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Toni Morrison and the Journey Homeward.
An Analysis of Beloved and Paradise.

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Introduction

Word-work is sublime […], because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference - the way in which we are like no other life.

We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.


In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison evokes a widespread traditional story of an old, wise and blind black woman living on the edge of town. This woman’s “reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression” (Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture). Her wisdom is questioned only by the young, who angrily look for answers for their yearns, who desperately try to make meaning of the world that surrounds them: “You, old woman, blessed with blindness, can speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation” (Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture). When the youngsters have finished ventilating their frustrations, their questions and their lamentations, the old woman answers: “Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together” (Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture).

In this parable, the old woman could be thought of as being Toni Morrison, and the angry youth would then be her readership. Morrison attempts to guide her readers on their searches for answers, and she does that with language, which “arcs toward the place where meaning may lie” (Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture). Together, Morrison seems to argue, they might bring these quests to a good end. One of the searches in which Morrison wants to accompany her readers is the search for a home. As the youth asks the old woman: “Tell us what it is […] to have no home in this place” (Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture).
The aim of this work is to examine how Morrison perceives this search for a home. What she thinks this home should look like, and how, according to her, this home could be obtained. Morrison’s novels could be considered as experiments in which she puts her personages’ lives under a microscope so as to examine how they accomplish their struggle for a home. Her prolific writing career has brought forth nine novels, but as this work has a limited scope, I will select only two of them. Since Morrison’s main concern is with black women, individually as well as in conjunction with a community, I have chosen *Beloved*, which focuses on the search of one particular woman, and *Paradise*, which recounts the search of a whole community of women.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on some significant aspects of the author’s life and poetics. Subsequently, I will interpret Morrison’s essay “Home” and extend this essay with writings of bell hooks¹ and Deborah K. King. Doing so, I will establish the basic definition of ‘home’ which I will apply in the rest of this work. Seconded by this theoretical framework, I will then analyze the search for a home portrayed respectively in *Beloved* and in *Paradise*, in order to discover the guidelines Morrison wants to provide her readers with on their journey homewards.

¹ This is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, an American black feminist. Lowercasing her pen name, Watkins wants to emphasize that what matters is “the substance of books, not who I am” (qtd. in “bell hooks Speaks Up”). Throughout my thesis, I will respect Watkins’ decision by lowercasing her pen name.
Chapter 1: The Author

Black women writers – having the example of authoritative mothers, aunts, grandmothers, great-grandmothers – have something special to contribute to the world. They have a distinctive and powerful artistic heritage.

- Nellie McKay (416)

1. Life and Family

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio (USA), as Chloe Anthony Wofford, the second of four children in a black working class family. She has southern roots from the sides of both of her parents, who participated in the great wave of migration from the South in the early 1900s. Her mother’s parents, looking for a better education for their children and fearing white sexual violence against their adolescent daughters, travelled northwards from Alabama (Matus 4-5); her grandparents from her father’s side came from Georgia, a state where racial violence was omnipresent. The confrontation with this racism heavily influenced Morrison’s father’s, and consequently indirectly also Morrison’s, vision on white America (McKay 414).

Given her family’s negative experiences with their white fellow citizens, Morrison was raised in a family “that thought all white people were immoral and they could corrupt, and that we were all wonderful and perfect”, thus providing her with a strong self-esteem. This helped Morrison not to develop the same racial self-loathing as did her childhood friend who, telling her she did not believe in God because He did not fulfill her prayers for blue eyes, inspired Morrison to write her first novel, The Bluest Eye (The Black List, Vol. 1: Toni Morrison (HBO)).

Morrison’s early life was richly infused with elements of black culture. Her family life thrived on a long storytelling tradition, which stimulated her rich imagination and which left
her, later on in life, with the will to evoke an oral quality, proper to this ancestral tradition, in her novels. She considers her novels as substitutes for “those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago” (qtd. in Furman 4), and which are meant to transmit a cultural legacy. Morrison’s grandmother, who fled from the South in order to give her children more opportunities and in order to save her daughters from sexual harassment, and her mother, who provided money for her daughter’s education by taking “humiliating jobs” (McKay 413), formed strong female role models for Morrison; they were the ones who transmitted those ancient black stories to her. Doing so, they provided her with a “distinctive and powerful artistic heritage” (McKay 416) that would be decisive for and characteristic of her writing.

2. Poetics

Toni Morrison’s poetics are, for a great part, rooted in her education, in her family life, and in the experiences she had as a young girl. Having grown up in a family where storytelling was a favorite pastime, she wants to mime the same oral quality in her writing. For this reason, she evokes, for example, already in the first pages of her first novel, the quiet, confidential and conspiratorial gossiping of black women on the porch with the words “Quiet as it’s kept” (The Bluest Eye 4), and she imitates the easygoing speech rhythm, typical of African-American English, in her characters’ speech: “She went to your grandmaw’s. Left word for you to cut off the turnips and eat some graham crackers till she got back. They in the kitchen” (58). Morrison’s goal is to “write literature that [is] irrevocably, indisputably Black” (Conner xxii). The principles that constitute the essence of this aesthetic ideal are an oral quality in the writing; a sort of complicity between the author and his reader; the presence of alienation; and the expression of a typical black musical element in the text (Conner xxii).

Moreover, as I have already mentioned, Morrison wants her novels to be a substitution
for traditional black stories, attaching great importance to the artist’s responsibility of “bearing witness” (qtd. in Furman 4), of interpreting and transmitting the past, and thus of conveying cultural knowledge (Furman 4). Flaying the separate, isolated ivory tower voice” (qtd. in Furman 4) of the artist, Morrison does not adhere to an ‘art for art’s sake’ conception: “If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything” (qtd. in Furman 3). Morrison resists the Joycean writer ideal, in which the writer is indifferent to what consequences his work may have. While she emphasizes that art can be “unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (qtd. in Furman 4), she insists that for her, “the best art is political” (qtd. in Furman 3). She argues that language is “an act with consequences” (qtd. in Grewal 9), or, as she points out in the opening line of her Nobel speech in 1993: “Ladies and Gentlemen: Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me” (qtd. in Grewal 9).

Morrison’s literary project is to confront national issues of race, class and gender as they are experienced by individuals (Grewal 8).

However, Morrison is not so ambitious as to wish to obtain social changes with her work – her goal is simply to clarify social realities. And the best way to achieve this goal, the best way to respond to the ills, either racial or not, of contemporary America is with story, with the wonder of language: it is expansive, creative and multifaceted (Conner xxv). As the old wise woman to whom the angry youth comes for guidance ponders in Morrison’s Nobel lecture: “word-work is sublime because it is generative: it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference” (qtd. in Conner xxv). Conner strikingly summarizes Morrison’s poetical ideal by arguing that “the writing is uncompromisingly political; but its aspiration is to the status of art, the realm of story and music and restoration” (xxiv).
Chapter 2: Home

In her essay “Home”, Toni Morrison argues that matters of home often lie at the centre of discourses on race: “an intellectual home, a spiritual home; family and community as home” (5). In many areas, “race magnifies the matter that matters” (5). One of the examples that Morrison gives, one of the areas in which race magnifies the matter that matters, is womanhood: “the devastations, pleasures, and imperatives of homelessness as it is manifested in discussions on feminism” (5). This female homelessness, magnified by race, is commonly called ‘the double jeopardy’ in black feminist literature. This double danger to which black women are exposed and which is, according to certain authors, multiplied by yet another jeopardy, classism, will be at the heart of this work.

In what follows, I will give a more thorough explanation of what the double and multiple jeopardies signify. This explanation will be based primarily on *Ain’t I a Woman* by bell hooks, a leading black feminist in the USA, as well as on “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology” by Deborah K. King, Associate Professor of Sociology at Dartmouth College. Afterwards, I will go deeper into Morrison’s essay in an effort to explain the importance of home in matters of race.

1. The Female Homelessness

1.1. The Double Jeopardy

In 1972, Frances Beale, a founding member of the Women’s Liberation Committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), introduced the notion of double jeopardy to refer to the particular circumstances that define the lives of black women (King 46). Black women share commonalities with both women in general and black men (King 42), and therefore they are “confronted by both a woman question and a race problem” (Anna Julia Cooper, qtd. in King 42). Because of their membership in two suppressed subgroups,
black women are “doubly enslaved” (hooks 2). As Frances Beale later on wrote in Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*: “As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men” (qtd. in King 46).

This double membership, in the group of black people on the one hand, and in the group of women in general on the other, does not imply that black women are doubly supported in the fight for their rights. bell hooks argues that “no other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (7). Deborah King, in her turn, remarks that “ironically, black women are often in conflict with the very same subordinate groups with which [they] share some interests” (52). Thus, black women belong to two vulnerable subgroups in society, but at the same time, they are discriminated by those groups. They are never recognized as full-fledged members of the group of women in general, nor of the group of blacks. As hooks phrases it: “When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women” (7). Consequently, according to hooks, black women mostly stand alone in the fight for their interests. hooks emphasizes the entanglement of racism and sexism in the lives of black women, and she stresses the fact that in order to understand the black female experience and the relationship of black women to society “both the politics of racism and sexism” (hooks 13) need to be studied.

The complex character of the double jeopardy never appeared more clearly than during the struggle for suffrage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, black American women participated in both the struggle for women’s rights and the struggle for racial equality (hooks 2). In those days, only white men had the right to vote, so that black men and all women were allowed little political capacity. Alliances were formed to
extend the vote, and in the formation of those alliances, sexist and racist dispositions clearly surfaced and prevailed.

At the time, white men’s sexism dominated their racism: they decided to ally with black men rather than with women of their own race. Prior to that, white women had already tried to affiliate with black men, but when it gradually became clear that black men were more likely to receive the vote than they were, white women severed the alliance. They then turned to white men in an effort to let them make their racism overshadow their sexism (hooks 3).

Given those multiple and complex alliances, black women “were placed in a double bind” (hooks 3). On the one hand, associating themselves with white women was impossible, since white women had publicly revealed their racism when breaking their alliance with black men and when trying to persuade white men to let their racism gain the day over their sexism. On the other hand, assorting themselves with black men would not help them any further: the patriarchal values that black men had interiorized would not allow black women to gain the vote (hooks 3).

Many black women decided to ally with black men, in spite of those men’s patriarchal values, convinced that those men would protect their interests (hooks 9). Some black women joined the feminist movement and were heavily criticized. Others did not choose any of both sides, refusing to associate themselves with patriarchal black males or with racist white females (hooks 9). Hence, black women did not “collectively rally against the exclusion of [their] interests by both groups” (hooks 9). The fact that only submission to the actions of others was an option for them proves that “racist-sexist socialization” (hooks 9) had made black women believe that their specific interests were not worth standing up for.

Finally, sexism “carried the day” (hooks 4) and black men ‘won’ this struggle: they were granted the right to vote while women were not. It was not until 1920, with the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, that women, both white and black,
would obtain suffrage. According to hooks, the struggle for suffrage of these three different subgroups (black men, white women, and black women) proves once more that “sexist-racist attitudes are not merely present in the consciousness of men in American society”, but that they “surface in all [the] ways of thinking and being” of every American (hooks 7).

1.2. Towards a Multiple Jeopardy

“The dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism” (King 43) are often aggravated by a third type of oppression: class inequality (King 43). While some scholars argue that class status is but one of the consequences of racism, others remark that “such a preponderant majority of black women have endured the very lowest of wages and very poorest conditions of rural and urban poverty” that economic class oppression necessarily constitutes a third jeopardy (King 46). According to King, this triple jeopardy is now commonly used as “the conceptualization of black women’s status” (46).

Nevertheless, King points out that the notions of ‘triple’ and ‘double’ jeopardy are “overly simplistic” in that they represent the discrete jeopardies as being “merely additive” (47). Consequently, “each discrimination has a single, direct, and independent effect on status, wherein the relative contribution of each is readily apparent” (King 47). The accumulative character of the ‘double’ or ‘triple’ jeopardy thus implied, suggests “that one factor can and should supplant the other” (King 47), which is not at all the case. The use of these terms neglects the fact that “racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems” (King 47). So, in order to cover these interdependent types of discrimination to which black women are subjected, King suggests “an interactive model”: the “multiple jeopardy” (47). The adjective ‘multiple’ not only refers to “several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (King 47). This term stresses the fact that the adequate formula is not racism plus sexism plus classism, but “racism multiplied
by sexism multiplied by classism” (King 47).

The relative importance of each facet of the multiple jeopardy depends on “the particular aspect of [black women’s] lives under consideration and the reference groups to whom [they] are compared” (King 48). Hence, in a particular situation, racism might be “the more significant predictor of women’s status” (King 48), while in other situations, sexism or classism might be of more vital importance. Here, King warns of the fact that the preponderance of one discrimination in a particular situation leads to a monist approach in many liberation theories (51). All too often, the multiple jeopardy is reduced to one of its factors, which is then considered to be the origin, the most important factor. Black women’s “history of resistance to multiple jeopardies is replete with the fierce tensions, untenable ultimatums, and bitter compromises between nationalism, feminism, and class politics” (King 52). Black women have been asked to decide which interests to further, to determine if their “primary ideological and activist commitment [should] be to race, sex, or class-based social movements” (King 52). However, King insists on the fact that “the necessity of addressing all oppressions is one of the hallmarks of black feminist thought” (43).

An example which strikingly illustrates the interdependent relationships between the different discriminations of the multiple jeopardy is the sexual abuse of black women during slavery. Because of their race, black female slaves were condemned to a life of hard labor and of humiliating treatments, just like black male slaves were. Yet, being female, black female slaves had to undergo some additional ordeals, only used to subjugate women (King 47). As Angela Davis writes in Women, Race and Class: “If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped” (qtd. in King 47). At the same time, black women served to maintain the slave economy. Not only were they used to quench the sexual desires of white males, their child-bearing capacities were employed “to enhance the quantity and quality of the “capital” of a slave economy”
King displays the entanglement of the different jeopardies in black women’s lives during slavery by concluding that “[their] institutionalized exploitation as the concubines, mistresses, and sexual slaves of white males distinguished [their] experience from that of white females’ sexual oppression because it could only have existed in relation to racist and classist forms of domination” (47).

2. Morrison’s “Home”

In her essay “Home”, Toni Morrison writes that “matters of race and matters of home are priorities in [her] work” (4). She argues that her home would be “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter”, a world “free of racial hierarchy” (3) – even though she admits never having lived in such a world, and even though she recognizes the fact that she herself is “an already- and always-raced writer” (4). The use of the term ‘home’ allows Morrison to distinguish between “the metaphor of house and the metaphor of home” (3). In Morrison’s view, this ‘house’ is the impersonal, already existing racial structure, built in the course of time and issuing its own rules. The ‘home’ is something more personal: a place that you can arrange yourself, to your own taste; a place where you have the freedom to be yourself; the place where you belong – the place which meets the “contemporary searches and yearnings for social space that is psychically and physically safe” (10). By equating home with ‘a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter’, Morrison “domesticates the racial project” (3): she wants to show that “the job of unmattering race” (3) is “a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (4). She considers it her duty as an author to try to “take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it” (8) in her work.

The question which then imposes itself is how to change the existing racial house into “a race-specific yet nonracist home” (5), how to imagine “race without dominance – without hierarchy” (11), “how to be both free and situated” (5), “how to enunciate race while
depriving it of its lethal cling” (5). Doing this, one runs the risk of incorrectly calling the redesigned racial house “diversity or multiculturalism as a way of calling it home” (8), of “[reproducing] the master's voice” (4), or of replacing his voice by that of “his fawning mistress or his worthy opponent” (4), positions which “confine [you] to [the master's] terrain, in his arena, accepting the house rules in the dominance game” (4).

Therefore, Morrison wonders whether it is actually possible to simply convert the racial house into a home. Whether converting this house would not mean “forfeiting a home of [your] own” (4); whether “life in this renovated house [would] mean eternal homelessness” (4); whether “it [would] require intolerable circumspection, a self-censoring bond to the locus of racial architecture” (4); whether we aren’t and wouldn’t always be unfree, “tethered to a death-dealing ideology even (and especially) when [we] [hone] all [our] intelligence toward subverting it” (5). However, the other possibility to construct a home, that is to “escape or self-exile from the house of racial construction” (8), can stir up new dangers, or can result into “making a genuflection” in the familiar yard of the racial house instead of acting outside of it (8).

In “Home”, it thus becomes clear that Morrison herself still struggles with the notions of race and home, matters which “remain in [her] thoughts as aesthetically and politically unresolved” (5). She seems to be sure of two things: her home would be “a race-specific yet nonracist” (5) one and, contrary to the general opinion that such a home is merely Edenesque, a utopian mirage, she is convinced of the fact that the project of constructing her home is “a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (4). Nevertheless, this does not mean that Morrison knows how this activity should best be initiated. Should the already-there racial house be used and converted? Or would this redecorating of the racial house imply too strong a bond with “a death-dealing ideology” (5), and thus a want of freedom? Should the racial house be fled to obtain complete self-determination? Yet, this flight might strand untimely in
the yard of the racial house, whereas a successful escape might bring about new dangers, in this way provoking unsafety.

3. **Home: The Union of Safety and Freedom**

For the benefit of the rest of this work’s argument, I will use Morrison’s metaphor of house versus home, and, since her protagonists are mainly African-American females, I will extend this metaphor by referring to the multiple jeopardy, i.e. by replacing the ‘racial house’ by the ‘house of jeopardies’. I want to argue that Morrison’s novels are in a way experiments to see if it is possible (and if so, at which price) to find the home she describes in “Home”. I want to argue that Morrison’s female protagonists are all looking for a home; that, how diverse their characters might be, their lives all revolve around the desire to belong to a family, to a community, to a nation – in Morrison’s words: they are marked by “the anxiety of belonging” (10). Morrison’s protagonists want to find safety, both physically, in the sense that they want to be physically protected, and psychologically, in the sense that they want to belong somewhere. Many of those female protagonists also experience the need to be free individuals, to have the right of self-determination. Therefore, their home should not restrain them by discriminations based on racism, sexism or classism.

Yet, in many cases, those two desires mutually exclude each other. Because safety is found more easily in the community which is often rooted in the already existing house of jeopardies, it is tempting to call this house a home, without changing it or with the introduction of a few minor, soothing alterations. Freedom, and an entirely new home, can be found outside of this house – but often at the risk of losing one’s safety: not being physically protected anymore, not belonging anywhere. Hence, freedom is often obtained at the expense of safety, and safety at the expense of freedom. The ideal home is not plagued by the multiple jeopardy and still offers its inhabitants security; the ideal home reconciles safety and freedom.
Nowhere can the struggle for freedom and safety be seen more clearly, more literally, than in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison’s fifth novel. Loosely based on the life of Margaret Garner, an African-American slave notorious for killing her daughter rather than returning her to slavery, it recounts the hard fight of a black female slave for a home, for freedom and safety for her and her children. Sethe, Margaret Garner's literary counterpart, defies the restraints the multiple jeopardy imposes on her. First and foremost, she refuses to be a breeder instead of a mother, and she loves her children ardently. She refuses to give up her children, willing to do everything it takes to find a safe and free home for them – even if that means that she has to flee Sweet Home while being pregnant, and even if that means that she has to commit an atrocious act which expels her out of her community.

Sethe’s journey is scattered around the book: being the victim of a bitter trauma, she is haunted by what she calls ‘rememories’ – which, together with morsels of other Sweet Home survivors’ reminiscences, enable the reader to reconstruct Sethe’s hurtful past. Sethe’s quest for a home could be seen as a journey, subdivided into different parts, during which she acquires, or at least seems to acquire, at each time a certain amount of freedom and/or safety. In what follows, I will analyze Sethe’s travel chronologically throughout the novel, and see in which ways she hovers back and forth between a room in the house of jeopardies, a “genuflection” (Morrison, “Home” 8) in its familiar yard, and a home of her own. By tracing this journey, I will attempt to discover how Morrison deems it possible to find a home after an experience so deeply traumatizing as slavery.

1. **Sweet Home and the Garners : Redecorating the House of Jeopardies**

   Sweet Home. Readers familiar with Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, where the Breedlove family is all but a love-breeding family, know that Morrison has a taste for ironical name
giving. Nevertheless, at the outset of Sethe’s journey, Sweet Home seems to be a sweet home indeed. Coming from a plantation where the cruelest, most debasing kind of slavery was maintained, where she had barely known her mother, who was, moreover, hung before her eyes, Sethe is relieved to arrive at Sweet Home. Mr. and Mrs. Garner practice a liberal, ‘humane’ kind of slavery, Mr. Garner taking pride in his being “one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men” (Morrison, *Beloved* 13). Paul D. later on recalls that the Sweet Home men were “allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to” (147). Before Sethe, Baby Suggs had been Mrs. Garner’s help, and even though “she jerked like a three-legged dog when she walked” (164) because of her injured hip, her mistress “never pushed, hit or called her mean names” (164). Sethe, then, is not forced to “lay down” (165) with one of the Sweet Home men in order to breed more slaves. On the contrary, she is allowed to fall in love with one of them, marry him and start a family with him. At this point in her life, it thus seems as if Sethe has found a real home, where safety and freedom envelop her and her family.

Even so, Sethe later on realizes that she was mistaken when thinking that Sweet Home at the time really was what its name implies. As Paul D tells Denver: “It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (16). When recalling how every day, she brought “a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen […] just to be able to work in it” (27), “as though a handful of myrtle stuck in the handle of a pressing iron propped against the door in a whitewoman’s kitchen could make it hers” (28), Sethe reproaches herself: “A bigger fool never lived” (28).

When Halle asks Sethe to marry him, for example, Sethe thinks there ought to be some sort of ceremony: “a preacher, some dancing, a party, a something” (31). So, she decides to ask Mrs. Garner if there will be a wedding. But Mrs. Garner, “laughing a little, […]
touched Sethe on the head, saying, “You are one sweet child.” And then no more” (31). Sethe and Halle are allowed to found a family together, but Sethe’s wish to have a real ceremony, like white couples have, is received condescendingly. Their marriage is then simply consecrated by the first time they have sex. Because Halle wants privacy for his young bride, they go into the cornfield, away from the cabins. Yet, what they get instead of privacy is “public display” (32): “Who could miss a ripple in a cornfield on a quiet cloudless day?” (32). Thus, Sethe wanted a real marriage, but she gets the reverse instead: animal-like coupling in a field.

However, what consumes Sethe the most is that she cannot take care of her children the way she would want to take care of them. Being the only woman with children at Sweet Home, she doesn’t know how to properly feed her children; she doesn’t know the little tricks women in her community used to soothe their babies; and her work prevents her from being around to secure her children’s safety. Therefore, at certain times, she is forced to tie a rope around her son’s ankle, attaching him to the well like a dog to make sure that he stays out of danger. She “didn’t like the look of it, but [she] didn’t know what else to do” (189).

Hence, slavery remains slavery, how liberal and humane it might seem. Mr. Garner always boasts “that his slaves were men, that he had perfected the art of creating the perfect environment for producing pacified slaves” (Beaulieu 56). So, his motives to treat his slaves well are not so much humane as experimental. As Lovalerie King points out:

Evidence of Garner’s success exists in the brothers known as Paul A, Paul D, and Paul F. The names suggest a series of the same model. The Pauls are all brothers bred (or perhaps manufactured is a better word – since no mention is made of their having parents) at Sweet Home. […] The suggestion is that there must have been Pauls B, C, and E at some point. (Beaulieu 56-57)
Therefore, when Paul D. later on realizes that it had been “Garner who controlled the definition of the term “man” which he choose to bestow on the Pauls and that he could have removed the term whenever he wanted to remove it” (Beaulieu 57), he wonders “how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after” (Morrison, Beloved 260). And when Sethe in a conversation with her husband compares the whites she knew at her previous master’s plantation with Mr. and Mrs. Garner, implying that the latter are good masters, Halle answers: “It don’t matter, Sethe. What they say is the same. Loud or soft” (231).

Consequently, the home Sethe has constructed for herself and for her family during Mr. Garner’s government of Sweet Home is an illusionary one: the self-determination and the safety granted to them is just enough to give them the illusion of a free and safe home, while in reality they are confined and determined by the bounds of slavery. Thus, it could be argued that Sethe is at this stage stuck in the house of jeopardies. A room of it has been designed for her to convert and to call ‘home’. This room offers a certain degree of safety and of self-determination, but it is thoroughly imbedded in a structure that disseminates the discrete discriminations of which the multiple jeopardy is composed. Sethe is fully exposed to those discriminations – even though they are veiled by a thin layer of humanism. She might have an understanding mistress and she might have the privilege of choosing the father of her children, nevertheless, being a black slave woman, Sethe is “double oppressed in that both her productive and reproductive capacities [are] used and abused” (Brooks Bouson 138). Not only does she contribute to her master’s economic gain by means of the work she does with her hands, her ability to bring forth children also serves to preserve the slave economy. So, while Sethe’s home at this point offers her physical and psychological safety in the sense that her master doesn’t use corporal punishments and that she belongs to a community of slaves, she is
not free at all, being impeded by the racist, sexist and classist discriminations that slavery implies.

2. **Sweet Home and Schoolteacher: A Bare Room in the House of Jeopardies**

The death of Mr. Garner launches a new phase in Sethe’s search for a home. Schoolteacher comes to run Sweet Home because for Mrs. Garner, as a white woman, it is inappropriate to stay alone with only Negroes: “She didn’t want to be the only white person on the farm and a woman too” (Morrison, *Beloved* 44). Schoolteacher’s management differs completely from that of his brother-in-law. As Lovalerie King argues: “Garner’s death and schoolteacher’s new roles turned [the Sweet Home slaves’] “safe” little manufactured world upside down” (Beaulieu 57). The era of ‘liberal’ slavery at Sweet Home has ended and schoolteacher, called this way because he always carries a notepad with him, runs his business with an iron discipline, treating his slaves like workhorses. The Sweet Home men are degraded from the men that Mr. Garner bragged them to be to animals. The slaves are subjected to tortures like whippings and the wearing of a bit. Schoolteacher asks them weird questions, measures Sethe’s head, her nose and her behind, and numbers her teeth. At first, Sethe laughs about those weird practices; it is only later on that she realizes what her new master was actually doing.

When Sethe discovers schoolteacher’s real motives, she feels for the first of three times “fine needles [sticking] in [her] scalp” (Morrison, *Beloved* 228). She overhears how schoolteacher teaches his pupils to put “her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (228), and she realizes that the questions, the measuring, and the numbering all served one goal: to show the inferiority of the black race. Schoolteacher is “a practitioner of the nineteenth-century pseudoscience of race, which included the systematic measurements of facial angles, head shapes, and brain sizes” (Brooks Bouson 140). He was “out to prove his
belief that Blacks are subhuman and that slavery is their manifest destiny” (Beaulieu 299). The overhearing of “the contemptuous racist discourse of schoolteacher engenders feelings of self-contempt in Sethe, who feels dirtied when she is suddenly exposed to the magnitude of schoolteacher’s disgust for her race” (Brooks Bouson 141).

But Sethe is not only defined as an animal, she is also treated like one. Under schoolteacher’s supervision, the pupils drag her into a barn and milk her as if she were “the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses” (Morrison, Beloved 237). Her milk, the only thing that Sethe had been able to reserve for her children, the single thing through which she could genuinely be a mother at Sweet Home, is taken from her. Her animalization is completed. When she tells Mrs. Garner, schoolteacher and his pupils take vengeance by degrading her even further: they “[divide] her back into plant life” (222). While further degrading Sethe, from an animal to a plant, they make sure that their property, the fetus developing in Sethe’s womb, is not damaged by digging a whole in the ground for Sethe’s pregnant stomach.

At this stage in Sethe’s travel, it could be argued that she lives in a bare room of the house of jeopardies. Under the cruel type of slavery maintained by schoolteacher, freedom and safety are nearly non-extant: the slaves are refused every right of self-determination and, while they still find some comfort in their forming a group, they are subjected to brutal physical and psychological humiliations and mistreatments. Sethe is now fully exposed to the discriminations of the house of jeopardies – the thin layer of humanism that Mr. Garner used to cover slavery with has been peeled off. Not only is she abused for her productive as well as for her reproductive capacities, as she was when Mr. Garner was her master; not only is she, like the Sweet Home men, classified as and treated like an animal under schoolteacher’s harsh racist regime, “for animals could be economically exploited, worked, sold, killed, and consumed” (Brooks Bouson 138); she is now also a target of white male sexual assault.
Moreover, being milked like a cow by two white boys, Sethe is explicitly reduced from a mother to a breeder – and even to a plant, the cowhide used to punish her for her indiscretion shaping a chokecherry tree of scars on her back.

3. A Transitional Home: Escaping from the House of Jeopardies

Humiliated and debased, the Sweet Home slaves decide to run. While Paul A is caught and hanged, Sixo is burnt and shot, and Paul D is caught, chained and sold, Sethe manages to bring her children to the cornfield, and when Halle doesn’t arrive, she flees – all by herself. After a while, Sethe, tired and wounded, lies down in a field, and she seems convicted to death. Yet, her ardent mother love, her will to take care of her children, her conviction that nobody else but her can give them a safe home, keeps her going:

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. [...] The milk would be there and I would be there with it. (Morrison, Beloved 19)

Help then arrives in the form of a young white girl, Amy Denver, the runaway daughter of an indentured servant. It is she who will help Sethe on her way to the Ohio river, on her way to freedom, rubbing her feet, taking care of her cherry-tree back, and assisting her in the birth of her baby. The special, temporary bond that is forged between the two women, based on gender and on a common fugitive status, illustrates how Sethe is gradually escaping from the house of jeopardies: the discriminations of classism and sexism seem to have been cancelled out. Nevertheless, “the barrier of race (and all that implies in the slaveholding South in 1855) remains” (Beaulieu 99), and Amy abandons Sethe and her newborn baby on the
riverbank, afraid of being caught in daylight with a fugitive slave and her child. So, racism prevails, which means that Sethe is not yet entirely free. Moreover, safety seems further away than ever: exhausted, Sethe and her frail child are left alone at the side of a river which they will not be able to transgress without help.

4. Twenty-eight Days of Happiness: Home in the Black Community

Sethe’s escape from the house of jeopardies and the start of her twenty-eight days of perfect happiness are inaugurated by the helping hands of Stamp Paid and Ella, two leading figures in the community of Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law. At Sethe’s arrival in Baby Suggs’ house, the older woman “bathed her in sections, starting with her face” (Morrison, *Beloved* 109). Doing so, she ritually cleanses Sethe of the dirtiness bestowed upon her by the humiliations of schoolteacher and his pupils, thus healing her and preparing her for her life in her new home, surrounded by her children and by a supportive community (Brooks Bouson 143).

During her “twenty-eight days […] of unslaved life” (Morrison, *Beloved* 111), Sethe experiences things she has never experienced before. For the first time in her life, she has the freedom to claim her motherhood to the fullest. She is no longer a breeder, she can love her children, play with them and take care of them as much as she wants: “I was big […] and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here” (190). She realizes that it is thanks to her, and her alone, that her children have escaped from the yoke of slavery, and she takes pride in it. Later on, unveiling her story to Paul D, she recalls: “I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that” (190). For the first
time in her life, Sethe also experiences the comfort of a community. Those twenty-eight happy days are “days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better” (111). In this way, “bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself” (111). Because “freeing yourself [is] one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self [is] another” (111).

Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, fulfills a special role in the community Sethe is welcomed in. Crooked by slave labor and sexually abused, she is the symbol of the black slave who has been exploited both through her productive and through her reproductive capacities. She has had eight children, fathered by six men, and “what she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (28). Her children are all sold or traded for goods, and she was impregnated by a man who promised to let her keep her fourth child in exchange for sex: “That child she could not love and the rest she would not’” (28). The only child she had been able to keep for a longer time was Halle, Sethe’s husband, “who gave her freedom when it didn’t mean a thing” (28). The arrival of Sethe and her children, without Halle, informs Baby Suggs that she has probably also lost her precious last son, her “somebody” (27). Nevertheless, the pain that she has had to endure doesn’t prevent her from being large, from forming herself “a site of home for the larger African American community” (Beaulieu 163). Baby Suggs is a lay preacher, and she “is presented as the healing and wise ancestor figure” (Brooks Bouson 143) found in many of Morrison’s novels. In the Clearing, an area in the woods, she “preaches love and dignity” (Beaulieu 163), and she exhorts the members of her community to love themselves, “since the dominant culture will not” (Beaulieu 83). In a wonderful, ecstatic scene, Baby Suggs urges them to celebrate themselves:
Here, [...] in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. [...] You got to love it, you! [...] More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, here me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison, *Beloved* 103-104)

Making the freed or escaped men, women and children of her community dance, cry, and laugh, Baby Suggs “encourages [them] to create what they have been systematically denied: a shelter, a protected place, in which to grow, flourish, and simply be” (Beaulieu 163).

Arrived at Baby Suggs’ home, surrounded by her children, and imbedded in a strong communal structure, Sethe finally seems to have constructed a home of her own outside of the house of jeopardies. All three discriminations that make up the multiple jeopardy seem to have been overcome. In the black community in which Sethe now resides, there is no racism, no discrimination of people who have a slightly lighter or slightly darker skin. On the contrary, Baby Suggs’ calling in the Clearing encourages each and every member of the community to love every part of themselves. Sexism too seems to have been vanquished: Baby Suggs, a woman, is the community’s preacher, a strong figure whom everybody respects. Classism, then, doesn’t seem to matter: the freed or escaped men and women are all equal, and they are willing to help each other out at any time. Sethe learns to claim herself and her motherhood, for “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire – well now, *that* was freedom” (Morrison, *Beloved* 191). What is more, she belongs to a protective community, and she doesn’t have to fear whippings, bits or other
degrading tortures neither for herself, nor for her children. Hence, for the first time in her life, Sethe is completely free and safe.

5. Invasion of the Multiple Jeopardy into the Black Community

When some twenty days after Sethe’s arrival, Baby Suggs decides to share the blackberry pies she made from two buckets of raspberries Stamp Paid plucked, the sharing grows into a feast for ninety people. But the copious feast, the selfless act of sharing “stirs smoldering feelings of class resentment and envy among the ex-slaves, who wonder were Baby Suggs gets “it all,” and why “she and hers” are “always the center of things” (Brooks Bouson 144): “124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought” (Morrison, Beloved 161). The community members are also angry about the privileges they assume Baby Suggs has been granted: not having escaped slavery but being bought out of it by her son, being brought over the river Ohio by her master, and renting a house with two floors from the Bodwins. “It made them furious” (162).

Thus, class tensions creep into Sethe’s home, indicating that she has not yet left the estate of the house of jeopardies. The community, which is “in transition from slavery to freedom” (Beaulieu 87), is jealous of Baby Suggs. Their jealousy “is stronger than their loyalty, indicating slavery’s negative impact on communities” (Beaulieu 87). Therefore, when schoolteacher and the slave-catchers come to recover Sweet Home’s lost goods, the community doesn’t warn the inhabitants of 124: “the party […] explained why nobody ran ahead; why nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut ‘cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions” (Morrison, Beloved 184).

Consequently, it soon turns out that the construction of Sethe’s apparent safe and free home outside of the house of jeopardies is nothing more than “a genuflection” in its familiar
yard (Morrison, “Home” 8): despite Baby Suggs’ preaching, the yard of her home is entered by the oppressing white master, and the exslave community’s jealousy is stronger than its loyalty – one of the pernicious consequences of slavery.

6. Freedom and Safety: A Rough Choice

When Sethe notices the four white men who come to return her and her children to slavery, she feels needles pricking in her head for the second time. The shame she felt upon realizing that schoolteacher could not have written down his loathing for her race if she had not made the ink; the shame she felt when being milked like a cow; the shame she felt when being beaten like an animal resurfaces. Realizing that the safe and free home she had laboriously constructed for her and for her children could collapse before her very eyes, all Sethe can think is “No. No. Nono. Nonono” (Morrison, Beloved 192). She claims her selfdetermination, she claims the right to mother her children that her new home has given her, and she “took and put [her] babies where they’d be safe” (193): “She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (192).

Sethe’s “rough response to the Fugitive Bill” (201), as Stamp Paid phrases it, “grows out of her awareness that whites not only can work, kill, or maim the slaves but also can dirty them so much that they cannot like themselves anymore or forget who they are” (Beaulieu 304). Schoolteacher had degraded Sethe to an animal, measuring, milking and beating her as if she were a cow, and Sethe is determined not to let this happen to her children: “No notebook for my babies and no measuring string either” (Morrison, Beloved 233). Collecting her children and taking them to the shed, she is driven by one thought: “Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was
clean. [...] And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (296).

Accordingly, committing her atrocious act of mother love, “Sethe wants to protect her children from the dehumanizing forces of slavery and the dirtying power of racist discourse” (Beaulieu 304). Trying to kill herself and her children, she argues that some things are worse than death – than the ultimate loss of physical safety. In death, Sethe would not participate in the slave economy anymore; she and her children would be freed from the yoke of slavery and safe from schoolteacher’s debasing humiliations. In Sethe’s mind, death, where they would be entirely free and where no schoolteacher would be able to retrieve them, would be the ultimate home for her and for her children.

7. Eighteen Years of Solitary Life: Back into a Bare Room of the House of Jeopardies

However, Sethe’s attempt fails. She only manages to kill her “crawling-already?” (Morrison, Beloved 110) daughter and to wound her two young sons. Stamp Paid succeeds in saving baby Denver, who will accompany her mother during her time in prison. When Sethe is led off to prison, she walks past members of her community. They don’t support her with their singing, no “cape of sound [is] quickly […] wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way” (179). The community, who had already abandoned Baby Suggs and her family because of their selfless generosity, now abandons Sethe a second time because of her apparent pride: “Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight?” (179). In trying to secure a home for her and her children and in sustaining that what she has done was the right thing to do, Sethe collides with the community’s rules of what is acceptable and what is not, of how far a slave mother’s love can go. The “twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life” (204). When Sethe returns from prison, 124 Bluestone Road has become a desolate place – abandoned by the community.
With regard to her children, Sethe has reached the opposite of what she wanted to obtain. 124 Bluestone road is not a safe place anymore: “Sethe’s haunted house […] is an unsafe world where there is a loss of controllability” (Brooks Bouson 150). Sethe’s sons refuse her touch and scare their little sister with stories about their murdering mother, and the venom of the murdered baby’s ghost fills the house and terrorizes its inhabitants. After a while, the two boys run off: “Each one fled at once – the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time” (Morrison, Beloved 3). Baby Suggs dies shortly after Howard and Buglar left. After the betrayal by her community, after the intrusion of the white men into her garden, after Beloved’s murder, she has taken to bed, “pondering color” (4) because she wants “to fix on something harmless in this world” (211). At first Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs’ good friend, thought it had been shame that confined Baby Suggs to her bed, but eight years after her death, he realizes that “her marrow was tired” (209). Baby Suggs “just up and quit” (208), because “her authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call […] – all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard” (208). Baby Suggs had realized that “the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice” (212).

After Buglar’s and Howard’s departure and Baby Suggs’ death, Sethe and Denver are left alone at 124 Bluestone Road. They lead a solitary life, withdrawn in “a walled off and presumably safe place” (Brooks Bouson 148). Sethe believes that she and her daughter are leading a better life, but that ‘better life’ “was simply not that other one” (Morrison, Beloved 51). She tries hard to forget her past, behaving like “a quiet, queenly woman” (14) and only occasionally telling Denver stories of how life was like before the “Misery” (201), as Stamp Paid terms the day schoolteacher intruded into Baby Suggs’ yard. Nevertheless, in spite of her efforts, Sethe “suffers from rememories, that is, spontaneous recurrences of her traumatic and
humiliating past” (Brooks Bouson 148), and the sad presence of the baby ghost works as a constant reminder of the tragic choice she has had to make. Consequently, “the isolated and secretive world [Sethe] enters affords her little protection against her painful past” (Brooks Bouson 148).

Hence, Sethe’s cruel act of mother love moves her even further away from the community in which she had been welcomed after her escape, and her twenty-eight days of communal life are over. The ghost of Sethe’s slain daughter haunts her house. Her sons fear her and are driven away by the baby ghost’s venom. Her mother-in-law takes to bed and dies, tired of a life full of grief and disappointment. Abandoned by her community and haunted by the consequences of a choice that the multiple jeopardy has forced her to make, Sethe is no longer safe, nor free – she seems catapulted back into a bare room of the house of jeopardies.

8. **Paul D, the Last of the Sweet Home Men: The Prospect of a New Home**

Paul D’s arrival breaches mother and daughter’s haunted isolation. The last of the Sweet Home men, Paul D takes Sethe’s breasts, symbols of her hurt motherhood, in his hands, and he tenderly caresses her mutilated back – the outward sign that Sethe is “psychically numbed by her slavery past” (Brooks Bouson 148):

> He held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. […] And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else’s hands. (Morrison, *Beloved* 20-21)

After so many years of losses, of being strong, of silently bearing the community’s constant rejection, Sethe wonders if she could now finally “Trust things and remember things because
the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank” (21). Paul D chases the baby ghost away, shouting “She got enough with you. She got enough!” (22). He makes love to Sethe, and doing so, he rekindles her hope of a normal life. For the first time in eighteen years, Sethe dares thinking about what the word ‘plans’ could mean: before, “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (51). She wonders if it would be “all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?” (46). She finally sees “how barren 124 really was” (48), “how little color there was in the house” (46), and she realizes that “There was something wrong with that” (47).

Finally, “the notion of a future with [Paul D], or for that matter without him, was beginning to stroke [Sethe’s] mind” (51). When he ensures her that he will take care of her, “Jump, if you want to, ’cause I’ll catch you, girl. I’ll catch you ’fore you fall” (55), and that they “can make a life” (55), Sethe even consents to leaving her house, together with him and Denver, for a social event – the first time in 18 years that she will face the community that betrayed her. During that outing, people, softened by Paul D’s gaiety, greet Sethe and Denver, and Sethe notices that “all the time the three shadows that shot out of their feet held hands” (57). Given the fact that Denver at first could not stand Paul D’s presence, Sethe decides that the hand-holding shadows are a good sign, and she muses: “Maybe he was right. A life” (56). So, “Paul D and Sethe work toward establishing a “normal” family life for the first time for either of them” (Beaulieu 58).

The arrival of Paul D in Sethe’s life seems to reawaken her and to restore her home. Slowly, Sethe starts to believe that she can share her burdens with someone else, and that a new life, a life after the Misery, is possible. Paul D frees 124 Bluestone Road from the wrathful prowling of the baby girl’s ghost – and thus from the consequences of a long stay in the house of jeopardies. He offers to be Sethe’s safety net, and he starts the restoration of the bonds between Sethe and her community. Hence, Sethe’s safe and free home outside of the
house of jeopardies is gradually rebuilt: she is freed from the consequences of the multiple jeopardy; she is protected by Paul D’s support; and she finally has the chance to bury the hatchet in the dispute with her community.


Yet, again, Sethe’s attempt to construct a home fails. Paul D encourages her to “go as far inside as [she needs] to” (Morrison, Beloved 55): “Emotions sped to the surface in his company” (48). Consequently, “Sethe finds herself obsessing on and literally being taken over by the past” (Brooks Bouson 151). Before, her “physical survival [had] been based on her ability to suppress the memory of past events” (Beaulieu 56), with the exception of some memories that managed to “seep through cracks in her memory, regardless of her efforts to suppress them” (Beaulieu 56). But the coming of Paul D revives many hurtful memories that had been latent for a long time, and fills up some voids in Sethe’s knowledge of her past at Sweet Home. Upon hearing how her husband has seen her degrading milking and done nothing, becoming mad instead, “squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face” (Morrison, Beloved 83), Sethe wonders how much she could possibly take:

She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can’t hold another bite? […] But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day. […] Other people went crazy, why couldn’t she? (82-83)

Then, upon their return from the carnival, the threesome find a young woman sitting on a stump by their house. The woman’s skin is lineless and she can’t seem to keep her eyes
open. When asked what her name is, she spells ‘B-e-l-o-v-e’. Arguing that a young colored woman roaming about alone must have run away from trouble, the residents of 124 Bluestone Road fulfill their duty and lodge the girl. Beloved seems to be particularly fond of Sethe, and she does everything it takes to be in her presence as much as possible. Angry that Sethe spends so much time in the company of Paul D, Beloved lures him into having sexual intercourse with her, and gradually chases him out of the house. Stamp Paid, who means well, finishes Beloved’s work by showing Paul D the newspaper clipping of the murder in the shed.

Confronted with the clipping, Sethe finally tells Paul D her story – and his reaction to it completely destroys her hope of a new life, of a new home. He assumes schoolteacher’s role and reproaches her with the freedom she has taken in claiming her mother love: “This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman […]. This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. […] more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him. “Your love is too thick,” he said” (193). Paul D doesn’t understand what Sethe’s standards are: “This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw” (193). He doesn’t grasp her reasoning that some things are worse than death:

“It didn’t work, did it? Did it work?” he asked. “It worked,” she said. “How? Your boys gone you don’t know where. One girl dead, the other won’t leave the yard. How did it work?” “They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em.” “Maybe there’s worse.” “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.” “What you did was wrong, Sethe.” (194)

Completing his internalization of schoolteacher’s values, Paul D finishes the discussion by rating Sethe’s act as beastly: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194).

Accordingly, while at first, Paul D’s arrival seemed to liberate Sethe from the past and to give her the hope that a new home could be constructed, it soon turns out that Paul D is a
catalyst who unchains a mass of painful memories. Those memories smother Sethe to the point that she is completely taken over by them. A young girl, who mysteriously appears at 124 Bluestone Road and who doesn’t tolerate any opposition in absorbing Sethe’s attention, drives Paul D out of the house. When Sethe is then forced to tell Paul D her story, his reaction to it shows that the multiple jeopardy has once again crept into Sethe’s home: in confirming the fact that black women are breeders, not mothers, and that they should therefore not love their children too much, Paul D assumes schoolteacher’s racist and sexist ideas. Then, by judging her act bestial, Paul D degrades Sethe a second time. In this way, he humiliates her and denies her the freedom to love her children. Moreover, by leaving, he takes away the safety net he promised her. Thus, at this point in Sethe’s travel, she is thrown back into a bare room of the house of jeopardies.

10. Recognizing Beloved: A Closed-off, Harmonious Matriarchal Home

Denver is the first to recognize Beloved as her resurrected sister – and she anxiously keeps her discovery secret, afraid to be deprived a second time of her only company, afraid that her mother will hurt her sister again. After Paul D’s departure, the pieces in Sethe’s mind finally fall together. She finally grasps why, at the sight of Beloved, her “bladder filled to capacity”, like “water breaking from a breaking womb” (61); why Beloved’s skin is so new; why Beloved’s name is the same as the one word Sethe could afford to have carved into her baby daughter’s headstone; why Beloved knows the song that Sethe made up and used to sing to her children. The recognition of her daughter liberates Sethe from the burdens of her past: “She even looked straight at the shed, smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember now” (214). Sethe feels relieved, profoundly happy, “Thinking, She ain’t even mad with me. Not a bit” (214). She doesn’t have to suffer from any painful rememories anymore: “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (216).
Sethe now also realizes that the hand-holding shadows on the way back from the carnival “were not Paul D, Denver and herself, but “us three”” (214). It gives her hope for the future, because if her daughter can come back from the dead without any vengeful feelings, then “certainly her sons could, and would, come back from wherever they had gone to” (214). The consequences of her past can be undone, her family can be reunited, and they can and will have a perfect home together.

Beloved has done what Sethe had hoped Paul D would accomplish: “Not since that other escape had she felt so alive” (225). Now that Beloved has come back, Sethe “can look at things again because she’s there to see them too” (237). She has found her real home: “Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. Should have known better. Did know better. Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be” (215). 124 Bluestone Road is screened from the external world by “a conflagration of hasty voices” (202) which surrounds the house like a protecting shield, and which sometimes slackens to a mutter: “the eternal, private conversation that takes place between women and their tasks” (203).

Leaving 124 Bluestone Road, Paul D has made room for a matriarchal unit. The three women live together in a perfect, harmonious unity; they are “wrapped in a timeless present” (217). This unity is illustrated in a conjuring episode, which Morrison herself has described as “a kind of threnody” (Darling and Morrison 6). Sethe and her daughters “exchange thoughts like a dialogue, or a three-way conversation, but unspoken” (Darling and Morrison 6). The three women seem to melt together “in a joy-filled world free of […] trauma” (Brooks Bouson 152):

Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine  (Morrison, Beloved 255)

The recognition of Beloved seems to end Sethe’s quest for a home. Her daughter has come back to her and seems to have forgiven her. The pernicious consequences of Sethe’s stay in the house of jeopardies, of the betrayal by her community, of the intrusion of the white men into the home she had constructed upon her escape, of Paul D’s sexist and racist reproofs – all that seems to have dissolved. At last, Sethe is completely freed from the multiple jeopardy. Her home outside the house of jeopardies is confined by the four walls of her house. Within those four walls, the three women are safe; within those four walls, they “were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds” (235).

11. Recognizing Beloved: The Multiple Jeopardy Re-invades

However, the past is not so easily gotten rid off: “the joy and safety of this mother-daughter world of blissful intimacy and merging identities are illusory” (Brooks Bouson 153). The mutter surrounding 124 Bluestone Road becomes “a roaring” (Morrison, Beloved 213). Upon hearing this roaring, Stamp Paid recognizes it as the voices of “The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons” (213), as “the mumbling of the black and angry dead” (234). He calls it the “new kind of white-folks’ jungle” (234-235) – another word for the prejudices whites hold against colored people. The fact that Stamp Paid hears the mumbling of this jungle outside of 124 Bluestone Road suggests that the women’s harmonious unity has crumbled away.
Beloved is not simply Sethe’s resurrected daughter: she is the incarnation of the lonely baby ghost who had been chased away by Paul D; she is the embodiment of the rememoried past (Brooks Bouson 150). Whereas “Sethe thinks that she can lay down her burdened past and live in peace, she instead becomes involved in a deadly battle for survival” (Brooks Bouson 154). Beloved is greedy, she “never got enough of anything” (Morrison, Beloved 282), and after Sethe has given her everything she has, “Beloved invented desire” (283). Sethe wants to fulfill every little desire her regained daughter fosters – but she doesn’t succeed in satisfying her. The month of perfect unity is over, “furious arguments, […], shouting and crying” (281) take its place, and a never-ending game of accusing and apologizing begins. Beloved “accused [Sethe] of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her?” (284). Sethe “pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons […]. […] Beloved denied it” (284). Sethe desperately tries to explain why she has given Beloved “the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin” (281); she revisits the past over and over again in trying to undo it. But whenever Beloved quiets down, “Sethe got her going again” (297): “It was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out” (297).

Finally then, Beloved and Sethe “had arrived at a doomsday truce designed by the devil” (294). They reenact the infanticide over and over again (Brooks Bouson 154): Beloved “screamed, “Rain! Rain!” and clawed her throat until rubies of blood opened there […]. Then Sethe shouted, “No!” and knocked over chairs to get to her and wipe the jewels away” (Morrison, Beloved 294). Hence, Sethe and Beloved are trapped in a “repeated drama” (Brooks Bouson 154). At the end, Sethe sits around “like a rag doll, broke down, finally, from trying to take care of and make up for” (Morrison, Beloved 286). She is completely taken over by the past: “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the
older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (295).

But Beloved is also more than the embodiment of a baby ghost who has come “from the other side” (254) to exact revenge from its mother. She is the incarnation of a slave woman who has survived the Middle Passage and “who speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience” (Darling and Morrison 5). Beloved’s narrative of her traumatic slave experience is fragmented and left for the reader to reconstruct. She explains how “the men without skin” (Morrison, Beloved 248) captivated her and her mother in Africa; how they had to crouch in their own dirt in a slave ship’s hold; how they were all “trying to leave [their] bodies behind”; and how the “men without skin [pushed the little hill of dead people] through with poles” (249). Like the embodiment of Sethe’s murdered daughter, this Beloved moans about how her mother did not smile at her when leaving her, committing suicide because she could not bear the restraining iron ring around her neck: “She was getting ready to smile at me and when she saw the dead people pushed into the sea she went also and left me there with no face or hers” (253).

At times, the two traumatized Beloveds seem to merge. When Sethe goes to the Clearing to feel Baby Suggs’ support, for example, she is choked by the hands that first caressed her. Denver afterwards accuses Beloved of having strangled Sethe, but Beloved denies it: “I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it” (119). Here, “Sethe’s frightening experience is [not only] the repetition of a collective trauma, it also is the repetition of a family trauma” (Brooks Bouson 151). Clawing “at the hands that were not there” (Morrison, Beloved 113), thrashing with her legs, Sethe reenacts the murder of her baby, who died of a cut throat (Brooks Bouson 151).

While the recognition of Beloved at first seemed to purify Sethe of her haunting past, it soon turns out that Beloved is not just Sethe’s resurrected daughter. At once the incarnation of the murdered baby’s ghost who has come to take revenge on its mother and the
embodiment of the abused slave woman, Beloved represents the multiply jeopardized woman under slavery. Beloved’s intrusion into Sethe’s home could then be interpreted as an intrusion by the multiple jeopardy. Sethe is cast back into the house of jeopardies, and she is locked in a continual repetition of her humiliating, painful past. She is literally taken over by the multiple jeopardy, being devoured by her vengeful daughter. As she seeks to grant every petty demand of Beloved, as she compulsively apologizes, as she is bound and taken over by her past, Sethe is no longer free. As she pines away, both physically and emotionally, she is no longer safe.

12. The Community’s Clearing: The Possibility of a New Home

Denver, who is soon excluded from her mother and sister’s games and fights, is the first to break out from the “love that wore everybody out” (Morrison, Beloved 286). Although Denver has never experienced life at Sweet Home, she is profoundly embedded in her family’s traumatic experiences, having “swallowed her [sister’s] blood along with [her] mother’s milk” (242) when she was a baby. She has tried to go to school with the children of her community, but quitted once she understood why those children shunned her. Ever since, she has learned to “take pride in the condemnation” (45) put upon her family by members of the black community, cherishing her sister’s ghost as her only companion after her brothers’ departure and her grandmother’s death. When Beloved then incarnates, Denver anxiously watches over her, afraid that she might leave again, and “afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for [her] mother to kill [her] sister could happen again” (242). Denver realizes that “Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to” (242). Thus, she “never leave[s] th[e] house and [she] watch[es] over the yard, so it can’t happen again” (242). However, Denver was named after the white girl who helped delivering her on the banks of the Ohio river, the last hindrance on Sethe’s way to freedom, which means that she was born partially outside of the house of
jeopardies. Therefore, Denver is a transgressive figure, a “redemptive figure” (Bowers qtd. in Brooks Bouson 155): she will free herself and her family from the stern grip of the traumatic, haunting past. When seeing how Beloved consumes Sethe, Denver’s “job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (Morrison, Beloved 286). With a little encouragement from her deceased grandmother, “Know [that there is no defense], and go on out the yard. Go on” (288), Denver conquers her fear and leaves the house to restore the bond with the black community.

The community clasps Denver’s extended hand: “the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course” (294), and “maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain” (293). They provide 124 Bluestone Road with food gifts and they give Denver a job. When the women of the community hear that Sethe is being haunted by her resurrected daughter, some of them figure that “she had it coming” (301). But Ella, who had helped Sethe at her arrival in the community and who had been locked up and abused by two white men, “the lowest yet” (301), in her puberty, argues that “children can’t just up and kill the mama” (301). Therefore, she convinces the other women that “rescue was in order” (301). Even though Ella thinks that “Sethe’s crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that” (302), she understands “Sethe’s rage in the shed twenty years ago” (301-302), and she “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (302).

As follows, thirty women gather outside of 124 Bluestone Road, and at the sight of the house, old memories of Baby Suggs’ hospitality resurface. To make up for their past mistake, for abandoning Baby Suggs and her family, the women start to pray: “Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes” (304). Then, when Ella imagines how the “white hairy thing fathered by “the lowest yet”’” (305), which she had killed by refusing to nurse it, could come back to whip her like Sethe’s daughter has, she hollers. The others join her, and together they “took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the
beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (305). Doing so, the community’s women reenact Baby Suggs’ purifying, loving role in the Clearing.

Startled by the voices, Sethe and Beloved, like Denver, finally go outside. When Sethe starts to “[tremble] like the baptized in its wash” (308), the community’s purification ritual seems to obtain its goal. But at that moment, Mr. Bodwin, who came to pick up Denver for her new job, arrives, and a reenactment of the day of the Misery takes place. Like on that day, the sky is “blue and clear” (162; 308); like on that day, there is “Not one touch of death in the definite green of the leaves” (162; 308); and like on that day, Sethe sees the hat of a white man, who, in her troubled mind, “is coming into her yard and [who] is coming for her best thing” (308). Sethe feels hummingbirds sticking into her hair for the third time, and again one thought takes over her mind: “No no. Nonono” (308). Again she flies, but then a major difference with the day of the Misery occurs: Sethe’s violence is directed not at her children, but at the white intruder. Armed with the ice pick she was using in the house, she attacks Mr. Bodwin. However, the second major difference with that day twenty years before then takes place: the community assumes its responsibility and protects Sethe from her own blind rage, in this way avoiding another Misery.

Nevertheless, in Beloved’s traumatized psyche, there is no difference. Again, she is left alone; again, she sees a hill of black people in front of her; again, she sees how the white man, “the man without skin” (309) is looking at her. When the turmoil is over, Beloved is gone. Exploded, disappeared, or just hiding somewhere – nobody has seen what has happened in the tumult following Sethe’s attack, but Beloved is no longer there. Sethe has been saved by the community: her vengeful daughter has been chased away.

The voices that surrounded 124 Bluestone Road, too, have disappeared. Denver works at the Bodwins’ house, and she has been given the chance to go to school again. Paul D regrets his rude, injuring departure, and he moves back into the house, “his coming [now
being] the reverse route of his going” (310). But Sethe has taken to bed, still suffering from rememories: “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink” (320). Moaning about her daughter’s departure, she has given up: “This little place by a window is what I want. And rest. There’s nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe” (321), thus implying that even Amy’s foot rubbing or Baby Suggs’ cleansing ritual would not suffice now. But Paul D “wants to put his story next to hers” (322). He tries to convince Sethe that a future together is possible, “we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (322), and he attempts to inspire her with some sense of self-esteem: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (322). Sethe’s wavering “Me? Me?” leaves it in the middle as to whether or not she will be able to start a new life and to finally bring her quest to a good end.

13. A Disremembering Home: Has the Quest Ended?

Beloved’s concluding passage seems to bring more clarity. Here, Morrison writes that “They forgot [Beloved] like a bad dream” (323), because “Remembering seemed unwise” (324). Consequently, it seems as if Sethe, Paul D and Denver, “those who had spoken to [Beloved], lived with her, fallen in love with her” (323), have started a new life, freed from the “incubus” (Furman 79) and re-assimilated into the safe black community.

Morrison seems to approve of this disremembering by repeatedly asserting in this last passage that “This is not a story to pass on” (324). Because “if you just dwell on the past, you can’t go forward” (Morrison, qtd. in Caribi 38). Sethe was smothered by rememories and devoured by her vengeful daughter, so in order to protect herself, she forgot. However, Morrison has also insisted many times on the need to remember, to confront the past, because “If you confront the past, there is a possibility to move on” (qtd. in Caribi 38). Accordingly, in Beloved, the words “This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison, Beloved 324), have a double
meaning: “This is not a story to pass on, to give to the next one, yet the irony is that it is not a story to pass by” (Morrison, qtd. in Caribri 38). Beloved is now being disremembered, “she is not claimed” (323) anymore, and because of this, her worst nightmare has come true: being disremembered, she is dismembered, she “erupts into her separate parts” (323). So, here, Morrison seems to stress the danger of forgetting: “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there” (Morrison 324).

Thus, while Sethe finally seems to have reached her home of safety and freedom, out of the claws of the multiple jeopardy, Morrison seems to doubt the value of a home where the past is not given a proper place to be commemorated, but instead is stuffed away into a forgotten corner of the mind. As Furman argues: “Only by remembering the past can there be liberation from its burden” (80), because while “remember[ing] painful periods generates suffering”, it “has a healing quality” (Carabi 38). Consequently, as long as Sethe won’t acknowledge her memories and give them a place in the present, those memories will return to haunt her. Hence, by suppressing the memory of her traumatizing past instead of coming to terms with it, Sethe jeopardizes her new free and safe home.


In a sense, Beloved’s ending is “like a warning to black people” (Morrison, qtd. in Carabi 38) in general who want to construct a free and safe home. With Beloved, Morrison wanted to “bring up a collective pain that had been silenced within the black community but that was always there, kept as an unspoken burden” (Carabi 38). She argues that “There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back and deal with them” (qtd. in Carabi 38). In Morrison’s opinion, “those who do not remember the past are in danger” (Beaulieu 206).
In this respect, the Freudian opposition between melancholia and mourning comes to mind. In the context of trauma studies, melancholia should be understood as the condition in which the victim of a trauma is “trapped in an endless reliving of his traumatic past while acting that past out in a post-traumatic present” (Uytterschout and Versluys 3). Previously to the community’s clearing, Sethe had surrendered herself to this melancholia, which “smothers every possibility of moving towards a liveable future” (Uytterschout and Versluys 3). Sethe’s solution to this smothering re-enactment of the past is to forget, but as Uytterschout and Versluys point out: “experiences that resist knowing will inevitably manifest themselves belatedly” (2). In order to come to terms with a traumatic experience, melancholia should be interwoven with mourning, “an effort at testimony” which leads to the development of “a narrative memory of the traumatic event” (Uytterschout and Versluys 3) – and this is exactly what Morrison does for her readers.

As an African-American female writer, Morrison sees it as her duty to ‘pass this story on’, to answer the plea of the angry youth she evokes in her Nobel Prize Lecture: “You, old woman, blessed with blindness, can speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names” (Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture). Hence, Beloved could be considered as “Morrison’s attempt to bring forward into literature the unbearable memory of slavery so that African Americans and society can move on at last” (Beaulieu 207).
Chapter 4: Paradise

In her essay “Home”, Morrison announces the goal she aims to obtain with *Paradise*: “I am trying first to enunciate and then eclipse the racial gaze altogether” (9). Already from *Paradise*’s very first line, “They shoot the white girl first” (3), Morrison thus enters her novel into the search for her ideal home, for “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter” (Morrison, “Home” 3).

Whereas *Beloved* recounts the individual journey of a black slave mother, *Paradise* opposes two groups of people, two communities, in their search for a home. While the inhabitants of Ruby and those of the Convent all escaped from a life dominated by multiple discriminations, the ideal safe and free home, the paradise they construct upon their escape differs in many ways. With *Paradise*, Morrison wanted to explore the “larger issue [of] the idea of paradise, which is built on exclusion” (“Time: Toni Morrison”). She canvasses the pernicious consequences of one community elevating the values of its home, of its paradise, to dogmas excluding, ‘disallowing’ fellow victims of discriminations – simply because they deviate from the community’s frozen norms.

In what follows, I will examine how two different groups of people, traumatized by discrimination, attempt to construct their own free and safe home, and hereby I will focus on the position of the women in the respective communities. Doing so, I will investigate the danger of constructing an isolated home, a ‘Paradise’, and attempt to distill Morrison’s vision on what a genuine paradise implies.
1. Ruby

1.1. The Founding Fathers: From Haven to Ruby, a History of Disallowing

1.1.1. The Old Father’s Exodus: The Foundation of Haven

In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution brings an end to slavery. During the following period of Reconstruction, freed slaves can be elected to rule in state governments. But during the purges of 1875, many Negro men are “chased or invited out of office” (Morrison, *Paradise* 193). Among them are three descendants of the nine families who, in 1890, will travel “from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma” (13), in the hope of finding a safe and free home elsewhere. What causes those families to leave is the fact that while the other men who have been dismissed “got less influential but still white-collar work”, their three family members are “reduced to penury and/or field labor” (193). At the time, “They must have suspected yet dared not say that their misfortune’s misfortune was due to the one and only feature that distinguished them from their Negro peers. Eight-rock” (193), their pitch-black skin.

During their journey, the families’ humiliation continues: they are “Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children” (13). However, “smart, strong, and eager to work their own land” (13-14), the families never would have thought that the newspaper headline “Come Prepared or Not at All” (13), warning poor homesteaders that they will not be accepted in the newly built all-black towns, could apply to them. Hence, they are not prepared for “the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built” (13). Looking too poor and too black, the nine families, which include many pregnant women, are refused entrance to the communities of their fellow liberated slaves.

For ten generations, the nine families had “believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black”, but
now they have to face the fact that a new separation has emerged: “light-skinned against black” (194). The nine families had figured that their partners in adversity, who had known the same deprivations as they had but who had simply been more lucky, would not hold any classist or racist prejudices against them. They had assumed that no one could possibly refuse to admit pregnant, tired women. Nevertheless, they are turned away. The lucky ex-slaves settled in all-black towns have assumed the values and prejudices of their ex-masters, victimizing people slightly too black and slightly too poor. Thus, at this point in their travel, the group of nine families, looking for a safe and free home, is still suppressed by multiple discriminations.

But while the shock upon “hearing disbelievable words formed in the mouths of men to other men, men like them in all ways but one” (189) is big at first, the homesteaders do not give in. The group is “no longer nine families and some more”; it has become “a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them” (189). They continue their journey, “Becoming stiffer, prouder with each misfortune” (14). Feeling blessed, protected, and guided by God, convinced that “they were destined” (14), they finally reach their Promised Land, their safe Haven, after a long sequence of ordeals. And indeed, “From the beginning [Haven’s] people were free and protected” (8). As a symbol of communal unity and of their pride that none of Haven’s women has ever worked in a white man’s kitchen, Haven’s citizens erect the Oven, where “they gathered for talk, society and the comfort of hot game” (15). The words Zechariah Morgan nails on the Oven’s lip serve as a constant reminder of “how narrow the path of righteousness could be” (14): ‘Beware the Furrow of his Brow’.

Haven’s symbol is carefully observed by its residents: the nine founding families form a close-knit community in which discrimination is given no chance. Racism does not exist, since all members of the nine families are “8-rock” (193), as Patricia Best later names them: “Blue-black people, tall and graceful” (193). Haven’s women are thought to be free and safe:
“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. [...] On out, beyond the limits of town, because nothing at the edge thought she was prey” (9). Class tensions, then, do not exist in Haven: “Having been refused by the world in 1890 on their journey to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing, were vigilant to any need or shortage” (109). In this way, by founding a community in which racism, sexism, and classism are not given any chance, the once-rejected group finally manages to establish a safe and free home.

Nevertheless, while Haven might have seemed the ideal home in the eyes of its founders, Patricia Best, Ruby’s unofficial historiographer, later on reveals that the first foundations of the Convent massacre are already apparent in Haven, years before the raiders are even born. First of all, as Linda Krumholz points out: “the protection of women has often justified the oppression and possession of women” (24). The men of the nine founding families present the commendable intention of protecting their wives, their sisters and their daughters, but doing so, they patronize them and they limit their freedom. Men, not women, play the leading part in the establishment of Haven. The Founding Fathers, not the Mothers, decide on the families’ itinerary and determine the community’s laws. Patricia Best strikingly exposes the old founders’ sexist values when arguing that from the beginning onwards, the identity of women “rested on the men they married” (Morrison, *Paradise* 187), and when analyzing the names Zechariah Morgan gave to his nine children:

Pat ran her finger over their names: Pryor Morgan, Rector Morgan, Shepherd Morgan, Ella Morgan, Loving Morgan, Selanie Morgan, Governor Morgan, Queen Morgan and Scout Morgan. Scooting up the margin in Skrip black ink, one of her earlier notes read: “It took seven births for them to get around to giving a female child an
administrative, authoritative-sounding name, and I bet they called her ‘Queenie’.

(191)

But, as will be the case later on in Ruby, the women of the nine families not always accept this male issuing of rules without resistance. When the people of Fairly refuse to admit the nine families but give them money, food and blankets out of pity, for example, the men “forbade the women to eat the food” (195). Nonetheless, one of the women, “Celeste Blackhorse, sneaked back and got the food (but not the money), secretly passing it to her sister Sally Blackhorse, to Bitty Cato and Praise Compton, to distribute to the children” (195).

Secondly, the stories of the nine families’ journey which are told around the Oven display the fact that their new paradise is based on exclusion. Gradually, the founders of Haven fabricate a foundation history for themselves and for their descendants, and in that history, they picture themselves as the chosen people – and the notion of a chosen people always implies the exclusion of other people. Their journey, during which the men, who are called the “Fathers”, followed “the signs God gave to guide them” (14), becomes a sort of exodus; the nine founding families are sanctified; and the main rebuff they have had to digest is systematically called the Disallowing – with a capital letter. The town the Old Fathers found then becomes a sort of ‘City upon a Hill’. In this manner, Haven’s founders mimic the United States’ nationalist discourse, a first sign that they will internalize the values of the dominant culture they wanted to escape so badly.

Thus, while Haven seems at first a safe and free home for its women, built outside of the house of jeopardies, sexist notions and the idea of exclusion pervade the village from the very beginning.
1.1.2. The Disallowing, Part Two: The New Fathers and the Foundation of Ruby

Despite their paradisiacal isolation from the world that has rejected them, Haven’s residents do not remain immune to world-shaking events. When World War II breaks out, Haven’s sons go out to fight, and at their return, they find their hometown convulsing in the aftermath of the Depression, invaded by classism. The men are appalled by stories about “missing testicles of other colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy” (194), and since the first Disallowing “was a burn whose scar tissue [was not yet] numb by 1949” (194), they recognize it as “the Disallowing, Part Two” (194). Haven’s men powerlessly watch how their town is taken over by racism and classism, how their paradise declines.

So, a new generation of ‘Fathers’ stands up and does what the Old Fathers sixty years before them had done. “Loving what Haven had been – the idea of it and its reach” (6), they go “Out There, where [their] children were sport, [their] women quarry, and where [their] very person could be annulled” (16). They start a new “Run” (194) and move their fifteen families 240 miles westward, carrying the Oven with them like a shrine. The new town, with the old communal symbol in its middle, is left nameless for three years, until another Disallowing strikes its founders. Ruby Morgan, the sister of New Fathers Steward and Deacon Morgan, had become ill during the journey, and desperately needs medical help. However, she is refused admittance to both of the hospitals she is driven to: “No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them” (113). No regular doctor, because the doctor the nurse is trying to reach when Ruby dies on the waiting room bench is a veterinarian. Thus, Ruby is not only refused medical care, she is also implicitly degraded to an animal. This new, even crueler Disallowing aggrieves the town’s inhabitants so deeply that they decide to name their town after Ruby – as a constant reminder. Bearing this Disallowing in mind, Ruby’s inhabitants live their lives in perfect isolation, 90 miles
away from the nearest white town of Demby, being guaranteed freedom and safety – perfect safety, because after Ruby’s death, no other eight-rock will die in Ruby. Hence, the second exodus seems to have reached its destination.

Nevertheless, the New Fathers haven’t learned from their predecessors’ mistakes. And again, Patricia Best is the reader’s guide in discovering this. The New Fathers, especially the Morgan twins, are imbued with the stories the Old Fathers told around the Oven: “The twins were born in 1924 and heard for twenty years what the previous forty had been like. They listened to, imagined and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in” (16). The New Fathers are trapped in their memories of a past marked by disallowing, still carrying “the rejection of 1890”, which is re-enacted every year in the school’s Christmas play, “like a bullet in the brain” (109). Therefore, they are willing to do everything in their power to keep their paradise exactly the way the Old Fathers designed it. But in preserving that paradise, the New Fathers come to occupy the position of the white master in the house of jeopardies, issuing discriminations that exclude certain groups of people.

The fact that the New Fathers’ journey to a new free and safe home would result into the construction of a new house of jeopardies is already obvious from the moment they start their ‘Run’ in Haven. During the war, Roger Best, Patricia Best’s father, has fallen in love with Delia, “a hazel-eyed girl with light-brown hair” (201), with whom he has had a child. When Roger hears about the plans of leaving Haven, he immediately writes Delia a letter asking her to come to Haven with their child. Yet, by marrying a light-skinned girl, Roger Best violates the old blood rule “established when the Mississippi flock noticed and remembered that the Disallowing came from fair-skinned colored men” (195). Steward Morgan’s reaction upon seeing Delia reveals how the New Fathers have internalized the racist
scale of light-skinned versus dark-skinned the Old Fathers were so appalled by upon their refusal in Fairly. However, this scale has been reversed. The “dung” Steward Morgan refers to when grumbling “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (201) is Delia, the light-skinned girl. When later on, Delia has a complicated childbirth and Ruby’s two midwives cannot help her, “the 8-rock men didn’t want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn’t want to drive out to a white’s house begging for help; or else they just despised [Delia’s] pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go” (198). Being refused medical help, the light-skinned woman and her baby die – the first ones to die in town after the town’s name giver. Thus, by preserving their paradise, the men do what was once done to them: they disallow because of color, they treat the light-skinned girl the same way their dark-skinned sister was treated by light-skinned society.

But racism isn’t the only discrimination that has infiltrated into Ruby. The New Fathers become even more patriarchal than the Old Fathers. Like their racism, the New Father’s sexism is already apparent right before the trek westwards. After Steward Morgan’s disallowing of Delia, Fairy DuPres, one of the town’s midwives, “cursed him, saying, “God don’t love ugly ways. Watch out He don’t deny you what you love too”” (201). Patricia Best later on saliently summarizes the New Fathers’ sexist attitude by remarking that “they were just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise” (201-202). Also, when “like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks even before they took apart their own beds” (16), the women disagree. Too much valuable space is taken up by the old Oven, which doesn’t even have a practical function anymore, and too much valuable time is spent reassembling it. But again, the women are not reckoned with.

Then, like racism and sexism, classism finds its way into Ruby – and this time, it doesn’t penetrate into the town from the outside, it comes from within. The twins, who own
Ruby’s bank, take pride in the “magical way [they] accumulated money” (107). Kelly Reames notices that over the years, Steward Morgan’s “gains have been financial, his losses personal and spiritual” (37). Deacon Morgan, who lives together with his wife in the “biggest house in Ruby” (Morrison, Paradise 100), shows off his wealth, daily driving “his brilliant black sedan three-fourths of a mile. From his own house on St. John Street, he turned right at the corner onto central, passed Luke, Mark and Matthew, then parked in front of the bank. The silliness of driving to where he could walk in less time than it took to smoke a cigar was eliminated, in his view, by the weight of the gesture” (107). Whereas in Haven, “families shared everything, made sure no one was short” (108), the twins put their own financial interests first, not helping friends who are in financial troubles, such as Menus and Fleet.

Thus, while the New Fathers left Haven because it could no longer offer their families a safe and free home, the paradise they built upon their arrival 240 miles west from Haven ends up even worse. The first Disallowing, the memory of which still burns in the minds of the New Fathers, is reinforced by a second one, so the new founders’ will to isolate their community from the rest of the world becomes even harsher. However, in trying to secure a safe and free home for their families, the New Fathers turn their home into a new house of jeopardies where racism, sexism and classism have free play.

1.2. Ruby’s Women: A Quest for Freedom

Whereas the women of Ruby are granted physical safety, being physically protected, as well as psychological safety, belonging to a community, they are very much aware of the fact that their safety goes at the cost of their freedom. They are severely inhibited by the discriminations of the multiple jeopardy that Ruby has internalized, which have given more than one of them a grievous trauma they are unable to recover from. Accordingly, Ruby’s women don’t have the right to self-determine their lives. Therefore, many of them revolt and
attempt to acquire their own little piece of freedom. In that group of rebelling women, different subgroups can be distinguished, depending on the degree to which they revolt.

1.2.1. In Ruby

First of all, there are those women who have found their own way to rebel, but who do it in secret. Those women stay in Ruby, ultimately defending their town when an outsider, in the person of Reverend Misner, for example, criticizes it, or showing that in reality they have internalized the New Fathers’ ideals.

Of all women, Dovey Morgan, the wife of Steward Morgan, is the least outspoken in her views. Her attitude after the meeting concerning the words written on the lip of the Oven is in this respect revealing: “Days later she still hadn’t made up her mind about who or which side was right. And in discussion with others, including Steward, she tended to agree with whomever she was listening to” (87). The piece of freedom she has obtained is a little house on St. Matthew Street where she sleeps alone, and which “was becoming more and more home to Dovey” (88). There, she is sometimes visited by a mysterious man, who she calls her Friend. Whenever her Friend comes, Dovey “talked nonsense. Things she didn’t know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world’s serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said” (92). The fact that Dovey’s Friend is her sounding board, and seemingly the only one, clearly displays the extent to which Steward’s misogynist attitude prohibits him from really listening to his wife. However, the house Dovey occupies is “a foreclosure the twins never resold” (88) – it had previously belonged to Menus. So, it is thanks to the fact that the Morgan twins do not help friends who are in financial need that Dovey acquires this home; it is at the price of Menus’ home that Dovey obtains her new home.
In her history project, Patricia Best, the daughter of the light-skinned girl who had been disallowed by Ruby’s men, reveals the fact that from the foundation of Haven onwards, the multiple jeopardy has had Haven’s inhabitants in its power. Nevertheless, she doesn’t do so in public, and after several years of working on her project, she eventually burns the papers. Moreover, Patricia’s behavior towards her daughter, who has inherited her light skin, shows that Patricia has completely interiorized Ruby’s racist prejudices. Pondering over a fight she has had with her daughter, in which she has thrown a pressing iron at her daughter’s head, Patricia wonders “whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her. And was she sacrificing her still? The Royal Ease in her hand as she ran up the stairs was there to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was” (204). Finally, then, when Reverend Misner, who feels that Patricia “didn’t seem to trust these Ruby hardheads with the future any more than he did” (209), tackles Ruby’s haughtiness, Patricia defends her town: “This is their home; mine too. Home is not a little thing” (213).

Anna Flood, then, the keeper of the town’s grocery store, doesn’t straighten her hair—an uncommon practice in Ruby. Because of this, many citizens disapprove of her. While Anna didn’t intend to provoke such a polemic, and while she eventually would have straightened her hair again, she chooses to leave it the way it is because “Instantly she could identify friends and those who were not; recognize the well-brought-up, the ill-raised, the threatened, the insecure” (119). Moreover, like Reverend Misner, Anna is very much interested in social change. She doesn’t think that the youth hanging around at the Oven forms a threat: “Kids need more than what’s here” (117). Whereas Anna thus seems to offer some sort of resistance against Ruby’s prevailing values, a discussion with Reverend Misner displays that she has internalized Ruby’s common ideas, refusing to acknowledge the classist tensions that have crept into the town, “We own the bank; the bank doesn’t own us” (116), and calling the light-skinned woman Menus had fallen in love with a “prostitute” (119).
So, while these women present the will to escape from the house of jeopardies Ruby has become, they don’t succeed in doing so. Thoroughly embedded in their town’s beliefs and customs, afraid to lose the safety their community grants them, they eventually remain loyal to the New Fathers’ body of thought.

1.2.2. The Walking Women

The second subgroup consists of those women who sense that the Convent can grant them a time-out from the sexist, racist and classist society Ruby has become. In the chapter carrying her name, Lone DuPres, the town’s midwife, recounts how “For more than twenty years [she] had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. […] out here where the wind handled you like a man, women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent” (270). In this group of walking women, two subgroups can be distinguished.

1.2.2.1. The Convent as a Repository

First of all, there are those women who walk to the Convent but who, as Brooks Bouson phrases it, “nevertheless retain their sense of 8-rock purity and respectability by […] depositing their shame at the Convent” (203).

Arnette Fleetwood knocks on the Convent door saying “You have to help me […]. You have to. I’ve been raped and it’s almost August” (Morrison, Paradise 77). Her lover, K.D., the Morgans’ nephew, has hit her and refuses to take care of her and her unborn child. As Consolata later on recalls: “[Arnette] was not anxious as might have been expected, but revolted by the work of her womb” (249). She stays at the Convent, but without anyone knowing it, she “had been hitting her stomach relentlessly”: “With the gusto and intention of a rabid male, she had tried to bash the life out of her life” (250). The baby is born but doesn’t
survive, and his mother disappears “having never touched, glanced at, inquired after or named him” (250). Later on, when Arnette has married K.D., she comes back to the Convent to claim her baby. When the women can’t give him to her, she accuses them of having killed him. In this way, she “pass[es] her earlier “mistake” off on the Convent women’s tricking her” (278).

Sweetie Fleetwood, then, Arnette’s sister-in-law “who enacts the socially prescribed role of the all-giving, self-sacrificing mother” (Brooks Bouson 203), the perfect woman in Ruby’s ideology, hasn’t left her house in six years, taking care of her four ‘broken’ children. One day, she too walks the road to the Convent, tired of watching and caring: “The small thing she wanted was not to have that dawn coffee, the already drawn bath, the folded nightgown and then the watchful sleep in that order, forever, every day and in particular this here particular day” (Morrison, Paradise 125). Sweetie revolts, she escapes, and she walks, “smiling – or crying” (129). When a hitchhiker, Seneca, who will become one of the Convent women, joins her, Sweetie fancies that she is “walking next to sin” (129). Doing so, she projects her sinful behavior onto Seneca “Instead of acknowledging her desire to abandon – to walk out on – her children and thus find relief from the exhausting burden of caring for them” (Brooks Bouson 203). Similarly, when Sweetie and Seneca find shelter in the Convent, Sweetie imagines the Convent women to be demons, to be “birds, hawks […]. Pecking at her, flapping” (Morrison, Paradise 129). Then, when she is reunited with her husband, Sweetie completely annuls her act of resistance by blaming the Convent women for her infatuated walk: “They made me, snatched me” (130).

Accordingly, while these women at first seem to have the courage to escape from Ruby and to follow the road to the Convent, they too are afraid to lose the safety their community grants them. Hence, they return to their safe but unfree home, and even completely undo their attempted escape by shifting the blame for it onto the Convent women.
1.2.2.2. The Convent as a Constant Refuge

The second subgroup of Ruby women walking to the Convent consists of Billie Delia and Soane. In times of trouble, the Convent has been a refuge for them, but contrary to Sweetie and Arnette, they acknowledge their flight and don’t disavow their bonds with the Convent women afterwards.

Soane, Dovey’s sister and Deacon Morgan’s wife, has a much stronger personality than her sister. She cautions her husband’s misogynist language when he says that Gigi “dragged herself in town” (105), and when she waits for him to come home from hunting, she ironically remarks: “Look out, quail. Deek’s gunning for you. And when he comes back he’ll throw a sackful of you on my clean floor and say something like: ‘This ought to take care of supper.’ Proud. Like he’s giving me a present. Like you were already plucked, cleaned and cooked” (100). The first time Soane goes to the Convent is to confront Connie, her husband’s mistress. Nevertheless, despite her husband’s affair with Connie, Soane will later on develop a friendship with her when Connie resurrects Soane’s son, killed in a car crash. From that moment on, Soane keeps going to the Convent, bringing Connie sunglasses and getting tonics in exchange. However, Soane always returns to Ruby, and when she invites the Convent women to K.D. and Arnette’s wedding reception, she realizes that “The strange feathers she had invited did not belong in her house” (155).

Billie Delia, then, Patricia Best’s daughter, strikingly summarizes the fight between the Floods and the Morgans when remarking that “the real battle was not about infant life or a bride’s reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals” (150). She flees to the Convent when an argument with her mother turns into a physical fight, and “What she saw and learned there changed her forever” (152). Billie leaves Ruby and becomes independent, never denying what the Convent women have done for her. When she finds Pallas and brings her to the Convent,
for example, she praises the freedom available in there, calling the women “A little nuts, maybe, but loose, relaxed, kind of. [...] Anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They’ll take care of you or leave you alone – whichever you want it” (176). But while Billie has acquired partial freedom by leaving her town, this implies that she doesn’t belong to a community anymore – which means that she has lost safety. Moreover, she still carries the burden of the fight with her mother, with whom the relationship has not yet been restored.

Hence, while Soane and Billie Delia acknowledge their bonds with the Convent women and thus come closer to freedom than any other Ruby woman ever has, they too are not yet entirely free. Soane keeps visiting Connie, but she always returns to her husband and she admits that the Convent women do not belong in her home. Billie Delia leaves Ruby, but doing so she loses the safety her community previously offered her, and she is not yet freed from the pain the rift with her mother has caused her.

Thus, Ruby’s women are very much aware of the fact that while they belong to a community and while they are physically protected by their husbands, fathers and brothers, they are suppressed by the sexist, racist and classist values those men cherish. Moreover, they are trapped in the image those men have conceived of the ideal woman. Constrained by that image and by their men’s values, Ruby’s women are not free at all. So, they revolt and try to be in charge of their own lives – but none of them completely succeeds in doing so. Dovey doesn’t have the power to stand up against her husband, and she acquires her new ‘home’ thanks to the twin’s classist discriminations; Patricia has treated her daughter the same way the eight-rocks have treated her; and Anna Flood has internalized her town’s racist prejudices and refuses to recognize the classist tensions reigning in Ruby. Arnette and Sweetie deny their attempt to escape from Ruby, and shift the blame for it onto the Convent women instead.
Billie Delia leaves Ruby but is still troubled by the fight with her mother; and while Soane isn’t afraid to argue with her husband and doesn’t disown her friendship with Connie, she admits that the Convent women don’t belong in Ruby and acquiesces in her role as a wife, eventually cleaning, for example, the quails Deacon has shot.

2. The Convent

2.1. The Convent as a Mere Shelter

Situated seventeen miles from Ruby, the Convent has never been an actual convent. It is the former house of an embezzler, who had decorated it with overtly sexual objects, denigratory vis-à-vis women. When the embezzler was run in by the police, the land was assigned to the Sisters Devoted to Indians and Colored People, who, after quickly painting over or removing sexually explicit elements in the house’s interior, established the Christ the King School for Native Girls. There, “stilled Arapaho girls […] sat and learned to forget” (4). Hence, at first, the Convent exudes the exact opposite of what a free and safe home ought to be: it is a temple of perversion and oppression, disseminating the discriminations of the multiple jeopardy. As Linda Krumholz writes:

An embezzler’s house shaped like a bullet, the Convent’s first incarnation represents the brutality and paranoia as well as the economic and sexual domination that characterized the European conquest of the Americas. The Convent’s second life as a Catholic school for Arapaho girls describes a quieter but equally insidious colonizing tactic of religious domination, sexual repression, and cultural demolition through forced removals and education. (23)

However, in 1953, the school closes and only Mother Superior, who soon becomes ill, and Consolata, a sexually abused girl the Mother picked up presumably in Brazil, remain in the Convent and lead a quiet, peaceful life. In Steward Morgan’s words: “the Convent [was] a
true if aloof neighbor” (Morrison, Paradise 10), selling hot peppers and rhubarb pies to Ruby’s inhabitants and to passers-by.

In 1968, Mavis Albright is the first to come to the Convent and to stay there. From that moment on, the Convent begins to function as a haven for women who seek refuge from a violent, unfree past. Mavis’ twins suffocated in the car when she was out buying dinner for her husband. Convinced that her husband and her other children planned on killing her, she stole her husband’s Cadillac – which was the laugh of the neighborhood because “its owner had no screens in his windows and no working television” (28) – and ran off. But being abused by her husband physically, sexually as well as psychologically, she had been closed off from the rest of her community for years: “Frank found ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship” (27), so she had nowhere to go. She went to her mother, but when she overheard her calling Frank to tell him where her daughter was, Mavis fled again. Betrayed by her own mother, she crossed the country, taking female hitchhikers in when her financial resources were depleted. Until one day, her car broke down, and she ended up in the Convent. There, she not only found Connie and Mother Superior, she also heard the voices of her twins. Feeling that “she was not safe out there or any place where Merle and Pearl were not” (259), she decided to stay in the Convent to take care of her children.

Grace, or Gigi, is the second girl to board at the Convent. Dressed provocatively, “in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large [K.D. and his friends] forgot to laugh at her hair” (53), Gigi’s arriving in conservative Ruby did not pass unnoticed. Left by her mother, her father being on death row, and haunted by the memory of a young black boy shot during a Civil Rights protest in Oakland, California, she wanted to see if “there was anything at all the world had to say for itself (in rock, tree or water) that wasn’t body bags or little boys spitting blood into their hands so as not to ruin their shoes” (68). Her boyfriend, arrested during the Oakland Riots, told her of “the eternal desert coupling” (64), a black stone couple in the
desert just outside of Wish, Arizona, who were making love forever – but Gigi never found the love-making rocks. Even so, she could not believe that her boyfriend had invented them: “He may have put them in the wrong place, but he had only summoned to the surface what she had known all her life existed … somewhere” (64). Therefore, when a stranger on the train to Alcorn, Mississippi, where Gigi’s grandfather lives, told her of “two trees [growing] in each other’s arms” (66) in Ruby, Oklahoma, she didn’t doubt for a second and went to Ruby. Disappointed again in Ruby, Gigi was finally ready to go home, when her lift stopped at the Convent to pick up the body of Mother Superior. Gigi decided to stay to watch over the drunken Connie. And like Mavis, she never left.

Then twenty-year old Seneca walks into the picture. At the age of five, she was abandoned by her sister, who would turn out to be her mother. When she looked out of the window, searching for her sister, a crying woman passed by. The image of this crying woman, inextricably linked with the traumatic loss of her sister, would never leave Seneca again, becoming “an occasional heart-breaking dream” (128). After being sexually abused by a foster brother, Seneca was moved from foster home to foster home. She soon contrived “that there was something inside her that made boys snatch her and men flash her” (261), thus assuming that the abuse she was subjected to was her own fault. Traumatized by her abandonment, Seneca had become an expert in pleasing everyone around her, because “Otherwise – what? They might not like her. Might cry. Might leave. So she had done her best to please” (131). Doing so, she made herself vulnerable to further abuse, such as by her boyfriend Eddie Turtle, convicted for the hit-and-run death of a child, as well as by Norma Keene Fox, who used her as a sex toy. When Norma Fox’s driver dropped Seneca back at the bus station “like a stray puppy” (138), Seneca decided to travel “resolutely nowhere, closed off from society, hidden among quiet cargo – no one knowing she was there” (138). But one day, she saw “a black woman weeping on a country road [who] broke her heart all over
again” (126). She climbed out of her hiding place, and accompanied the woman to the Convent. There, she would find her new place as the peacemaker mediating between Mavis and Gigi.

The last girl to find refuge in the Convent is Pallas Truelove. Daughter of a wealthy, powerful lawyer, Pallas had eloped with her janitor-boyfriend to visit her estranged mother. After a few weeks of bohemian life, Pallas caught her boyfriend and her mother making love, “grappling bodies exchanging moans in the grass, unmindful of any watcher” (169). Stupefied by the betrayal, Pallas ran away, wrecked her car and was subsequently chased by two men, from whom she hid in a black lake, “hoping, hoping the things touching below were sweet little goldfish like the ones in the bowl her father bought her when she was five. Or guppies, angels. Not alligators or snakes” (163). Bewildered and terrified, Pallas was then picked up at the side of the road and dropped off at a clinic. Billie Delia noticed her, vomiting at the side of the building, and took her to the Convent.

Accordingly, a group of motherless, traumatized women are gathered in the Convent. While these women share two important things, i.e. being, in one way or another, abandoned by their mother, and having fled from a life dominated by one or more of the discriminations that make up the multiple jeopardy, they still aren’t united by a comforting bond of support, each drifting on their own little island, directed by trauma and grief.

After Mother Superior, who to Connie was a real mother, dies, Connie starts to drink, and her deepest wish is to die: “Each morning, her hopes dashed, she lay on a cot belowground, repelled by her sluglike existence, each hour of which she managed to get through by sipping from black bottles with handsome names” (221). And while she listens to the girls telling their stories, deep down she despises them: “the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and, what Sister Roberta warned the Indian girls against, drift. The three d’s that paved the road to perdition, and the greatest of these was drift.
On her worst days, when the maw of depression soiled the clean darkness, she wanted to kill them all” (223). Mavis is still preoccupied with taking care of her twins and with fighting with Gigi. Gigi has an affair with K.D., whose submission to her is obsessive and complete, but she ends it when he hits her. She fills her days with digging for a treasure, studying and improving her looks, and provoking Mavis. Pallas goes home but returns a few months later, and “when [she] wasn’t eating she was crying or trying not to” (261). Seneca, then, who at first had found peace in the Convent, feels that “The safety available in Connie’s house had become less intact when Pallas arrived” (261) after a few months of absence. For Seneca’s “serenity [was] rocked only by crying women, the sight of which touched off a pain so wildly triumphant she would do anything to kill it” (261). That “anything” implied cutting herself because “It thrilled her. It steadied her” (261).

Thus, these women all have fled from a past in the house of jeopardies, and in the Convent, they have obtained a measure of freedom, of self-determination, and a measure of safety. Whereas the novel opens with the words “They shoot the white girl first” (3), the reader is deprived of information concerning the women’s race, signifying that race does not matter in the Convent. The women sense that “a blessed malelessness” (177) envelops the Convent, meaning that sexism is excluded as well. Moreover, selling their peppers and their pies, the women are economically independent. However, while the women can tell their stories to Connie, they are still haunted by their past, which surfaces, for example, in Connie’s drinking and in Seneca’s cutting herself. Therefore, the women are not yet entirely free. Also, living in their own little worlds and yielding to their own, often egocentric, impulses, the women are still not united in a comforting bond of sisterhood. Consequently, they are not yet secure, they are not yet psychologically safe. But, as Kelly Reames summarizes it: “The Convent provides for these women who are haunted by the violence in their past, a place free from judgment where they can recover, or recreate, themselves”, and “Despite their bickering,
the gift [the women] gave each other is the space to reimagine themselves and their lives” (52). Hence, it could be argued that at this point in the women’s travel, their “assertion of agency outside the [house of jeopardies] turned into genuflection in its familiar yard” (Morrison, “Home” 8): they have fled from their abusive past, but they are not yet entirely safe, nor free. At this stage of the women’s cohabitation, the Convent is not yet a home offering safety and freedom, but merely a shelter offering refuge.

2.2. The Sisterhood

Just when Connie seems completely lost, longing more than ever to die, she meets her male twin, who has “fresh tea-colored hair” and eyes “as round and green as new apples” (Morrison, Paradise 252) – recalling Connie’s own features when Sister Mary Magna found her. Due to this encounter, Connie reconciles her body, traditionally thought of as being represented by the female, with her spirit, traditionally represented as being male. While the disorder in the Convent continues, Connie emerges from the cellar she had been hiding in and starts creating again: she prepares the food for what could be interpreted as a Last Supper. Gathering the women around the table, Connie announces her spiritual rebirth as Consolata Sosa. She has “the features of dear Connie, but they are sculpted somehow – higher cheekbones, stronger chin” (262), and, again repeating what Jesus Christ did with his disciples, she invites the women to follow her: “I call myself Consolata 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 that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me. Somebody could want to meet you” (262). Doing this, Consolata becomes a Mother to the motherless, traumatized Convent women.
The newborn Consolata descends with her pupils into the cellar, where she lets them lie naked on the floor. After having drawn a silhouette, a template, around each woman, she recounts her troublesome past and unveils her message in an inarticulate monologue:

My child body, hurt and oil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? 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)

As Ana María Fraile-Marcos phrases it: “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 [wants the women to know] that both Eve and Mary, body and spirit, must be acknowledged if [they are] to be whole again” (27). Subsequently, Consolata starts telling the women about “a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word” (Morrison, Paradise 264), presumably the mother figure Consolata so desperately longed for after Mary Magna’s passing. Telling the story of her trauma, of her longing, Consolata starts the “loud dreaming” (264) sessions during which the women enter into each other’s trauma’s, helping each other to cope with them. Then, the women paint their body templates in order to further heal each other and themselves.
As Kelly Reames claims: “The stories and the artwork help the women heal more actively than the Convent had done up to that point. Before, they were […] passively seeking comfort and refuge. Now they actively take control of their stories” (58). So, “when [Seneca] had the hunger to slice her inner thigh”, for example, “she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor” (Morrison, Paradise 265). The women become calm, “still and appraising” (266), they “were no longer haunted” (266). Their blessed state is sealed by their dancing in a purifying rain shower which cleanses them, baptizes them, and makes them holy women:

Seneca embraced and finally let go of a dark morning in state housing. Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt that never should have been stained. Mavis moved in the shudder of rose of Sharon petals tickling her skin. Pallas, delivered of a delicate son, held him close while the rain rinsed away a scary woman on an escalator and all fear of black water. Consolata [was] fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden. (283)

Thus, the Convent finally seems to have realized its name: its inhabitants form a sisterhood, helping and supporting each other. Having found their “unbridled, authentic self” (177), the women, too, finally realize their names: Albright, Divine Truelove, Grace, Seneca. Their escape from the house of jeopardies has reached its destination: a home outside of the house of jeopardies, where racism, sexism and classism have been banned. The healing sisterhood the women belong to helps them to free themselves from their haunting past, so that they can self-determine their lives. Consequently, the Convent women have acquired complete freedom as well as psychological safety.
3. The New Fathers Versus The Ancient Mothers

3.1. The Invasion

The problems in Ruby come to a head: “A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed” (11). Ruby’s men feel the foundations of their town trembling, but they refuse to face the fact that the source of their problems is the new house of jeopardies they have constructed themselves by devising a paradise based on exclusion. Therefore, since “everything that worries them must come from women” (217), and since, in their opinion, “the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women”, the men’s wrath is directed at the Convent women, who “don’t need men and [who] don’t need God” (276). As one of the men phrases it: those women are “Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families. We can’t have it, you all. Can’t have it at all” (276). Every man has his own personal reasons to harbor hate vis-à-vis the Convent women, but they all agree upon the fact that “Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue” (10).

Like the Old Fathers, the men are nine, and like the Old Fathers, they are prepared to do everything in their power to protect their families and their ideals. So, after having eaten a good male meal of beefsteaks, “prepared the old-fashioned way” (282), the men go and “take aim. For Ruby” (18). At the moment the men leave for the Convent, “The Oven shifts, just slightly, on one side” (287), a presage that the nine men will become exactly what the Old Fathers wanted to protect their families from.
Upon their arrival in the Convent, “They shoot the white girl first” (3). Thus, with the hunters, racism and sexism invade the Convent. Sneaking through the house, the men see everywhere proof of what they consider to be the women’s perversion. They mistake Seneca’s lipstick letter for “a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered” (7); they are shocked by “the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to a cord hanging from a crib in the last bedroom” (7), probably belonging to Pallas’ son; and in the chapel, they are appalled by the fact that on the cross, “Clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus” (12) – which means that no male authority is tolerated in the Convent. Convinced of the women’s perversity, the men hunt the other women, the “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (18), and they kill them all, this way destroying the women’s home.

When the Ruby citizens Lone DuPres has gathered appear, reality dawns upon the raiders. The twins’ unity is severed, Deacon admitting the wrongness of their deeds and Steward insisting on the fact that “The evil is in this house” (291). “Bewildered, angry, sad, frightened”, the newly arrived wonder: “How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?” (292). In this way, they acknowledge the fact that the New Fathers’ utopia has reversed into a dystopia. But when Roger Best comes to pick up the women’s bodies with his hearse, the bodies have all disappeared.

3.2. The Aftermath

3.2.1. Ruby

In Ruby, life continues, but some changes have occurred: “Although the evidence of the assault was invisible, the consequences were not” (299). Save-Marie, the youngest of Sweetie Fleetwood’s damaged children, has died. This means that “The reaper was no longer barred entry from Ruby”, so the once protected 8-rocks are put “in the awkward position of
deciding to have a real and formal cemetery in a town full of immortals” (296). The difficulties caused by the murders “churned and entangled everybody” (298). Different versions of the raid circulate. People wonder whether the crime the nine raiders have committed should be reported to white law if the bodies have disappeared. The Oven is still sliding, and the graffiti on its hood now reads “We Are The Furrow Of His Brow” (298). But the greatest change of all has occurred in Deacon Morgan. Leaving his car aside, thus doing away with classism, he enacts a new ‘Run’. Barefoot, he walks to Reverend Misner’s house, and the unintelligible speech he delivers there recalls the first speech Consolata addressed to her pupils as her new, purified self. Reverend Misner understands that Deacon’s “long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different” (302).

Reverend Misner’s thoughts upon seeing seven of the raiders at Save-Marie’s funeral summarizes Ruby’s failure, and predicts what will become of the New Fathers’ paradise:

“They had ended up betraying it all. They think they have outfoxed the white man when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. […] How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it. Soon Ruby will be like any other country town: the young thinking of elsewhere; the old full of regret. (306)

Nevertheless, despite the men’s ghastly failure, there is hope for Ruby. As the exclusive immortality deal with God has been severed; as Reverend Misner, who realizes that “there
was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people” (306), decides to stay; and as Deacon Morgan repents his deeds and is prepared to do penance for them, Ruby has indeed, as Lone DuPres phrases it, been given “a second chance” (297). The sacrifice of the Convent women has given Ruby the chance to overthrow their house of jeopardies and to start all over again. The chance to rework their definition of ‘paradise’.

3.2.2. The Convent

Billie Delia is the only one who knows for sure that the Convent women have not disappeared. She just wonders: “When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town?” (308). Indeed, in the last, unnamed, enigmatic passage of Paradise, the Convent women seem to have been resurrected, like Jesus Christ, or gone to another place, a place between heaven and earth – which is suggested by the visions of Reverend Misner and Anna Flood in the Convent’s garden, the first seeing a beckoning window, the second seeing a door. In this last passage, the women, except for Consolata, appear to their family members. Some of them are dressed in warrior outfit, Pallas even carries a sword.

Consolata, whose face has become a blend of racial features, “All the colors of seashells – wheat, roses, pearl – fus[ing] in [her] face” (318), appears on a beach. Her head rests in the lap of Piedade, the pitch-black singing woman she had told her pupils about and who incarnates the mother figure Consolata was so desperate for after Mary Magna’s death. A ship arrives, with “crew and passengers, lost and saved”, who have come to “rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (318). Presumably, the “lost and saved” people aboard the ship include Consolata’s disciples, who will accompany her and Piedade in paradise.
The Convent women’s afterlife is foreshadowed by the epigraph Morrison has chosen for *Paradise*. It is the last stanza from “The Thunder, Perfect Mind”, a Gnostic poem in which a female divinity issues a series of contradictory statements, exhorting her readers to find the divine within the text and within themselves. In the final stanza, the readers reach a place of rest where they find the divine person speaking, Piedade in *Paradise*, and where they begin “a state of living and not dying again” (“Diotima: “The Thunder: Perfect Mind””). Also, *Paradise* is divided into nine chapters, each carrying the name of a woman. Hence, the nine women dominate, control this story, as did the nine Old Fathers with their story of the foundation of their paradise. However, since the ‘nine mothers’ story encompasses the story fashioned by the Old Fathers, their story prevails.

Therefore, it could be argued that the home the nine Ruby raiders have invaded is not destroyed. The women’s physical safety is devastated, but Morrison exhorts her readers to look beyond this. The women have gone to another place, somewhere between the spiritual, marked by the presence of Piedade, “the Black Madonna” (Brooks Bouson 215), and the earthly, marked by the lying about of “sea trash” (Morrison, *Paradise* 318) – which seems to be in line with Consolata’s previous reunification of spirit and body. They have seized the gist of what paradise means: not excluding others, not obstinately clinging to rigid traditions like the founders of Haven and Ruby did, but working continually to “create and sustain more enabling communities” (Romero 428).

4. *Paradise*: The Ultimate Home

Morrison’s intention was to begin the last word of *Paradise* with a small letter, “paradise” instead of “Paradise” (Morrison, *Paradise* 318), because she wants *Paradise* to be an interrogation of the idea of paradise and [...] to move it from its pedestal of exclusion and to make it more accessible to everybody” (“Time: Toni Morrison”). Morrison’s ‘paradise’
could thus be thought of as coinciding with Morrison’s ideal home, described in her essay “Home”, which she wants to move “away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (4).

Morrison’s paradise is not a ‘Paradise’, a ‘City upon a Hill’, an isolated utopia based on exclusion like America’s microcosm Ruby (Romero 420); it is not “a static condition already achieved, but something that must be endlessly worked on […] through the continuous free interplay of race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality [and] class” (Fraile-Marcos 29). To show her readers that this paradise can become reality, Morrison chooses not to perfect Paradise’s cyclical construction by ending the novel with the Convent massacre, but ends it with the hopeful vision of an obtainable, earthly paradise “down here” instead (Morrison, Paradise 318).
Conclusion

As a writer, Toni Morrison embodies the wise woman she pictures in her Nobel Lecture. She deems it her authorial duty to assist her readers on their journey through life: “If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything” (qtd. in Furman 3). Observing the “contemporary searches and yearnings for social space that is psychically and physically safe” (Morrison, “Home” 10), Morrison wants to guide her readers on their search for a home – one of the main aspects of their journey.

The aim of this work was to investigate how, in her novels, Morrison portrays this search for a home: what she thinks this home should look like and how this home could be obtained. Unfortunately, the scope of this work did not allow for a discussion of each of the nine novels Morrison has written so far. The two novels that I selected, *Beloved* and *Paradise*, mirror Morrison’s preoccupation with black women individually as well as in connection with a community.

Taking into consideration Morrison’s essay “Home” as well as writings by bell hooks and Deborah K. King, I have defined the ‘home’ Morrison’s female protagonists look for as the place where they are granted safety, both physically, in the sense that they want to be physically protected, and psychologically, in the sense that they want to belong to a certain community. Moreover, even though this might be in conflict with their requirement of safety, Morrison’s women want to be free: they want to have self-determination, unrestricted by racism, sexism and classism – the three discriminations of which the multiple jeopardy, a term used to conceptualize black women’s status, consists. These women’s journey towards a home could thus be seen as a constant struggle for safety and freedom: in trying to escape from the house of jeopardies, which exudes the multiple jeopardy, they attempt to obtain both safety and freedom.
In *Beloved*, the story of Sethe, an African-American runaway slave who prefers killing her daughter to returning her to slavery, Morrison demonstrates the complicatedness of a forced choice between safety and freedom, and the difficulties of constructing a home after a traumatic experience. With this novel, she alerts her readers to the fact that a traumatic experience cannot be suppressed. Be it an individual trauma, a ‘rough choice’ one has had to make, or be it a collective one, such as the Middle Passage and the slavery experience, the trauma has to be given a place for the safe and free home to be solidly constructed.

In *Paradise*, then, Morrison explores the idea of ‘paradise’ – which could be understood as being synonymous with ‘home’. Contrasting Ruby, a patriarchal community whose attempt to escape discrimination results in the construction of a new house of jeopardies, and the Convent, a group of women who together come to terms with their traumatic past, Morrison warns of a utopian vision of paradise, based on exclusion. The Convent women’s physical safety is destroyed by the Ruby men’s raid, but Morrison invites her readers to overcome this. She gives them insight into her paradise, the ideal but feasible home the Convent women finally have reached, and she stresses the fact that the maintenance of this paradise, of this home, requires continuous work.

Thus, Toni Morrison seems to have conceptualized her work as a search for the ultimate home, each of her novels providing her readers with some valuable guidelines. It would be of considerable interest to examine Morrison’s other novels in the light of this search, in order to obtain a fuller sight on how Morrison imagines the ideal home as well as the path leading towards it.
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