into both sides of her history in order to understand and redefine her future.

Sophie's path toward healing continues when she returns to the United States and Erzulie is reflected in the process. Sophie attends therapy with a Santeria priestess who leads her

through the healing process. She also belongs to a sexual phobia group which incorporates her statute of Erzulie into the healing ceremony. The ceremony is designed to reaffirm their womanhood and sexuality as well as to heal the hurts inflicted upon them by their abusers. Their ceremony is a process like Vodou in which they prepare their heads by wrapping them, dress in white, pray, light candles and include religious iconography—Erzulie—in the spirit fulfillment process. While they are not involved in a spirit-filled possession as in Vodou, the goals are similar: release and healing.

Erzulie symbolizes release for Sophie and Martine Caco. After Martine kills herself, Sophie decides to dress her in red at the funeral: "It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped them and killed them" (227). Sophie allows Martine's final presentation to the world to be one of resistance and liberation. The events leading up to Martine's funeral—Sophie's self-inflicted violation; her return to Haiti; her confrontation with Ife and Martine, as well as her therapy—have been a part of a journey toward spiritual connection and healing. Arguably, Martine's funeral is a final catalyst that allows Sophie to achieve a spirit possession and true liberation. After the funeral, the family gathers to walk Martine's coffin to its final resting place. It becomes a communal event:

> As we went through the market, a crowd of curious observers gathered behind us. We soon collected a small procession. . . The vendors ran and dropped their baskets at friends' houses, washed their feet and put on their clean clothes to follow my mother. School children trailed us in a long line. And in the cane fields, the men went home for their shirts and then joined in (232).

As with a Vodou ceremony, the community is coming together and ritually preparing themselves, through cleansing and dress, to be part of the process. Danticat also uses the rituals of drumming and music in the ceremony. As the crowd gathers at Martine's interment, "[t]he

priest started off with a funeral song and the whole crowd sang . . . People with gourd rattles and talking drums joined in. Others chimed in with cow horns and conch shells" (232). Sophie becomes overwhelmed by the process and the sight of the cane field, which is linked with sexual imagery and violence of her family's past.

The cane field is the final instrument that allows her to connect with her emotions and her spirit. The cane represents a phallic symbol and the cane field is the site of Martine's rape. Sophie runs through the cane field "attacking the cane. [She] took off [her] shoes and began to beat a cane stalk" (233). Sophie is attacking the man that raped her mother as well as an ideology that has led to her violation: "I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding" (233). Sophie's battle is a very physical and engaged process in which she is "pounding" the man who raped her mother and she is "yanking" at the hands that have done damage to her, her mother and the women of her family. When she describes "yanking it from the ground," she is "yanking" away the trauma that has oppressed her and her family. Her grandmother and aunt shout "'Ou libéré? Are you free?'" (233). Her attack against traumas of the past allows her to gain a greater sense of freedom and control.

Danticat refuses to define Haitian women through Catholicism's standard of motherhood. Instead, she highlights the ways in which Catholicism's patriarchal legacy can be used as a tool of sexism and oppression to paint a false picture of Black Haitian female identity. Sophie is able to redefine herself and future generations of Caco by turning to the traditions of her African heritage. Vodou and its spirit of openness allow her the opportunity to be free.

CHAPTER 2:

Liberating Eve and Mary in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

"They shoot the white girl first," is the opening line in *Paradise* (3). The opening scene of the novel signifies the culmination of the wars that have been raging in the background of Ruby, an all-Black town located in Oklahoma. Morrison intended for the novel to be entitled "War" and war is a common theme throughout it. The freedom promised by the Civil War for slaves is complicated by America's history of oppression and racism. During the post-Reconstruction era, the 8-rock, a "blue-black" community of former slave, were able to gain access to prominent political positions (193). Segregationist White people eventually forced them from these positions and away from their lands in search of a new home in Haven. In the aftermath of World War II, the community of 8-rock go in search of a new home when the 8-rock men believe the outside world begins to touch their isolated Paradise. The Vietnam War kills the sons of one of the founding Ruby families; and at the beginning of the novel, the war over civil rights sets the backdrop for the religious turmoil between the "chosen" men of Ruby and the "Eves" of the Convent "with their plain brains . . . who call[ed] into question the value of every woman [they] knew" (18, 8).

The battle waged between the men of Ruby against the women of the convent—as well as the women of their community—symbolically represents the war that exists between Christian religious ideology practiced by the inhabitants of Ruby and the hybrid religion of Candomblé which combines African-based religions with Catholicism. Within the town of Ruby, the "blue black" community appropriates a White standard of Christianity that privileges male authority

and defines women as submissive to male authority. For the men of Ruby, "True Womanhood" is defined by four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 152). Theses attributes are also linked to the Virgin Mary whom the men of Ruby associate with their women. The women of the Convent stand in contrast to the women of Ruby because they live without men; they are associated with sexuality and their spiritual leader is a woman in the tradition of Candomblé. These "nasty women" whom the men describe as "Bitches. More like witches" threaten the moral authority of Ruby and they must be eliminated (275, 276). I argue Morrison is critical of this repeated pattern of oppression based on male privileging. She juxtaposes the male-led space of Ruby against the female space of the Convent to disrupt the masculinized version of womanhood created by patriarchal Christianity. Masculine identity in Ruby is fostered by the control of female bodies and female sexuality. I propose to explore Morrison's use of religious space and ceremony in Ruby to expose how Christianity is used as a tool of oppression against Black women. The religious traditions of Ruby are a source of female containment. I argue the Convent, with its complicated history of sexual debauchery and sexual repression, is transformed into a site of religious flexibility where women can attain spiritual healing and liberation.

The 8-rock community draws its source of identity and moral authority from stories of the Old and New Testament that are associated with trauma and rejection. As the scholar Marni Gauthier points out, there are biblical allusions in the novel to the rejection of Joseph and Mary at the Inn; Moses leading his people to the Promised Land; to Abraham's, to Moses's, Samuel's and Isaiah's responses to the Lord calling on them; and to Jesus leading the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane (404). Ruby's association with these biblical references signifies a marker of "chosenness" and religious privilege; however, the larger implication of these stories

for the community of Ruby is the way they influence gender roles, specifically male roles which derives from the notion of "chosenness" and God's "favor." Male identity for the men of Ruby is conflated with male biblical leaders—Joseph, Moses, Abraham, Samuel, Isaiah and Jesus—who were called on by the Lord to lead their people. Like the Holy Family, the Israelites and the disciples, and the aforementioned male leaders, who experienced the trauma of rejection and persecution, the 8-rock community suffers a similar trauma of rejection: "the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter" (95). Shame is a generational legacy, particularly for the older 8-rock men as it "had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones." (95). The 8-rock men use the trauma associated with rejection and religious righteousness to create a space for reinstituting gender roles and power paradigms.

In *Paradise*, as well as her novels, *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison explores the idea of memory in relation to the historic trauma of slavery and its legacy for future generations. In *Song of Solomon*, memory is problematic for successive generations because it shapes the identity of characters such as Denver and Milkman in ways they are not fully aware of and are unable to engage because previous generations are resistant to retelling and thus reliving the trauma of the past. Elizabeth Yukins describes the legacy of historic trauma in the following way:

> In fictional and nonfictional works alike, the descendants of the victims of these collective traumas describe a twofold struggle: to inhabit and enliven a memory that was not their own and to pay homage to a violent and devastating history. (224)

In *Paradise*, retelling and reliving past trauma becomes the source of the community's strength and identity; however, it also causes them to engage in and repeat oppressive, racist and sexist practices against women inside and outside their community. The older men of the 8-rock

community are overly engaged with the memory of a historic trauma, the "Disallowing," which they interpret as reflecting on their masculinity.

Pivotal to the construction of maleness and femaleness in the novel is "The rejection, which they call the 'Disallowing'" (194). Morrison links the "Disallowing" to the Black exodus from the South during the post-Reconstruction era.[11] During the post-Reconstruction era, conditions for Black people in the South continued to deteriorate as a result of racial oppression and intimidation. Under the threat of violence and economic hardship, Blacks were forced to flee the South for states like Kansas. In *Paradise,* the 8-rock community is driven from Louisiana, Mississippi and Georgia by White people who strip them of their means to make money commensurate with their mental acumen. This community of "Blue-black people, tall and graceful" receives the ultimate humiliation from another Black community whose members differ from them only in skin tone. The 8-rock community seeks shelter and a chance to start over with another Black community in the town of Fairly, Oklahoma. The "Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellow men" are kind to them and give them food, blankets and money but ultimately, they rejected blackness and the poverty of the 8-rock community (195).

The history of the 8-Rock community and the trauma of the "Disallowing" are largely described through a patrilineal perspective by Stewart and Deacon Morgan. Stewart Morgan, a grandson of Zechariah Morgan, one of the founding fathers of the 8-rock community, "remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told, and had no trouble imagining the shame for himself" (95). The story Stewart tells of the journey out of Oklahoma

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[11] For more discussion on the Black exodus out of the South see Nell Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977). For further discussion on the post-Reconstruction period for Black people see Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*, (Amistad: Harper Collins 2008).

describes the emotional turmoil of men left helpless, unable to take care of their women and children. He describes the journey as if he were a witness to it:

> All their belongings strapped to their backs or riding on their heads. Young ones time-sharing shoes. Stopping only to relieve themselves, sleep and eat trash. Trash and boiled meal, trash and meal cake, trash and game, trash and dandelion greens. Dreaming of a roof, fish, rice syrup. Raggedy as sauerkraut, they dreamed of clean clothes with buttons, shirts with both sleeves. (96)

After the "Disallowing" a trend begins in which the community begins to isolate itself:

> After Fairly they didn't know which way to go and didn't want to meet anybody who might tell them or have something else in mind. They kept away from wagon trails, tried to stay closer to pinewoods and streambeds, heading northwest for no particular reason other than it seemed farthest way from Fairly. (96)

The "Disallowing" is a communal trauma; however, the memory is essentially hijacked by the men of the community who use it to privilege the trauma of their shame. When Stewart recounts their story it is from the perspective of what it would have been like for the men. A female voice is not mentioned in his accounting of the story and when women are mentioned, it is in relation to a man's ability to care for them.

After the "Disallowing," Morrison symbolically links Zechariah with Moses and biblical allusions to the story of the Exodus (Gauthier 404). Zechariah goes into the woods to pray when a man, God, appears. The man chooses Zechariah, as God chose Moses, to help deliver his people from the persecution and injustice they have suffered from the world. [12] Only Zechariah, and sometimes small children, sees the man as he guides them on their journey. The man helps

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[12] In Exodus 3:4-10 God appears to Moses: ". . . he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God, of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptian, and to bring them up, out of that land unto a good land unto a land flowing with milk and honey. . . Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppressed them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egygpt. Cain Hope Felder, *The Original African Heritage Bible* (Nashville: James C. Winston Publishing Co., 1993)

lead the 8-rock community to the first town that they establish, Haven.[13] The 8-rock exodus story is a communal story; however, Zechariah's status as "the chosen one" privileges male authority for the 8-rock community. Biblical stories in which male leadership is prevalent are appropriated by the 8-rock and they serve as a source to construct male and female roles. The 8-rock reinstitutes the patriarchal paradigms of White society in a Black world. According to the historian Paula Giddings, after Emancipation, the Black church was historically instrumental in trying to keep Black women "in their place" (64). Giddings notes, "The church attempted to do this in much the same way that Whites had used religion, by putting a new emphasis on the biblical 'sanction for male ascendancy'" (64). Although Giddings specifically references the church, I propose that Morrison extends the idea of oppression beyond the church walls and focuses on how the institution can be used by Black men to extend the idea of male privilege throughout the community.

Ruby contains three Black churches--Mount Calvary, New Zion and Holy Redeemer--that represent three denominations within the Black community; however, I contend the largest religious edifice is the town itself, Ruby. Ruby is constructed as a "holy" city guided by a people "chosen" by God. It is a town where the streets are marked by saints: St. John, St. Luke, St. Matthew, St. Peter and Cross Mark. Zechariah, the Moses of Ruby, has inscribed on a communal Oven a warning: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (86). The "His" is God who has granted the inhabitants of Ruby this holy space in exchange for obedience. Anything that challenges Ruby's order is a threat to the God that granted them favor. A symbolic Mary is significant for constructing Ruby as a "holy" space. In order to emulate their biblical counterparts, the men of Ruby need an "other," a Mary, to protect. They need a Mary whose virtue and submissive nature make her the perfect subject to tend to their homes. Reverend

[13] Haven is an earthly allusion to the Heaven on Earth or Paradise for the 8-rock community.

Misner tells the men: "Women always the key, God bless'm" (61). The men of Ruby are vested in defining their masculinity in an ability to provide for "one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter" (95). The older 8-rock men speak of Ruby in terms of it being a protected space:

> From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A his-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. (8)

The men of Ruby have provided the protected space and Mary's role within that space manifests itself in dutiful work associated with the home. According to Welter, the virtue of piety situates women in the home where women's minds are kept busy by domestic work (153, 154). A focus on the home means a focus on the needs of men and children. Thus, a woman's value lies in her service to her husband first, then to the family.

The men of Ruby define the goodness of their women in association with the home: "Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them were elegant black women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting" (111). Deacon Morgan describes his wife: "She was beautiful as it was possible for a good woman to be: she kept a good home and did good works everywhere" (112). The women of Ruby are characterized by their goodness and virtue in association with a patriarchal Christian agenda appropriated by Black men. Morrison reveals that Black women are actually trapped by Mary and confined and controlled within a space meant to protect, honor and liberate them. She challenges the patriarchal Christian ideology appropriated by the community of Ruby and the notion of Ruby as a "holy" and protected space for women by retelling the "Disallowing" and revealing the space that women occupy through the female point of view.

Critical to storytelling in *Paradise* are the multi-voiced shifts that occur throughout the novel. The chapters in *Paradise* are all named after women: "Ruby," "Mavis," "Grace," "Seneca," "Divine," "Patricia," "Consolota," "Lone" and "Save-Marie." These are not the only women in the novel; in fact, only two of the chapter names, "Patricia" and "Lone," correspond to the names of inhabitants of Ruby; yet, a similar patterns run throughout their stories: all are females who are objectified and controlled by males. Morrison uses these "Eves" to provide a counternarrative to that promoted by the male-centered leadership of Ruby. Morrison shifts the idea of narrative voice and authority from male to female as a way to re-view history and recontextualize the sexism and racism experienced by the females of the community.

Patricia Best is the town historian who provides one example of such a female lens for viewing the town's history, the "Disallowing" and the ceremony surrounding it. She is the outsider within the community. Her father, Roger Best, married a woman from outside the community of Ruby who was light-skinned. Patricia's mother, Delia Best, represents impurity and rejection. Delia was never accepted as a member of the community and her father was never forgiven for afflicting them with a "wife of racial tampering" who also reminded them of their rejection and their perceived failures as men (197). Although Patricia is a member of the community, her mother's status as a light-skinned Black woman, and an outsider mark Patricia and her daughter, Billie Delia, as "othered" within Ruby and a threat to its sanctity of female virtue.

Ruby is driven by interracial and intraracial racism. In order to maintain a position of privilege and power, the 8-rock are vested in racial purity. By using Patricia Best as the town historian, Morrison subverts the privilege of maleness and racial purity. Patricia's quest for truth is a quest to understand how and why she and her mother were "othered" in this community. As

someone who as been excluded, she could have continued the tradition of mimicking the oppressor; yet, her outsider status sends her on a quest for perspective. She does not accept the sanitized version of stories. She makes a conscious effort to discover the meanings behind the stories.

In Patricia's version of the "Disallowing", she interjects women into the story of the "Disallowing" as active agents. When Fairly, the town of light-skinned Black people, rejects the 8-rock, the women of the 8-rock disobey the men who forbid them from taking the money, blankets or food offered by the Fairly community; Celeste Blackhorse sneaks back to steal the food for the women and the children. The women act out of a sense of survival, not out of masculine pride. As the town historian, Patricia has gathered stories of the town's inception from both men and women. She knows that the women demanded that an orphaned Lone DuPres be adopted into their community. Lone's admittance into the 8-rock community signifies that women were not silent about communal matters. The 8-rock women challenged the authority of the 8-rock men by demanding that an outsider be allowed into the community.

She also recognizes that Ruby's sanctity depended on controlling female bodies. She documents a practice within the community known as "takeovers" (196). The takeovers allowed women with no prospects to be married to be claimed by a widower, or a widow to be passed on to another man (196). The "takeovers" often meant blood relations assuming another blood relation's family, but only if familial permission was given for the new union. The significance of the "takeovers" is to preserve the sanctity of the 8-rock. Patricia recognizes that Ruby's inception is falsely premised on "chosenness"; instead, she recognizes it is predicated upon male pride which leads Zechariah to strike a bargain with God: "The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too. 'God bless the pure and holy' indeed. That

was their purity. That was their holiness. That was the deal Zechariah had made during his humming prayer." (217). A Black man makes a decision for his whole community--out of love--but also out of an attempt at self-preservation. In the face of complete emasculation, religion becomes the means by which men of 8-rock redefine identity, power and control.

Patricia's storytelling reveals how Ruby's sanctity and male hegemonic control depend on controlling female sexuality. Women are caught in the cross-current of racism and sexism, which leads to a communal marginalization of them for the good of promoting racial solidarity. Racial solidarity, however, is patterned after White patriarchy. Black women are sacrificed for the sake of a greater good which equates to privileging the male experience. For the community of Ruby, their identity and constructions of femaleness and maleness are tied to their religious understanding of themselves as a "chosen" people. They incorporate the memory and the trauma associated with the "Disallowing" as part of their religious experience. According to Patricia, their first religious ceremony is "the school program, featuring the Nativity and involving the whole town . . . having started before the churches were even built" (Morrison 185). The "Nativity" is a reenactment of the "Disallowing." It is telling that Patricia juxtaposes this program with church programs which she describes as "more formal," featuring sermons, the choir and recitations by the children. The churches in Ruby appear to be perfunctory, serving as places where people role play at spiritual connection and healing. The school program appears to serve as a religious ceremony meant to incite connection.

Religious ceremonies within Black communities historically have been designed to facilitate spiritual engagement with God. They were often particularly important for slave communities because it was the one space where the enslaved could feel a sense of liberation and healing. Through religious ceremonies, slave populations could connect with their history and

their culture, so not only were they sites of liberation and healing, they also served as sites of memory. The religious legacy passed down by slave ancestors fostered a sense of community in which members gathered and utilized music, movement and most importantly, God's word through prayer and sermons to engage the senses and create an opening for God's spirit to enter the body.[14] Joseph M. Murphy discusses the Black religious experience through the evolution of the Black Church. According to Murphy, "The Black Church was a place where the power of the ancestors through the spirit could loose the bounds, drop the imposed limitations of the mask, and ignite the power of the people" (153). I argue the Black church experience is keenly linked to the idea of ceremony within the Black community. In Ruby, the "Nativity" is referred to as a "school program"; however, its purpose is clearly associated with a religious experience and ceremony.

Morrison inverts the experience evoked by religious ceremony for the members of the Ruby community. They use traditional church elements in the incorporation of the "Nativity" program; however, they trade the experience of spiritual release for a confined rage. All the "accepted" members of the Ruby community participate in the production of the Christmas play by building sets, making costumes and decorating. The Christmas play incorporates a speech by a communal male elder and singing of gospel hymns. Children of the 8-rock families reenact the "Disallowing." They are dressed in yellow and white masks with gleaming eyes and snarling lips in order to represent the people of Fairly. Other children are dressed in torn clothes, with boys carrying staffs and girls cuddling dolls, in order to represent the 8-rock. Through the play, they are reengaging with the ancestors and enlivening the memory of the trauma. The children recite lines: "'Get on way from here! Get! There's no room for you! But our wives are

[14] For a general on the Black religious experience see Raboteau, *Slave Community*, 243-274 and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 3-97.

pregnant!'. . . 'Our children going to die of thirst!' . . . The masked ones wag their heads and roar" (210). As with many Black religious ceremonies, the ceremony elicits a call-and-response from the participants and the holy families. The participants say, "'God will crumble you. God will crumble you.'" "The audience hums agreement: 'Yes He will. Yes He will'" (211). They use the "Nativity" program as a means of remembering and embracing the pain of the past. Instead of using religious ceremonies as sites for peace, healing and salvation, they use them as a source to promote racism and sexism. It is a ceremony designed to engender anger, self-righteousness and interracial and intraracial intolerance through ceremonial repetition. At the heart of the "Disallowing" is the emasculation of the male members of the 8-rock community. Their true shame lies in the fact that they could not provide for their pregnant wives. As a result of this incident, they develop an almost hypermasculinized version of manhood. Community members are indoctrinated at an early age through this ceremony about the construction of manhood and womanhood for the 8-rock.

Racial oppression and religious persecution form the basis for their self-proclaimed status of God's "chosen people," which is an inherently discriminatory concept. The idea of constructing identity in this manner is problematic because the 8-rock, who were marginalized and given the status of "other" because of their race and color, use the same signifier to recast the identity of "other" on all those who do not bear the 8-rock signifier for racial purity: blue-blackness. Additionally, in order to construct and control their signifier of racial purity, women must maintain a role within the community that casts them as submissive and obedient to the men of the community. The 8-rock men assume the position of privilege and merely repeat patterns of racial privileging. Through colonization, they have been stripped of their value system and had Western values implanted in their colonized mind (Fanon 36). According to the

scholar Frantz Fanon, colonization has caused Black people to internalize notions of racial inferiority and subservience; thus, they privilege and emulate White values (Fanon 36). The men of 8-rock submerge themselves in the idea of a Christianity which was once used to subjugate them.

In "Afrocentricity and African Spirituality," Mambo Ama Mazama questions the legitimacy of this type of Christianity. While Mazama is referring to the religious ideals used by European colonizers against Africans, it also extends to the context of Ruby. According to Mazama, a religion that justifies the use of racism and oppression against people cannot stand as a source of moral supremacy (Mazama 222, 223). For the community of Ruby, Christianity legitimizes their rationale for privileging their identity. The act of repeating patterns of privilege and oppression de-legitimizes their moral authority. Morrison calls into question the 8-rocks' moral foundation by revealing the community as devoid of spiritual connection. The members of the 8-rock have allowed traumatic memory to guide their performance as good Christian men and good Christian women.

Arnette and K.D.'s wedding ceremony symbolizes the generational cycle of patriarchal construction of gender roles and the loss of self for women. Arnette Fleetwood and K.D. Smith (the nephew of Deacon and Steward Morgan) are progeny of the founding members of Ruby. Their union seemingly makes sense; yet, Morrison complicates their history with an early encounter in which K.D. strikes Arnette but the real problem is that he has gotten her pregnant. The two families, the Fleetwoods and the Morgans, meet over the incident to decide a course of action. Reverend Misner presides over the incident in which the women "were nowhere in sight" (61). Arnette, her mother and her sister-in-law represent "the light click of heels" above the men's heads as they decide what to do about the "injury" to Arnette. The negotiation reflects

Arnette's subjective status. It is ultimately determined by her father and her brother that the wrong can mostly be appeased through money—paying for Arnette's college education. When the Morgans question the Fleetwoods about whether she will go to college nearly three months away from the meeting, the Morgans are really questioning the Fleetwoods about what will happen with the pregnancy. Because Arnette is merely an extension of her father, the injury to her is actually an injury to her father as well as her brother. It is the men of the family, not the victim Arnette, who must be appeased because of the injury. Her father's pride is restored by an apology, a promise that K.D. will not strike her again, and money. Women do not possess a subjective existence; thus, when questioned her father can rightfully respond, "'I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind'" (61).

Moral authority associated with the bargain struck by Zechariah and God allows the Fleetwoods to exert dominion over Arnette. Arnette further submits to the religious order of Ruby when she decides to marry K.D. years later. A battle ensues during their wedding ceremony when Reverend Pulliam, a guest minister and an established member of the Ruby community, issues a direct challenge to Reverend Misner, the presiding officiant, over the idea of love. Reverend Pulliam argues love is not deserved; it is earned just as God's protection has to be earned (141). The God of Reverend Pulliam demands loyalty and obedience which is achieved through a constructed role that performs Christian ideals. Reverend Misner preaches that God loves you as you are, warts and all, because you are part of him. For Reverend Misner, God is a God of grace who wants you to reflect your truth. I argue Morrison's interruption of this religious ceremony with a battle between two men about the idea of love symbolizes the opportunity for spiritual liberation. The battle between Reverend Pulliam and Reverend Misner represents a battle between the older generation and the newer generation, older religious

ideology and newer religious ideology. Morrison creates an alternative idea of God and love as an opportunity for the 8-rock to redefine themselves.

K.D. and Arnette are caught in this religious battle of wills but the text reflects that they have already been indoctrinated into their roles within the community and all that is necessary to solidify their roles as man and woman is the religious ceremony. K.D. sees the wedding as an opportunity to "take his place among the married and propertied men of Ruby" (147). Arnette believes the wedding is an opportunity to make herself whole:

> She believed she loved him absolutely because he was all she knew about her self—which was to say everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Billie Delia, no one had told her there was any other way to think of herself. Not her mother; not her sister-in-law. (148)

K.D. and Arnette's union is void of the love Reverend Misner advocates. As evidenced during the wedding scene, Arnette has submitted to the communal rhetoric about her role within the community--daughter to her father, wife to her husband and mother to her child. She cannot see herself outside the structures of womanhood connected with belonging to a man. Arnette dons the mask of wife during this religious ceremony. Joseph Murphy suggests that religious ceremony within the Black community is a space where Black people can drop their masks, release their burdens and free their spirits (153). In Ruby ceremony creates a space for constructing a mask created by cultural memory. Cultural memory, surrounding a "Disallowing," has created a Black patriarchal society in which religion becomes a source of gender indoctrination. The text is clearly critical of Christian ideals adopted by the Ruby community as a means of supporting this type of gender oppression and submission.

Morrison undermines the notion that Ruby is a protected religious space for its women by providing a space outside of Ruby where they can seek solace. Particularly problematic for the women of Ruby are the issues of sex and sexuality. Their sex defines them in relation to good

women who are wives, mothers and daughters. Because of their sex, they are expected to emulate a domestic ideal of Mary. When the women of Ruby—as well as the women of the Convent—transgress the male ideal of womanhood and when their bodies becomes spectacles for viewing, they are defined in terms of their sexuality, Eves. Issues relating to sex and sexuality force women from Ruby to the liberatory space of the Convent. Billie Delia, for example, has been marked by the town as sexually loose because she lifted her dress as a young girl. She has "the virginity nobody believed in" and after a fight in which her mother hits her, she turns to the Convent for solace (152). Arnette seeks shelter at the Convent when she is pregnant. Soane goes to the Convent to ask Connie help abort her baby. The Convent is a space where women are not separated from their sex and sexuality. Sexuality is problematic for the men of Ruby because they associate it with looseness and impotence. A woman's blatant sexuality is not something that he can control and Ruby's sanctity depends on control. Their women keep running to a place controlled by women, which threatens the town's natural order.

I contend that the narrative of the Convent is juxtaposed with the narrative of Ruby in order to explore an alternative use of memory in the context of religious space and ceremony. Morrison challenges the rigidity adopted by the religions associated with Ruby by providing an African-based alternative religious tradition, Candomblé, which allows women to define themselves. Morrison challenges the marginalization of women by confronting issues of sexuality in a spiritually liberating and healing way.

Candomblé is a polytheistic Afro-Brazilian religion that has retained many African religious traditions (Murphy 44). Like Black religious traditions, it also engages memory and the ancestors; however, Candomblé represents a positive historical reconnection to them. Candomblé connects the past and the present through healing memory that acknowledges the

pain and oppression of slavery, but also celebrates the beauty, strength and power of the ancestors and Gods of Candomblé. It is the connection of mind, body and nature. Women are an important part of Candomblé and they often serve as spiritual leaders or mães-de-santo. Candomblé is a space where family can be recreated without privileging the idea of blood relations. Family in Candomblé is about connection. Space, dance and community are used as the means for engaging the spirit within Candomblé and the Convent becomes the Candomblé house for the women that come to inhabit it.

On the periphery of Ruby sits the "mansion-turned-Convent." Its evolution situates it as a site of religious fluidity. It was initially designed as a hide-out for an embezzler who filled the mansion with sexual imagery: a bathtub "which rests on the backs of four mermaids--their tails split wide for the tub's security, their breasts arched for stability," candelabra nymphs, faucets designed like male genitalia, nude statues and artwork full of sexual innuendo. It was transformed from a veritable pleasure den to "Christ the King School for Native Girls," a Catholic boarding school run by nuns whose mission was to use Catholicism to save the lives and souls of Native American girls. The nuns attempt to indoctrinate the Native girls into Catholicism, another attempt at controlling females; however, the Native girls constantly run away until the Convent is officially closed. Just as their attempt to subvert the Native girls fails, their attempt to convert the Convent also fails. The nuns attempt to subvert female sexuality by ridding the mansion of its sexual history, a goal they never achieve. Consolata, the spiritual leader of the Convent who is also one of the Native girls the nuns rescued, recalls that her first task at the Convent was "to smash offending marble figures and tend bonfires for books, crossing herself when naked lovers blew out" (225). However, in spite of the efforts of the nuns and their boarders, the evidence of the Convent's past could not be painted over, dismantled or hidden:

> Then [Gigi, one of the Convent's inhabitants] discovered the traces of the sisters' failed industry. The female-torso candleholders in the candelabra hanging from the hall ceiling. The curls of hair winding through vines that once touched faces now chipped away. The nursing cherubim emerging from layers of paint in the foyer. The nipple-tipped doorknobs. Layabouts half naked in old-timey clothes. A Venus or two among several pieces of nude statuary beneath the cellar stairs. She even found the brass male genitalia that had been ripped from tubs and sinks . . . . (72)

The fact that the nuns are never able to rid the Convent of its sexual imagery suggests the past cannot be hidden, forgotten or erased. The text suggests a resistance to continued attempts to control female bodies and female sexuality as well as a rejection of violence to the female body.

The Convent is not inhibited by its decadent appearance or its history; rather, its history suggests an adaptability and openness to its guests. The last guests to arrive at the Convent are Mavis, Grace, Seneca and Divine, "broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying" (222). They are women who have been sexually objectified by the men in their lives and now need of a healing space. They are a culmination of the Convent's history. I argue that the Convent's history allows Morrison to create a religious space where flesh and spirit are recognized as part of a woman's identity.

The Convent brings together a group of women--Mavis, Grace, Seneca and Divine--whose spirits have been damaged by the realities of life. Mavis is a housewife who is running from a physically and sexually abusive husband, as well as the memory of the death of her baby twin daughters, Merle and Perle. Merle and Perle suffocate when she leaves them in the car with the windows up in order to buy some meat for her husband's dinner. Grace, or Gigi as she is called, is in search of love. She has been abandoned by her parents and she blatantly uses her sexuality to attract male attention, which leads to her abuse by men. Seneca suffers sexual and mental abuse when she is placed in the foster care system. The trauma of her abuse leads her to self-mutilate, slicing "roads" on her arms and thighs. Pallas is a sixteen-year old troubled youth

who runs away from her family after she is seduced by her high-school janitor, who eventually sleeps with her mother. These women have suffered physical abuse, sexual abuse and mental abuse, as well as loss of love and loss of self-worth. Unlike the people of Ruby, they are running from the memories of their past, unwilling and unable to engage them in a healing way. The Convent becomes the site of their healing from these traumas.

When each of these women reaches the Convent they are physically and spiritually starved. Morrison utilizes food imagery to underscore the depth of the pain these women are experiencing. On the morning Mavis arrives at the Convent, she is "ravenous." Connie gives her potatoes with butter which she rapidly eats; however, she notices that "the satisfaction of the hot, salty potatoes made her patient" (40). Gigi is not hungry before she reaches the Convent; however, when she enters the Convent and sees the food on the table, she is overcome by hunger. "Suddenly, like a legitimate mourner, she was ravenous. Gigi was gobbling, piling more food onto her plate even while she scooped from it" (70). Upon Pallas's arrival at the Convent, she announces "Um. Starved". (179). She has an emotional and physical reaction as her traumatic memories are intertwined with the pleasure she seems to derive from tasting the food: "melted cheese covering the crepe-tortillas thing was tangy; the pieces of chicken had real flavor, like meat; the pale, almost white butter dripping from early corn was nothing like what she was accustomed to; it had a creamy, sweetish taste" (179). "The pleasure of chewing food," gives her a sense of relief (179). The Convent provides a place of refuge in which the women can begin to address their physical hunger; however, Morrison suggests that feeding the physical body will not satiate their spiritual emptiness. These women have been abused by men and defined by their sexuality. In order to reconstruct an identity outside of patriarchal constructions of womanhood, Morrison constructs a space, the Convent, where both the physical and the

spiritual can be addressed. Important to the construction of a spiritually healing place is the deconstruction of gender hierarchies and the notion of what constitutes family and community.

Unlike Ruby, the Convent is an open space and women are constantly crossing its doorsteps in need of solace and shelter. The women who inhabit the convent are not blood relatives. They are from different backgrounds and they represent different races. What is common for these women are their traumatic memories as a result of abusive relationships with men and the sense of unworthiness, loneliness and loss that each feels. Out of this apparent dysfunction, Morrison creates a family who is led by a woman, Connie. Connie recognizes that she and the women have wallowed in their traumatic memories to the point of over-indulgence and disengagement with their lives. Morrison taps into the idea of reengagement with the spirit through initiation rituals guided by Candomblé and a female leader.

Connie stands in contrast to the male leaders of Ruby because of her gender and her "otherness" both in color and association with the African diaspora. She is a native of Brazil with "green eyes" and "tea colored hair;" however, her "smoky sundown skin" marks her as a woman of color (223). Her christened name, Consolota, means "counselor," one who comforts, and Blessed Virgin of the Consoled. With her name, Morrison foreshadows her role as mother figure, counselor and faith healer in the tradition of the "iyalorixas" or "mãe de santo" of Candomblé.[15] Consolota serves the women of the Convent in much the same way that a mother, "mae" or "iya," of a Candomblé house serves her initiates (Murphy 59). She begins the process by announcing that the women have choices for their lives but also by letting them know that should they choose to follow her, it will take work which she will guide:

> 'I call myself Consolota Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for. . . If you have a place,'

[15] In the Candomblé tradition the "iyalorixas" or "mãe de santo" is the "mother of the spirit." When one is reborn in Candomblé their "iyalorixas" or "mãe de santo" presides over their rebirth. Murphy, *Working the Spirit,* 52.

> she continued, 'that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me. Someone could want to meet you.' (262).

The Candomblé initiation ceremony involves extensive preparation to ready the body and mind for connection with the spirit world. Initiates must gather an extensive list of initiation objects, prepare food, separate or isolate themselves in ritual spaces and prepare their heads to receive the "orixas," patron spirit (Murphy 60). In order to prepare one's head, the initiate must cut-off all hair. The initiate must also dress in white and participate in dance ceremonies (Murphy 60). The healing ceremony that takes place for the women of the Convent resembles many of the rituals performed during the Candomblé initiation ceremony.

In Candomble, families are formed through initiation, the symbolic equivalent of being reborn (Murphy 52). The initiation for the women begins with their isolation at the Convent and the acceptance of Connie's guidance. Morrison promotes this type of isolation as instructive because it gives them the opportunity to disengage from an outside world where, "The male voices saying saying forever saying push their own down their throats. Saying, saying until there is no breath to scream or contradict" (264). Their guided isolation gives the women an opportunity to seek a private place to consciously reengage with their past.

Their ceremony involves the inspection and recontextualization of memory and trauma in order to heal it. Connie instructs the women to "scrub the cellar floor until its stones were as clean as rocks on a shore" (263). She then informs them to "undress and lie down" (263). The women are all uncomfortable with lying on the cold "uncompromising" floor in this condition. They have all been sexually exposed before; however, it has never been because of their own choosing and for the benefit of self-exploration. As they lie prone, Connie draws their silhouettes around them, constructing the portal for defining their space in this world and becoming comfortable with body and mind, sex and sexuality and Mary and Eve. She counsels

them against privileging Mary over Eve: "Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263). The women of Covent represent broken women who have been defined in terms of their sexuality. Their sexuality is reflective of Eve whom has been cast as the source of original sin. They are uncomfortable because Eve has been objectified and they have been made to feel ashamed of her. As they lie on the floor naked, they are being commanded to retake ownership of that portion of themselves that represents Eve. However, Connie counsels them that there is no Mary without Eve. Without Eve, Mary is defined by the roles of wife and mother.

The women of the Convent spend months in the process of reconnection, during which time they share their dreams, which become so real, it as if the other women present enter into them. Mavis recounts the details surrounding the death of her twins:

> They enter the heat in the Cadillac, feel the smack of cold air in the Higgledy Piggledy . . .They inhale the perfume of sleeping infants and feel parent-cozy although they notice one's head is turned awkwardly. They adjust the sleeping baby head then refuse, outright refuse, what they know and drive away. (264)

The Convent women continue to share memories by elaborating drawings in their body outlines: "First with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears and head hair" but they graduate to painting things reflective of trauma and loss. Seneca draws a "robin's blue egg" to cover one of her scars and Gigi draws a "heart locket" given to her by her father (265). The women move beyond painting items to gathering items: "Yellow barrettes, red peonies, a green cross on a field of white" (265). They are engaged in rituals central to Candomblé traditions: creating community, accessing memory and gathering initiation materials. Community, memory and gathering initiation items are part of the engaged process necessary to prepare the head for spirit possession. These practices are part of a purging process in which the women engage traumatic memories to heal them. The Convent women enter into one of the last stages of the preparation

process when they shave their heads. The shaving of their heads frees them from thoughts and memories that have overburdened them, while it opens a space for spiritual reconnection and liberation. Symbolically, when they shave their heads, this creates the opening for the spirit to enter.

Morrison crafts a final cleansing and release for the women during a rain shower. When it rains, the women venture outside to experience the water: "It was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces . . .In the places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain" (283). The rain scene is a metaphor for rebirth which is the center of Candomblé principles. As the women dance "in hot sweet rain," they are celebrating their liberation from memories and people that have oppressed them. Candomblé initiation affords them the opportunity to take ownership of their minds and bodies.

It is ironic that, as Connie empowers the women to take control of their lives through this spiritually healing practice, the battle for power reaches a pivotal point between the men of Ruby and the women of the Covent. The men of Ruby bring war to the doorsteps of the Convent. Although the women are killed by the men of Ruby or they disappear as a result of the attack, arguably, they are successful in their battle to resist men's loss of patriarchal Christian ideology to control them. The women of the Convent successfully achieve spiritual connection through a hybrid African religious tradition which allows them to align the past with the present in harmony. It also allows them to strengthen their identity through self-love. Morrison critiques notions of appropriate religious space by creating a space—the Convent—with a past linked to sexual debauchery as well as sexual oppression, where Eve and Mary can come together in balance.

I contend that although the women of the Convent disappear or they die at the end of the novel, it is still a site of empowerment for women. Paradise weaves together a novel filled with multiple dichotomous relationships: man/woman, black/white, dark-skinned/light-skinned, Ruby/Convent, and young/old. These relationships are set in opposition to one another because people privilege their positions. In Ruby, the Black man's experience is privileged over that of the Black woman because he has been the recipient of oppression. He then uses Christianity, a tool used to subjugate him, to oppress his communal partner. I propose Morrison is suggesting that the cycle of privilege is challenged through disruption and possibilities.[16] The Convent women are gone at the end of the novel, but that does not erase the fact that they are now part of the communal story of Ruby. How the people of Ruby choose to interpret the story is left to the individual, just as the reader is left to ponder why the women of the Convent are gone. I suggest Morrison is challenging the reader to consider possibilities and resist the urge to minimize the power of the Convent story because the women have disappeared.

[16] For further discussion see Channette Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*, 39.3 (2005) 415-430.

CONCLUSION

For Black people in the United States and Haiti, religion played an important role in their survival during slavery and their quest for freedom. The Christian principles of obedience and submission were used by the colonizers to enslave Africans and eradicate their history, their culture, their languages and their humanity. However, slaves were able to tap into Christian principles of salvation and deliverance, as well as their internal beliefs, in order to navigate the oppressive system of slavery. I am not suggesting that Christianity was universally accepted by slaves.[17] Many slaves rejected the hypocrisy of an institution that taught about God's mercy and goodness; yet, this same God subjected them to a system of brutality. What I am suggesting is that slaves developed a complicated relationship with Christianity in which they learned to adopt, accept and reject principles that allowed them to survive and resist oppression. Further, they were able to use religious rituals and services as a means to create community and preserve culture. What Morrison and Danticat expose about the institution of Christianity, an institution that has historically been critical to the development of the Black community, is how the Black community has used it to sustain the legacy of oppression against a communal member, the Black woman.

In an effort to rescue Black women from the margins of race and sex, Morrison and Danticat engage their characters in the process of re-membering and retelling their stories. These authors are critical of Christianity's role in the process of reengagement and spiritual liberation for Black women since Black women have had to stand in the shadow of the Virgin Mary. According to the feminist scholar Carol Boyce Davies, a Black woman's, "[Identity] is

[17] Raboteau, *Slave Religions*, 289-318.

the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-negotiate the terms of Black women's experiences that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities" (3). The fact that Black women define and redefine themselves within the context of the convergence of multiple planes establishes their "agency" and the ability to create a sense of wholeness: an integrated identity. In *Paradise* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Christianity's Virgin Mary represents a site of religious confinement for Black women. She is too narrow a construct to define Black women whose lives are a negotiation of multiple planes.

Although the Black community in Haiti and the United States infused their Christian religions with cultural practices, they are still practicing a religion linked to a colonial agenda. Christianity bears the imprint of White racism and sexism. How can a religion steeped in this type of tradition be liberating for Black women? The fact that Danticat and Morrison turn to Vodou and Candomblé, as religious sites of healing and liberation for Black women, suggests they are rejecting Christianity. I propose neither author rejects Christianity

Sophie's cataclysmic release at Martine's funeral is reflective of a Vodou spirit possession; however, her journey toward her spirit possession crosses multiple religious planes. Sophie is from a Catholic family. Catholicism has historically represented a site of oppression for the Caco women who seek to embody the purity of the Virgin Mary for marriage purposes. Although Catholicism has been problematic for Sophie's family, she never rejects Catholicism. During her testing, she says the "Virgin Mother's Prayer." Sophie engages a therapist, who is a Santeria priestess, to help her in quest for spiritual healing. By involving a therapist in Sophie's journey, arguably, Danticat is also advocating for the use of institutional medicine in the process of contextualizing her identity and gaining a sense of agency. Danticat's use of multiple religions, as well as the medical field, suggests that for Black women, spiritual liberation does

not mean privileging one religion over another. The process can involve multiple religious access points which are reflective of the Black woman's hybrid existence.

Although Morrison utilizes Candomblé principles in the healing process for the women at the Convent, I propose she is not advocating Candomblé as an alternative to Christianity nor is she privileging Christianity. She establishes multiple seemingly dichotomous planes in the novel: Ruby/Convent, Christianity/Candomblé and men/women. The relationships are seemingly dichotomous because they are viewed in opposition to one another as opposed to in conjunction with one another. Black women in the novel are particularly vulnerable to this type of dichotomy. They are either Mary or Eve, good or bad, nasty or pure. For Morrison, liberation for Black women can only be achieved when society stops dividing them into two people.

Black women in Haiti and the United States are geographically distanced by water; however, Morrison and Danticat reveal how Christianity's use of the Virgin Mary and the legacy of slavery link them in a continued bond of oppression. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Black women are both perpetrators and victims of oppression. For the Black women in *Paradise*, Black men seek to oppress them. By making a metaphoric return to Africa through the engagement with Vodou and Candomblé, Sophie and the women of the Convent seek to confront and engage identities and histories that have been suppressed. Danticat and Morrison suggest that Black women will gain spiritual healing and liberation by re-membering their past and projecting their stories in the communal dialogue.

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