

THE RELIGIOUS OVERTONES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY-BUILDING IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*¹

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This article approaches the study of Toni Morrison's latest novel, *Paradise* (1998), as an illustration of the process of (African) American identity-formation. The two communities that Morrison contraposes in the novel may be seen as representative of two different trends in America's construction of national identity: assimilation and homogenization, on the one hand, or interactive difference, on the other. Whereas Ruby emerges as a proud and paradisiacal African American town which gradually falls prey to its Manichean view of the world, the Convent is *eventually* presented as an alternative open community. Thus, Ruby functions as a mirror to American history. By adopting the American creeds and religious typology present in the Puritan origins of the United States, the community of Ruby reproduces the exclusionist, discriminatory, isolationist, hegemonic and violent character of American society as well as the tensions within it. The Convent, on the other hand, evolves towards the creation of a spiritual paradise based on the fluid hybridization of opposites. The issues of race and gender appear to be central to the construction of both communities, although it is religion, and particularly the adoption of the American jeremiad and the myth of the City upon a Hill, what provides the structural and thematic pattern for the novel.

The following article attempts a close reading of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) based on the assumption that the novel offers a critique of the traditional American paradigm of nationhood and identity formation with roots in Puritanism. The somewhat startling move the novel makes within the current debates about multiculturalism, diversity and difference, ethnic self-representation and national affirmation, lies in the fact that Morrison points at the eminently *white* Puritan roots of the African American self (to paraphrase the title of Bercovitch's cornerstone work), instead of focusing on the African heritage, reclaimed by African American authors and critics—including Morrison herself in her prior works—as the basis for

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a different and separate identity. Nevertheless, Morrison criticizes the wholesale adoption of Puritan rhetoric because it results in the inversion—not in the deconstruction— of the binary Manichean terms which account for racism and discrimination.

This article is divided into three sections. The introductory section assesses the role of religion, and more precisely of the Puritan paradigm and the American jeremiad, in establishing an American identity. It discusses as well the African American adoption of the Puritan foundational principles of the nation as a way of asserting black nationalism while critiquing White America's betrayal of its own ideals. The second and third sections focus on Ruby and the Convent respectively. In the second section I argue that the situation of Ruby in 1976, the present time of the narrative, is the result of an understanding of history and identity in the Manichean terms characteristic of American Puritanism. The history of Ruby is consequently revealed through three successive cycles of peril and redemption, typical of the jeremiad rhetoric. Morrison's critique of the resultant community is underscored by the interwoven story of the Convent community of women, analyzed in the third section. With Consolata as the unifying character, the story of the Convent functions as a successful struggle against Manicheism. The women's intertwined stories offer an alternative to the monolithic construction of ethnic identity characteristic of Ruby. Their evolution testifies to the possibility of achieving the dream of an earthly paradise only by the acknowledgment of difference and the integration of opposites. A brief conclusion follows.

1. ETHNOGENESIS: THE CITY UPON A HILL AND THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

A country as diverse as the United States has managed to build a national identity by means of the adoption of a set of myths, symbols, and rituals that unify "its diverse polity into one moral-spiritual community" (Howard-Pitney 1990: 6). Much scholarship has been dedicated to illustrate the importance that religion, and more specifically, the interpretation of biblical texts carried out by the New England Puritans, has had in the creation of what is now perceived as American identity, American literature and culture.² One of those shared, unifying myths is that of America as an earthly paradise. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, not only legitimated the Puritan venture in 1630 with his "Model of Christian Charity", but his sermon also originated the foundational fiction of America as "a City upon a Hill". His address to the arriving colonists informed them of their destiny as God's Chosen People, but it also included an ominous corollary warning them that if they deviated from God's path His wrath would be turned upon them, and their land—their paradise—, would be taken from them. This warning would also inaugurate the American jeremiad³ tradition, which became

² See, for instance, Elliott 1979; Bercovitch 1972 and 1993, and Berryman 1979.

³ As Howard-Pitney explains, "the term *Jeremiad*, meaning a lamentation or doleful complaint, derives from the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, who warned of Israel's fall and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Babylonia as punishment for the people's failure to keep the Mosaic covenant.

the domain of the all-male Puritan clergy, especially after 1650, when they found that New England's society fell short of its goal of perfection. Hence they developed a rhetoric of indignant reproach and urgent exhortation to reform in order to avoid divine punishment and the breaking of God's Covenant with His people. Despite its reprimanding tone, however, the Puritan jeremiad followed the pattern established by the Biblical prophet Jeremiah by never questioning America's destiny and promise. Hopefulness and optimism about the eventual fulfillment of their mission set the final note. Their repentance and reform would bring about the millennium, a future golden age, and the second coming of Christ. So, the essence of the jeremiad, argues Sacvan Bercovitch, lies in "its unshakable optimism" (1978: 6).

This rhetoric of Puritan origin soon became an integral part of the national "civil religion" of the country, the public rituals and the myths that express for most Americans the nexus of the political order to the divine reality.⁴ But not less important for the development of the civil religion has been the creation of the nation's myths of origins which allow for both change and continuity as one generation of Americans substitutes another. The American emphasis on renewal, a central paradigm in America's civil religion, had its origins in the American Revolution. The New England colonists who had transformed the Pilgrim Fathers into heroes came to realize that they could act upon the present not simply to maintain the tradition of spreading religious and political liberties in the wilderness, as their forefathers had done, but to "advance the national mission beyond all past approximations of liberty" (Howard-Pitney 1990: 10). The present acquired then a sacred dimension that was extended to themselves. They saw themselves as creators of history, so they were transformed from imitative sons into procreative fathers. The result was the independence of the Colonies from England and the creation of a new nation. Since then, the following generations' burden of measuring up to their forefathers' heroic deed has made the present seem profane in contrast with the sacred past. The present is thereby perceived as that period of declension that is the subject of the jeremiad. From time to time, however, the present becomes the field for divine intervention in history and Americans thrust themselves into a new national mission that will save their grandfathers' feat at the same time as raise themselves to the status of fathers of new traditions. Continuity and progress are thus secured. The jeremiad has historically functioned as the rhetorical instrument to propel change while rooting it in tradition.

Although Jeremiah denounced Israel's wickedness and foresaw tribulation in the near-term, he also looked forward to the nation's repentance and restoration in a future golden age" (6). "In current scholarship", Emory Elliott observes, "the term 'jeremiad' has expanded to include not only sermons but also other texts that rehearse the familiar tropes of the formula" (1994: 257).

⁴ According to Robert Bellah, who stimulated much of the discussion about civil religion with his 1967 seminal essay, civil religion in America is "an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality". The widespread use of the term, however, prompted Russell Richey and Donald Jones in 1974 to offer a useful five-category schema for the organization of civil religion literature. These categories were folk religion, transcendent religion of the nation, religious nationalism, democratic faith, and Protestant civic piety.

Because the very essence of migration lies in the hope to improve one's condition, it has not been difficult for the different ethnic groups that have peopled the United States to adopt the existing civil religion, its myths, symbols, and rhetoric based primarily on the Puritan tradition of New England. Instead of the "City upon a Hill" envisioned by the Puritans, the Chinese immigrants saw America as "the Gold Mountain", and the peoples of Hispanic origin as their "El Dorado". The different terms hold the same sense of promise. Their adoption allowed them the space to either assimilate their enterprise to that of the rest of Americans, or, in Werner Sollors' words, to "phrase their divergent interests and aspirations, including their fire-and-brimstone assaults on Puritanism, in the available rhetorical forms. Puritanism had created cultural mechanisms to transmit even discontinuity" (56). The result is a sense of kinship, of Americanness, among the heterogeneous American population.

In the case of African Americans, whose ancestors did not migrate but were taken forcibly to the New Continent and kept captive there under a system of slavery that contradicted the very foundational principles of the nation, the adoption of the oppressor's (civil) religion is fundamental in their quest for freedom: "If", —as Wilson Moses put it— "the bondage of the Colonies to England was similar to the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, was not the bondage of blacks in America an even more perfect analogy?" (31). The jeremiad, being an accepted cultural instrument to express poignant social criticism, soon turned into a valuable tool of protest and into an expression of black nationalism in the hands of black (and also white) abolitionists. Through their jeremiads, Blacks in bondage appear as God's Chosen People with the messianic role of achieving their own —and, also others'— redemption. Because if Americans were the Chosen People, and therefore entrusted with the mission to safeguard the divine and natural laws of human rights, their enslavement of blacks was endangering their covenant and foreshadowing God's punishment. Hence, African Americans have historically used the jeremiad rhetoric with the double aim of asserting blacks as a Chosen People within another Chosen Nation which, as such, had the covenantal obligation to be fair with them.⁵ Consequently, their struggle aims not only at their own liberation but, through its achievement, also at the redemption of America and, ultimately, of the entire human race. The use of the jeremiad rhetoric on the part of black leaders signals, as Howard-Pitney pinpoints, "their virtually complete acceptance of and incorporation into the national cultural norm of millennial faith in America's promise" (13), at the same time as it serves the purpose of asserting black nationalism. This apparent paradox of claiming one's Americanness while asserting one's difference was paradigmatically explained by the intellectual leader W. E. B. Du Bois when he defined African Americans' identity as determined by a sensation of "double-consciousness". What African Americans wish, he stated, is "to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (365). The result has been a paradoxical communal identity which is both American and separate.

⁵ Some of the most noteworthy African Americans mastering the jeremiad rhetoric are Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse (Louis) Jackson.

African American separateness has been periodically underlined by emphasizing at different moments in history the absolute importance of African roots in the formation of an African American ethnic identity as counterpoised to that of the white majority. In recent times, the debates over ethnicity, multiculturalism, *métissage*, pluralism and canon formation still use the African-origins argument to explain the particular identity of African Americans and their artistic production. Indeed, the attention to, and careful and exhaustive scholarship about, the latent African roots in African American identity was much needed, and has helped to trace and reinforce with new works and with the "resurrection" of old ones a rich African American literary tradition formerly misinterpreted or simply ignored.⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the balance that the term "African American" itself tries to establish, acknowledging both the African *and* the American cultural traditions in the formation of the African American ethnic identity.

In this sense, Toni Morrison's latest novel *Paradise* can be analyzed as a representation of African Americans' "Americanness" at the very basis of the process of their ethnic formation as African Americans. In contrast with her previous novels, where Morrison portrays the African American community as firmly anchored in the African and African American cultural tradition, and where she emphasizes its separateness from main stream society and critiques White America's failure to extend its foundational promises to the black population,⁷ *Paradise* shows an African American community whose internal coherence is due to the adoption of the eminently white, Puritan ideals.⁸ This development in her fiction, which sets the novel apart from the African argument as the basis for an African American nationalism, shows that the adoption of the Puritan paradigm does not necessarily mean integration into the larger American society. On the contrary, the Puritan and typological adoption is oppositional, and leads to the construction of a *superior* and separate African American community. Ingrained in the American tradition of typological rhetoric, the story works inevitably like a mirror to American history, as the protagonists both reproduce and invert the cultural codes that have been identified as "American". Thus, *Paradise* attests to the centrality of religious symbolism, especially that taken from Puritan theology and American civil religion,

⁶ The vitality of African American literature and scholarship is particularly visible since the 1970s when, after the impulse provided by the Civil Rights movement, not only male writers, but especially African American women writers emerge with an unparalleled strength.

⁷ As Deborah Madsen suggests. Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) works "within the paradigm of slavery rather than that of the city upon a hill" (Dalsgard 2001:235) in order to challenge the Puritan rhetoric. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in contrast, uses the jeremiad form to exhort America, drawing attention to its failure to live up to its dream and mythology where the African American community is concerned. *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Jazz* (1992) also show the African American community as central to Morrison's epistemology, and in these instances, the community is nurtured by myths, music and folklore of African, rather than European, origin. Characters such as Jadine in *Tar Baby*, or Hagar in *Song of Solomon* are doomed because they do not partake of the community's African (American) wisdom and support.

⁸ A parallelism exists in Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* (1985), also representing an African American community that apparently succeeds in creating the perfect black City upon a Hill, but which discloses the American Dream as a real trap.

in the formation of ethnic identities. As with other ethnic groups, the adoption of the Puritan typological rhetoric on the part of the African American inhabitants of Ruby is an index to their Americanization. But, at the same time, it serves to define a "new ethnic peoplehood in contradistinction to a general American identity" (Sollors: 49). Therefore, the community of Ruby is presented as a prototype of the American society, even when it tries to conceive of itself as different from that society. After all, as Werner Sollors points out, "[i]n America, casting oneself as an outsider may in fact be considered a dominant cultural trait" (31). The relationship between the people in Ruby and the women in the Convent exemplify the traditional social tensions within America, between homogenization and the acknowledgement of difference and hybridity, as well as America's continual attempt at regeneration and freedom. These tensions are magnificently illustrated by the contradiction between the present title of Morrison's novel —*Paradise*— and her initial tentative title —*War*.

2. RUBY

The all-black town of Ruby is built upon the same millennial expectations that characterized Puritan thought and which have become an integral part of America's civil religion. So, the successive generations of protagonists struggle their way through history in a quest for a "home" materialized in the creation of a secure, perfect town which they assimilate to the Biblical type of "the City upon the Hill", the "New Jerusalem" or, simply, Paradise. Their appropriation of certain Biblical elements leads to the typological rhetoric used by the Puritans when they related the secular history of American colonists to biblical types in order to create an American ethnic identity. The novel itself becomes an exercise in exegesis, not only on the part of the characters that people it, but also for the reader, who must repeatedly interpret, try to draw conclusions from the different perspectives of a single event, or remain baffled by the multiple alternative meanings. As a result of this exercise in interpreting the present and the past in the light of the events recounted in the Old Testament, what the different generations produce is a narrative of recurrent cycles of peril and redemption characteristic of Puritan sermons, and more specifically, of the jeremiad rhetoric, according to which, "whenever worldly affairs were going especially well or ill", "fears of approaching calamity" would arise (Elliott 1979: 116). Thus, the pattern that emerges as the basis for their "ethnogenesis", or ethnic formation, is founded upon the themes, imagery and structure of the Puritan jeremiad.

Furthermore, the very structure of the novel can be read as a result of the jeremiad tradition. Characterized by a complex mixture of voices and memories, past and present, dreams, myths, and reality, religion, superstition and magic, objectivity and subjectivity, the whole narrative is triggered by a murder, a moment of simultaneous triumph and damnation that opens the novel and causes an unprecedented confusion among the Ruby inhabitants, which is perceived as "the total collapse of a town" (304) by Anna and Misner. According to Perry Miller in *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, the jeremiad "could make sense

out of existence as long as adversity was to be overcome, but in the moment of victory it was confused" (33). That confusion is represented in the baffling shifting of voices and times that characterizes the novel and determines its form. It is also consequent with Morrison's understanding of narrative structure as representative of what Justine Tally terms "psychic realism": "I knew that I couldn't be exclusively chronological. I don't usually write that way anyway, because I think that even though we live chronologically, our consciousness works quite differently. We constantly think about yesterday, or 20 years ago, or the future, as we go about the day. Our minds are always moving back and forth, planning, remembering, regretting. So that seemed to me the way this book should be" (Morrison and Marcus 2001: 4).

Simply put—which is precisely what Toni Morrison does *not* do in this novel—, Ruby's *he-story* is encompassed by the following three cycles of peril and redemption

2.1 First cycle

A first generation of ex-slaves see their high hopes for a better future after Emancipation betrayed. They reluctantly have come to realize that the reason for their reduction to penury is due to the discrimination against their blackness on the part of whites *and* blacks alike. At this point their thought becomes polarized, as humanity is divided in two large blocks: the pure (themselves) and the impure. Mindful of "the Scattering", which was God's curse upon the tribes of the biblical prophet Zechariah, a group of "Eight-rocks", "blue-black" (193) men decide to initiate a migration in search of a place they could call home. Led by Coffee, or Kofi, who had already reinvented himself by acquiring the prophetic name of Zechariah Morgan, they confront the rejection of whites, Indians *and* blacks who had just settled in the new towns that were being built. What most vexed them was the rejection grounded on their blackness on the part of other blacks. Full of pride and anger, they would remember their rejection as "the Disallowing". From this point onwards, they do not only invert the meaning of the racial sign, turning it into a positive one, but they invent themselves as God's Chosen People in a clear identification of their troubles with those of the Israelites in the Bible.

Reproducing the jeremiad rhetoric, they root their quest in the millennial promise their slave ancestors believed in, and at the same time they honor them; they sharply criticize the current state of affairs, which turns them into the victims of racist discrimination and separates them from the fulfillment of the promise; and they finally define themselves on their own terms while renewing their faith in their own capability to bring about redemption and the fulfillment of the promise. Under Zechariah Morgan's prophetic vision, this group of people react against the danger of being obliterated by the rest of society by creating a solidly knitted community characterized by the unity of its members in a common cause: the quest for a place where they feel safe, and where they can do away with the imposed deprecating view of themselves. After the Disallowing, the ex-slaves headed farther West, to Oklahoma, where they finally built their dream town, Haven. Their pilgrimage

echoes that of the Pilgrim Fathers of the nation as rendered by William Bradford in "Of Plymouth Plantation". The pattern that emerges from their life experience is that of a narrative of peril and redemption. The danger of scattering was overcome by their exodus and eventual self-isolation.

Their dream of redemption could be made possible because the apparently unlimited virgin land of the country gave them the opportunity to start anew "outside of time" as new Adams, a central tradition in American thought and letters. However, the community that created Haven cannot keep their town "outside of time" as if it were a timeless paradise situated in an unlimited space (See Noble 1968: x). Whenever dates are introduced in the narrative, history is allowed to intrude; it destroys the illusion of isolation and emphasizes the dependence of people on a larger historical scale, foreshadowing the impossibility of fulfilling the myth. The most outstanding case is the death of Haven as a town in 1949, when the first dream of an idyllic place came to an end due to the interference of national and international politics in the town's economic development. So, the unlimited space that had allowed the Old Fathers to realize their dream of creating their own town turned into a menace:

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose. (16)

The conditions for the identification of a new cycle of peril and redemption are set.

2.2 Second cycle

In *Paradise* history is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the intrusion of History—with a capital "H", meaning national and international events—is something the town must guard itself from. In this sense, History is envisioned as a powerful disturbing element and as a main threat to the community. On the other hand, the particular history of the black people who founded Ruby is made into a glorious past to venerate.

As the third generation to be brought up on their grandfathers' mythologizing grows up, Haven starts decaying and its inhabitants begin to migrate to more prosperous places. After World War II, African Americans who had been ready to give their lives for their country see their heroic stature scorned by the violence against them. By means of a typological reading of the reality they live, the descendants of the Old Fathers, as they call the first generation of migrating ex-slaves, rapidly identify the peril, the disintegration of their town and of their values, and the aggression against them. They call for a new unity, and again nine of the original families join, by consent, in a new migration deeper into Oklahoma.

The ideals of the Old Fathers are not only preserved but reinforced, and even carried to the extreme: "lessons had been learned in the last three generations about how to protect a town" (16). The quest for the "City upon a Hill" will be defended

by any means necessary. Haven, in the collective memory of Ruby's inhabitants, stands as their ancestors' temporary success in creating a "dreamtown", but also, as a warning that the dream can come to an end if it is not protected against outside influences. Typologically, Haven signifies Jerusalem, the holy city, heaven on earth; but Jerusalem is also the literal city that failed, like Haven. So, Haven signifies both promise and threat, encapsulating the figurative and the literal meanings of Jerusalem.

Re-echoing the Puritan venture, redemption arrives for the third generation with the creation of a new town, Ruby, in which Paradise seems to materialize through the enforcement of utter isolation and exclusion, through the preservation and mythologizing of the past, and through the construction and institutionalization of new myths that situate the second-migration leaders as the elite and confer sacred power onto them. Like the community envisioned by John Winthrop in 1630, the community of Ruby is hierarchically constructed even though defending "the preservation and good of the whole" (1994: 108).

Ruby's geographical isolation, ninety miles away from anywhere but the Convent, which is just twenty miles away, is enhanced by the fact that its inhabitants are cut off from national developments by, as Reverend Cary puts it sarcastically, depriving themselves of "Television ... Disco ... Policemen ... Picture shows, filthy music ... Wickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liquor for lunch and dope for dinner" (274). Not even newspapers are popular in Ruby, as Misner notes (208). The result is an almost complete isolation from the cultural, political and economic events that affect the United States. For twenty years nobody dared to disturb their isolation. Beginning in the 1960's, however, the young people, supported by Reverend Misner, start claiming their connection to the outer world, thereby putting the dream at risk.

Not surprisingly, exclusion is primarily based on racial purity. Even though the Old Fathers had joined by consent to overcome the deprecating external definition of themselves, favoring an achieved rather than ascribed identity; what linked them together from the beginning was their common descent as pure black people. Their community and identity-building would be founded on race from then on, thus reproducing the paradox of supporting self-determination while creating systems of descent-based discrimination that have historically characterized the United States (See Sollors 1986: 37). For the third generation leaders, descent is a prerequisite to consent. Those families who have kept their purity intact —"Unadulterated and unadulteried" (217)— form the oligarchy. Those who have tampered with it are rejected and lose their status as Eight-rock. Once race is turned into a sign of having been elected, it can be used as a weapon to enforce exclusion.⁹ The same as the Puritans believed that they had not only the right, but also the obligation to expel anyone who strayed from the holy precepts they had set, because God would hold the whole community responsible for individual transgressions, similarly the Ruby

⁹ Two examples of the racial exclusion they enforce are the rejection of Delia Best, which costs her her life and the subsequent marginalization of her family, and the rejection of Melus' girlfriend.

leaders persecuted nonconformity by excluding from their society all those who might threaten their social order based on isolation and racial purity.¹⁰

Reverend Richard Misner, despite his status as a Church leader, represents such a threat. He is regarded not only as an outsider but as an enemy, since "in this town those two words mean the same thing" (212), as Pat informs him. His outsider status is further emphasized by his inability to interpret the signs offered by the surrounding natural world in typological terms, as the male leaders of Ruby do. This is particularly evident for Pat, who believes that his unsuccessful attempt to raise money for the legal defense of four teenagers arrested in another town is due to an incorrect approach to the situation on his part: "He should have built a prodigal sons foundation rather than a political one" (206).

What the rulers of Ruby refuse to see is that their emphasis on saving Ruby through isolation and exclusion is actually damning to it in the most literal sense. They are enforcing endogamy, which is resulting in potential incestuous relations, like that of K. D. and Arnette, and deformed children who die early deaths, like Save Marie. Somehow they manage to disregard incest so that the Morgan line can survive "pure", and blame Lone, the midwife—who is not really one of them, anyway—for the Fleetwood children's deformities. The town's foundational cornerstones must remain untouched.

Besides race, gender is the other category upon which exclusion is based. Actually, for the Eight-rock male leaders of Ruby both are closely connected since their pure race depends on reproduction, and in reproduction sex, sexuality and gender are involved. When it comes to Pat as a revelation that "The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too. 'God bless the pure and holy' indeed" (217), she also comes to the conclusion that "In that case, ... everything that worries them must come from women" (217). Indeed, women are invariably viewed by the male elite as either outsider temptresses or potential loose insiders. Eventually, the outsiders will also be turned into witches. Whereas the outsider temptress, like Eve in the Old Testament, can destroy the man's virtue, or even worse, get pregnant and consequently produce a miscegenated race, in both cases instigating the male's expulsion from Paradise, the loose insider woman can destroy the racial purity characteristic of Ruby with her promiscuity. Hence, the control over "race" becomes intrinsically linked to the control over women as the ultimate producers of generations. Like Consolata, the rest of the women who over the years had come to live in the Convent escaped male control. They are viewed as the permanent threat that can put an end to their life as American Adams in their mythic paradise, the disturbing element that, by making a single man fail, endangers the whole community, their millennial mission, and their covenant with God. Thus,

¹⁰ As Vaughan explains, as soon as 1637 "laws insuring an uncontaminated society were deemed necessary" (1972: 199). The Puritan theory of exclusion is summarized by John Winthrop's words: "If we here be a corporation established by free consent, if the place of our co-habitation be our owne, then no man hath right to come into us ... without our consent" (quoted in Vaughan 1972: 199).

the women in the Convent become the scapegoats for all the troubles afflicting Ruby over the years.

Additionally, women possess a sacred aura related to procreation. Their power over life as mothers or as midwives causes awe and even fear among the Ruby men, as Fairy DuPres, their first midwife, notes. Because men feel excluded from this power over life, they are suspicious and ready to link it to the Devil, rather than to God. Whereas men seem to be in control of the natural world, women are associated with the supernatural or, in the terminology used by the Puritans that led the Salem witch hunt, to the "preternatural". The novel claims this supernatural role of women by linking all the magic elements it contains to female characters and by endowing some of them with special powers over life. Interestingly enough, the women who manifest these powers are not the mothers, but the midwives, over whose work hangs a shadow of doubt and fear. As problems accumulate fear turns into the certainty that they have evil powers.

In the third generation the preservation and mythologizing of the past is carried out by the twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan, who inherit the role of their grandfather, Zechariah Morgan. Together they turn into Ruby's griot, transforming and fixing its history, becoming its institutional memory: "Between them they remembered the details of everything that ever happened —things they witnessed and things they have not" (13). The role of the Morgan brothers in the construction and institutionalization of the myth of origins is decisive. They create a flattering image of the community and of themselves that promotes social pride and complacency through symbols such as the Oven, which "both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (7), and the remaining words of the inscription placed on the lip of its mouth by the prophetic figure of Zechariah.

Also, the mythical, legendary communal roots of Ruby are institutionalized through its ritualization in a play featuring the Nativity. Held every year two weeks before Christmas, it retells the foundational myth of the Exodus of what they call the seven "holy" families, which is somehow mixed up with Joseph's and Mary's trip to Bethlehem and the subsequent birth of Baby Jesus. The performance invests not only the "Old Fathers" but Ruby itself with sacred meaning. The play reveals Steward and Deacon as the warrantors of Winthrop's hierarchical community. As God's steward and deacon, His mediators on earth, they are invested with divine power to erase families from the play as a way of public admonishment and disapproval towards those who have fallen in disfavor.

The flattering self-image promoted by the symbols and rituals that sustain Ruby as a community is nevertheless problematized by the ambiguous, prophetic, ominous discourses that run parallel to the symbols and ritual performances. There is a veiled warning against misreading or mis-speaking (298) the signs and the words that guide them. Zechariah Morgan's words on the Oven are the most visible example, but his very name and life attest to the danger of his people being punished "for not showing mercy or compassion" (192). The result of the punishment is "a scattering among all nations, and pleasant land made desolate" (192). Similarly,

benevolent Nathan Du Pres in the role of the Biblical prophet Nathan articulates his particular jeremiad in his introductory speech to the Nativity play. After referring to the goodness of the land they inhabit, he refers to an unprecedented sadness that invades him at the present moment. He can only explain it through an allegorical dream which is taken as one more "of old Nathan's incoherent dreams" (205), stressing Ruby's persistent failure to read the signs correctly. In his dream, Ruby, symbolized by the virginal white flowers of cotton that speak of a people's slavery past and of their purification through suffering, becomes red "Like blood drops" (205), which is, significantly, the color of the precious stone whose name the town bears. Ruby's bloody violation of the Convent is thus foreshadowed. Nathan then links the meaning of his dream to that of the myth of origins represented in the play and admonishes his fellow citizens against misinterpreting their mission: "It shows the strength of our crop if we understand it. But it can break us if we don't. And bloody us too". He finishes with the promising and hopeful words "May God bless the pure and holy and may nothing keep us apart from each other nor from the One who does the blessing. Amen" (205). Due to Ruby's inability to read these discourses, their future is endangered by the Morgan twins' decision to attack the women in the Convent. They fulfill the bloody prophecy that also their last name seems to foretell, bringing havoc and confusion upon a community which appears unable to decide whether they have been damned or saved after the assault on the Convent.¹¹

2.3 Third cycle

So far we have examined how a first cycle of peril and redemption initiated the ethnic community-building that would be geographically attached to Haven, and how this first cycle was followed by a second one that culminated in the construction of Ruby. By 1976 a third circle seems to be fully at work. With the emergence of the fifth generation in Ruby, the third generation senses a new threat to their authority and to the values they've tried to preserve. They will soon activate the jeremiad rhetoric lamenting the degeneracy of the times.

The younger generation, which has come of age in the heyday of the Civil Rights movements and their aftermath, fights the isolation imposed upon itself. Worse, this new generation questions the values, behavior and myth-making of their parents and grandparents. They even assault their ethnic rooting at its very foundation by wishing to remove themselves from the past of slavery and connect their identity to Africa, a continent they have not set foot on but which allows them the opportunity of retracing their origins to a time of primeval freedom, far from colonialism, and the fetters of slavery: a past that may allow them "to get rid of the slave mentality" (210), in Reverend Misner's words. Like their grandfathers before them, they see the opportunity to venerate the Old Fathers while expanding their messianic role. Inspired by the historical events of the times, they wish to share in

¹¹ "To morganize" is defined as "To assassinate secretly, in order to prevent or punish disclosures, as the Freemasons were said to have done in the case of William Morgan in 1826" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*).

the creation of a new myth, be imbued with the sacred mission of liberating not just their own tiny community but all African Americans, and with them, the whole country. They may wish to become the new fathers, not to walk out of the typological system adopted by the Ruby community and by larger America, but to work within it towards their own sacralization and the redemption of the entire people. This is why, instead of rejecting or destroying the Oven as a symbol of their forefathers' myth of origins and set of values, they adopt it as their meeting place and keep on changing the words written on it: from the ominous "Beware of the Furrow of his Brow" to "Be the Furrow of his Brow", and later on to "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" (298). By transforming the phrase from a warning (declension in the jeremiad tradition) to a self-assertive statement of divine identification *and* disapproval of the present, the young people of Ruby express their desire to make themselves creative agents in a new Exodus towards freedom and redemption and become in turn mythic parental figures. They too can be said to adopt the jeremiad rhetoric by finding fault with the present and moving themselves into (limited) action.

Naturally, they come up against the resistance of the present third generation of patriarchs. Aware of the internal discrepancies and possible disintegration of the community, the third-generation leaders reactivate the narrative of peril and redemption (which overlaps with that of the younger generation) redirecting the blame of whatever is going wrong within towards outside influences (namely, the women in the Convent) and decide to get rid of them: "when the men spoke of the ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways—they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need, till each piece fit an already polished groove" (275). What becomes evident next is that for them defense is synonymous with aggression. And so, the opening line of the novel "They shoot the white girl first" (3) is the result of defending an idea of Paradise based on exclusion, and exclusion is enforced by violence. Violence, and more specifically murder, not only contradicts the very idea of Paradise stated by the title, but implies the loss of innocence and the subsequent expulsion from Paradise. Consequent with the belief inculcated by the Puritan primer verses "In Adam's fall / We sinned all" the whole community may consider itself damned. The result of the attack upon the Convent women naturally unleashes an unparalleled crisis among the inhabitants of Ruby, which triggers new narratives of peril and redemption. The confusion is such that four months later Ruby was still "chewing the problem" (298), unable to decide, like its reverends, "on the meaning of the ending" (279).

Broadly speaking, the town's division following the assault is represented by the separation that takes place between the twins Steward and Deacon, both of whom were the principal agents of the attack. To Steward Morgan, the ultimate person responsible for the assault and for Consolata's murder, the town had been redeemed and new prosperous times were imminent. He was uncontrite. His brother Deacon, on the other hand, undergoes a sort of epiphany when he realizes that they made a serious mistake: "His long remorse was at having become what the Old

Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout, even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different" (302). Reverend Misner, too, thought that these men "had ended up betraying it all": "Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure" (306). The death of one of Ruby's children, the first to occur in this town "full of immortals" since its foundation, is taken by some as a sign of God's disapproval and punishment, as their inevitable expulsion from Paradise. However, even Misner envisions a future for the town: "mortality may be new to them but birth was not. The future panted at the gate" (306). He becomes aware of a kind of reverence for the experience of "these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people" (306) with a history of survival and renewal, as if the simple fact that they are able to carry on marks them as the Chosen. The strange disappearance of the women's bodies, leaving no trace of the crime that had been committed, led people to think that "God had given Ruby a second chance" (297), and that they could resume their quest for Paradise.

The ultimate hopefulness and optimism at the core of the jeremiad is thus made visible by the end of the novel, and the beginning of a new cycle may be foreseen. The circularity of the novel, made structurally obvious by ending it *almost* where it began—with the assault on the Convent women—is thus further underlined by the adoption of the jeremiad rhetoric and its unlimited cycles of peril and redemption. Ruby's redemption however is never definitive or total. They are trapped in the circularity of the cycles, neither damned nor saved. They will not be saved and wholly redeemed until they understand that the reversion of the hegemonic Manichean pattern of identity formation does not but reproduce the very essentializing they were trying to shun; until, to borrow from Toni Morrison's Nobel lecture, they "take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives". "Had they", Morrison advances, "the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life" (2001: 3-4).

Formally encoding the Puritan history of identity formation through the adoption of the typological rhetoric of Biblical symbolism and the structure of the jeremiad, *Paradise* warns about the dangers of essentializing "black identity" and the African American community. The novel turns then into a contemporary jeremiad. Simultaneously, *Paradise* imagines the possibility of individual and communal identity-building free of all constraints in the society represented by the Convent women.

3. THE CONVENT

Side by side with her critique of the Puritan pattern of insularity and exclusion, of monolithic views about history and about identity, Toni Morrison weaves the tale of Ruby with that of an alternative community, also laden with religious undertones: the Convent. The former house of an embezzler, later used as a Catholic school for Indian girls at the heart of a Protestant State, by 1976 the Convent has become a space where the blurring of boundaries has been made possible. The women who

presently inhabit it arrived there by chance and regard it as a transitional stage in their lives. They are not separatist, "except periodically, for health", as Alice Walker would put it (1993: xi). Even though they are the subjects of colonization, dispossession, and misrepresentation, in the course of the novel they are able to reject the fragmented identities imposed upon them and to replenish the ensuing void with new identities that result from the blending of constructed opposites.

Unlike the homogeneous history of Ruby, built on the Puritan myth of origins represented by the "City upon a Hill", the Convent's history is the result of various religious discursive layers. Catholicism, Protestantism and paganism seem to intersect here. Geographically as isolated as Ruby, the Convent emerges nevertheless as a meeting ground of opposites. First built as a pagan sanctuary of the body, the house had been gaudily decorated with all kinds of sexual symbols that were either partially destroyed or fully covered by the Catholic nuns who established their school here, and added their own religious symbols. If the people who built it had worshiped the body, the nuns worshiped the spirit. In due time, its later inhabitants, Consolata and the women she shelters, would painfully awake to the realization that Paradise consists of the integration and acceptance of both body and spirit, rather than in privileging one over the other.

Even though the Convent seems to function as Ruby's opposite, foregrounding from the New Fathers' perspective Ruby's rightfulness and chosenness—in a way reminiscent of Toni Morrison's explanation of the creation of whiteness as a response to blackness in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992)—, it actually deconstructs the polar logic that characterizes Ruby's Puritan thought by becoming a crossroads, the place where Ruby and the Convent intersect and where the outside world and the Convent converge.

Rejecting both Manicheism and immovability, the Convent exists as a liminal land, a border area where the acknowledgment of difference and cultural hybridity are made possible. Transformed into a Purgatory, the space where Catholics believe a soul tainted by sin can purify itself before joining God in Heaven, the Convent disrupts the dualistic theology of the Ruby men by introducing an axis that brings the poles of Hell and Heaven together. Furthermore, the Convent shuns immovability by not remaining a Purgatory but by turning itself into a Paradise for the women living there, demonstrating that improvement relies on the viability of change and fluidity that the men in Ruby eschew.

The rejection of Manichean polarities is also perceived in the blurring of racial boundaries that takes place in the Convent. Race is actually deconstructed by its changing, chameleonic quality when applied to the Convent women. From the first line of the novel the reader's quest to identify the "white girl" is rendered almost impossible, as any certainty with respect to their color is undermined. "I did that on purpose", Morrison explains in an interview:

I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people

from reading literature in that way ... Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing. (Morrison and Gray 2001: 4)

The undermining of racial categories is further emphasized by the way the women living in the Convent "miraculously speak no racial discourse of each other *at all*" (Wilt 2001: 282). Consolata's actual blindness could be said to emanate from her until the rest of the women turn color-blind too.

The key figure to understand the Convent is Consolata, the inheritor of the Catholic doctrine taught by the nuns of a Portuguese order, as well as the recipient of Lone DuPres' religious stance, which she identifies as "magic" and relates to satanic practices. Because she does not live in Ruby, Consolata escapes the patriarchal authority rooted in the Puritan exegesis that controls Ruby. However, she is subject to the uprooting and colonization carried out by the Catholic nuns who "kidnapped" her in Brazil and took her with them to North America. Made part of and complicit in their religious colonizing mission, Consolata does not interrogate their quest "to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither ... to help them despise everything that once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption" (227). Like the Ruby men, the Catholic nuns believe they are in possession of the only Truth. Their mentality is as exclusivist as that of the male leaders of Ruby. The victim of such a discourse, Connie is considered rescued by the nuns. Accordingly, she gratefully responded by adopting the colonizers' doctrine with fervor. She worshiped her rescuer, Sister Mary Magna, as if she was the embodiment of the Virgin Mary while embracing Christ as a mystical lover. The dissociation between body and spirit that she enforced upon herself during "those thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a pullet's egg when she met the living man" (225). Appropriating the language and symbolism of the Eucharist, with all its ecstatic and erotic connections,¹² she ate Deacon's body and drank his blood as if in an act of communion that she barely articulated as a wish "to go home" (240) and explained with the claim that "he and I are the same" (241). She is clearly reading her relationship with Deacon and her love for him through the prism of Catholic faith and rituals. Deacon, on his part, reacts as the inheritor of a long tradition of Protestant animadversion against Catholicism and the Pope, viewed in America as the Scarlet Whore of Rome. Consequently, as Deacon listens to Consolata's plans to make the Convent cellar, with its walls of wine to "slake their thirst" (237), into their love nest, he is drawn to turn her into a "Scarlet Whore" who is intent on making him "DRUNK WITH THE WINE OF HER FORNICATIONS" (Elliott 1979: 123), as Henry Cummings put it in his 1766 sermon. Once this association is established, it is not difficult for him to interpret Connie's lip-biting not only as the act of a whore but as an inversion of the vampire narrative convention in which she is released from a death-in-life trance that had turned her

¹² Some works which explore the relationship between religion and sex are those by Medieval and Renaissance scholars Bynum, Steinberg, and Rambuss.

sexuality into a "stone cold womb" (229).¹³ As Connie gains strength with their relationship, Deacon is outraged and frightened by her seemingly uncontrollable sexual power. These will continue to be pervasive images of the Convent women for some of the men and women of Ruby. Connie's behavior is in direct confrontation not only with the patriarchal logic that rules Ruby, but also with the Judeo-Christian construction of Mary, the impossible model of womanhood, as a passive, asexual icon whose virginal motherhood is a negation of women's sexuality.

After her surrender to carnal love, Consolata is the object of what could be accounted for as a "conversion" by Puritan standards, which typically takes place at the moment of a person's nadir, or deepest despair. Coming out of the chapel contrite and unable to preach, Connie's vision is then seared by a sunshot, which marks the beginning of a progressive blindness. Her blindness is connected to her ability to see into people's minds and to bring the dead back to life through a procedure that she calls "seeing in". This "accident" is undoubtedly described as an act of divine intervention by the narrator's statement "Consolata had been spoken to" (241). Thus, after having been abandoned by Deacon, crushed by a feeling of utter shame and sorrow, the supernatural impinges on the natural to create a new person. Consolata's transformation, however, does not take place at this point due to Mary Magna's intervention, which leads to a new privileging of the spirit over the body on Consolata's part. Consolata's conversion then becomes an inner struggle between the principles inculcated by Mary Magna and Lone DuPres' resolution to make Consolata consider her supernatural powers as part of God's scheme. Struggling with her preconceived religious notions, Consolata dismisses her gift as a satanic "practice", although she would eventually come to terms with it through a lexical tour de force. Even though Connie is led by her entrenched religious habits to consider Lone's words as anathema, Lone's religion is deeply embedded in the Puritan tradition, as she demonstrates with her belief that "God had given Ruby a second chance" (297). What Connie perceives as magic "practice" could be explained too from a Christian point of view as an "emanation of God's Grace" to her, in the Puritan terminology used by Jonathan Edwards, for example, which provides her with new eyes that enable her to see the world anew. Hence, "The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her 'in sight' became" (247). Her gift may then be explained as the re-emanation of God's Grace to the world and to Him through her. The result is a blurring of the boundary between the sanctioned Christian creed and the frightening heathen practices associated with magic and the devil. Morrison blends both ways of conceptualizing religion until they are indistinguishable from each other.

When Mary Magna dies, however, all her "in sight" is of no avail to Consolata. The pit of despair in which she falls for the second time in her life turns her into a drunken woman who despises herself to the extent of wishing to die. She feels not only orphaned but degraded, worthless, powerless and dispossessed of herself; in

¹³ For an account of the vampire symbolism in *Paradise* see Peach (2000: 161-63). Vampire narratives reflect the Victorian anxiety about sexual disease and prostitution.

short, "she felt like a curl of paper —nothing written on it— lying in the corner of an empty closet" (248). It is at this point when a second "emanation of God's Grace" can be observed under the guise of Connie's realization of the girls' troubles, but especially of the danger of losing an innocent new life. So, in a way reminiscent of Emerson's individualism but with a twist towards the social, Consolata sets out to redeem herself when she confronts pregnant Pallas. Her divine gift to give life does not allow her to remain passive when faced with Pallas' frightened rejection of her unborn child, especially after associating her terror with that of Arnette's or Soane's, both of whom had caused themselves to miscarry their unborn children. Thereby, she forces herself to sober up and starts a recovery of her flesh *and* her spirit as represented by a sort of apparition in the form of a flirtatious, seductive man whose tea-colored hair "cascading over his shoulders and down his back" (252) resembles her own, and whose round green eyes are definitely Consolata's when she was nine and innocent. The dialogue she establishes with him leads to a communal ritual that engages in the search for her own spirit and those of the girls. She is able to carry this search out by applying Lone's teachings and religious discourse founded on unity —"Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance his world" (244)— to an interpretation of the Bible that unifies the Manichean binary logic adopted by a male reading, and which allows space for women's divinity and holiness in the acceptance of their whole humanity. Using the same religious iconography as the men of Ruby when they refer to the Convent women as "Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary" (18), Consolata distances herself from their interpretation of the figures of Eve and Mary. Far from the belief that women can only be either the impersonation of the corrupting and corrupted Eve, or the embodiment of the virginal Mary, Consolata becomes aware that both Eve and Mary, body and spirit, must be acknowledged if she is to be whole again. This is what she sets out to show Mavis, Grace, Seneca, and Pallas when she finally formulates her new creed in her advice to the girls: "Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263).

Consolata reconciles in her own person the pagan religion she perceives in her "gift" and the Christian doctrine —both Catholic and Puritan— depleted of its patriarchal conditioning. From this point onwards, Consolata turns from the half damned, half blessed old blind woman she is into both a rejuvenated wise woman, —"a griot soothing restless children" (Morrison 1993: 1)— and a Christ figure. As such she will set out to quench the girls' hunger and thirst for salvation. In an act reminiscent of Christ's Last Supper with his Disciples, she summons the girls to eat the meal she has prepared as she tells them "I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). She conducts them through a ritual of self-dispossession which is represented both graphically and linguistically.

The stories of each of them unravel as a single loud dreaming shared by all, a communion and simultaneously a confession of sorts through which they purge and eventually purify themselves. Little by little, they cast off their former identities as they transfer their old selves to the empty silhouettes on the floor by drawing in the

templates their particular natural features, and those not so natural —the scars that speak of Seneca's pain and anxiety for love, a heart locket that speaks of Gigi's, a baby and a vampire woman's face that speaks of Pallas' love and hatred. Hence the women start repossessing themselves, reconstructing or recovering their unique souls, until their distress is replaced with happiness and a new acceptance of their whole selves.

Consolata's transformation into a Christ figure is further underlined by her death. Although the men shoot the other women too, the book only offers rational certainty of Connie's death after having been shot in the forehead. Her death seems to redeem everyone. To Steward and his followers, Ruby is rid of the Convent women's degeneracy and corrupting influence. To Deacon and his followers, redemption comes close to damnation when they realize how far they have drifted from the words of the Old Fathers and from the Word of the Lord. For the rest of Ruby, the realization that the crime goes unpunished due to the miraculous disappearance of the bodies is a Divine warning to be alert and not to deviate from the righteous path. As to the Convent women, whatever their future might be, they had already been redeemed by Consolata.

After discarding the idea of a Paradise seen as a separatist African American nation by deconstructing the myth of the Puritan exegesis embraced by Ruby, Morrison does not allow the Convent to become an eternal Paradise, either. As she herself explains in her interview with Marcus, "The title isn't an accurate description of the town or the Convent or any other place in the text" (2001:1). If the Convent appears at some point as an alternative to Ruby, it is because the women who live in it attain a personal inner peace and happiness rather than a well structured community with a defined identity. Actually, as Dalsgard very aptly notes, the Women in the Convent are characterized by indefinability (2001: 243). When their state of plenitude is truncated by the attack which, apparently, puts an end to their lives, they cross the border between death and life and appear as specters, in continuous evolution, impossible to grip or fix.

The enigmatic ending of the novel, depicting a rejuvenated Consolata who has rejoined Piedade in a flawed paradise, serves to re-emphasize "the possibility of reimagining Paradise" (Morrison and Marcus 2001: 5) by displacing it from up there in Heaven to "down here" on Earth. This paradise is not a static condition already achieved, but something that must be endlessly worked on, to paraphrase the last sentence of the novel, through the continuous free interplay of race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and whatever other categories are used in the construction of our hybrid individual and social identities.

What is revealed after this analysis of the novel is, firstly, that *Paradise* draws from a cultural and literary tradition identifiable not only as *American*, due to the novel's emphasis on the Puritan rhetoric and mythology, but also —and most interestingly— as *African American*, since the novel is firmly anchored in the African American tradition that appropriates the jeremiad rhetoric in order to claim African Americans' share in the American Dream. Furthermore, the novel expands

such a tradition by offering a harsh critique of an exalted African American nationalism grounded on religious essentialism and exceptionalism. Contrary to the opinion held by Katrine Dalsgard that Morrison "doesn't reinscribe the national American dream theoretically" (2001: 246), this article proves that Morrison does not eschew the aspiration, characteristic of the Puritan rhetoric and passed onto American civil religion, of creating an ideal community identifiable with an earthly paradise. In fact, she seems to approve, along with Misner, of a people who hold such a dream and who have the courage to try to fulfill it over and over again. Similarly, Paradise seems to materialize for the women in the Convent. Therefore, Morrison is not at odds with the idea of attempting to create an earthly paradise, but with the exclusionist terms in which such an idea is rooted. The novel shows how the idea of chosenness is intrinsically linked to the Manichean thinking which results in racism, marginalization, violence, and the destruction of paradise. To invert the poles of such Manichean thinking, as the men of Ruby do with their counter-discursive national narrative, does not change the result. The possibility of attaining paradise lies, instead, in the deconstruction of Manicheism by means of the integration of opposites. Thus, the fusion of different creeds undertaken by the women in the Convent represents a dialogic interchange among the Puritan, the Catholic and the pagan beliefs, rather than a counter discourse to any of these. As the women evolve toward the acceptance and integration of their own opposites, they are rewarded by achieving that state of plenitude, happiness and serenity which is associated with paradise. Morrison finally shuns religious as well as ethnic and nationalistic essentialisms by means of the open ending of the novel which implies that *paradise* —as well as ethnic construction— is neither closed nor fixed, but a condition that has to be continuously worked on.

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