

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN BELOVED AND PARADISE.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED AND  
PARADISE.

By

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## Abstract

This study considers the critique of American exceptionalism in Toni Morrison's Paradise and Beloved. While much African American fiction, particularly classic slave narratives, employ critiques of exceptionalism, most of these critiques appeal to the nation's failure to live up to its claims of greatness. These critiques focus on the hypocrisy of a nation that makes claims to American greatness despite the nation's racial exclusions and inequalities. Morrison's critical and creative work, on the other hand, suggests the interlocking racial, gender, and economic oppression of African Americans is absolutely crucial to the development and maintenance of America's exceptionalist ethos. Defining themselves against its black population, European America, Morrison argues, was able to develop a powerful exceptionalist self-image. From this perspective American racial, imperialist, and sexual domination is not a contradiction of but is instead inevitably implicated in American exceptionalism. Using Morrison's critical work as a starting point and methodological framework I investigate the various ways exceptionalism is registered in the two novels. Chapter 1 outlines the history of exceptionalism drawing out the key points of its development from the Puritans through the twentieth century, particularly as this mythology was employed in the field of literary studies. Outlining Morrison's critical work on the nation and the "Africanist presence" alongside her self-professed use of paradoxically pregnant silences, I lay the groundwork for an investigation into the two novels' unwillingness to use exceptionalist rhetoric to advance the cause of social justice. Chapter 2 discusses Beloved's historical context and the resurgence of the exceptionalist mythology in the Reagan years when the achievements of Civil Rights were being undermined by neo-conservatism. This context, along with a discussion of the generic codes of the slave narrative, frame a consideration of Beloved's lack of overt appeal to the mythology, a pregnant silence that strategically undermines the idea that America, because it abolished slavery and granted Civil Rights, is a model of freedom and democracy, an exceptional nation on the world stage. Chapter 3 reflects upon Paradise as a critique of exceptionalism as a misogynist mythology that both justifies and produces war and imperialism. The chapter draws out the links Paradise makes between domestic racism and imperialist wars abroad by way of Morrison's consideration of exceptionalism. Ultimately, Morrison's work offers an imaginative, critical contextualization for the contemporary American wars of aggression and the current resurgence of the exceptionalist mythology.

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Chapter One: Exceptionalism

Howard Zinn writes in the June/July 2005 issue of the Boston Review,

the notion of American exceptionalism—that the United States alone has the right, whether by divine sanction or moral obligation, to bring civilization, or democracy, or liberty to the rest of the world, by violence if necessary—is not new. It started as early as 1630 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony when Governor John Winthrop uttered the words that centuries later would be quoted by Ronald Reagan. Winthrop called the Massachusetts Bay Colony a ‘city on a hill.’ Reagan embellished a little, calling it a ‘shining city on a hill’ (4).

Zinn’s definition of exceptionalism—that the United States is uniquely sanctioned to bring civilization, democracy, or liberty to the world—is a useful one for thinking about the way this ideology is implicated in American violence and imperialism. As Zinn mentions, John Winthrop’s idea of America as a “city upon a hill” is foundational to American exceptionalism and refers to the belief that America and Americans are God’s elect, chosen to build an exemplary Christian nation. This belief in America as beacon to the world resonates through American history, across the political spectrum. Although the language and imagery of American exceptionalism is currently popular in political and public discourse it is not without its critics. In the same article, Zinn discusses exceptionalism as an imperialist mythology that has been centrally implicated in American aggression and expansion. He writes,

the terrible attacks of September 11 gave a new impetus to the idea that the United States was uniquely responsible for the security of the world, defending us all against terrorism as it once did against communism. President George W. Bush carried the idea of American exceptionalism to its limits by putting forth in his national-security strategy the principles of unilateral war (4-5).

Zinn suggests that the belief in American exceptionalism –especially by policy makers-- leads almost inevitably to imperialistic violence and aggression. Indeed, Zinn identifies the mythology of American exceptionalism as the key animating force behind American wars of aggression and as the guiding principle of the current Bush administration and its push to war. Therefore, countering this mythology is, in Zinn's estimation, not only crucial to resisting the political and religious right in America but is also key to confronting a longer tradition of American imperialism and violence.

Richard Slotkin points out that American mythologies, unlike the mythologies of older nations such as England, are textual, emerging from sources like literature and political tracts. Literature and the tools of literary analysis are therefore crucial to explorations of the nation's mythologies and discourses. In this study I will argue that Toni Morrison's Paradise and Beloved register a critique of American exceptionalism. In her critical writing and imaginative work Toni Morrison attempts to formulate a revised approach to thinking and writing about America. Morrison's Playing in the Dark suggests the interlocking racial, gender, and economic oppression of African Americans in America is absolutely crucial to the development and maintenance of America's exceptionalist ethos. Defining itself against its black population, European America was able to develop a powerful exceptionalist self-image. Morrison's contention that the "Africanist" presence in America has traditionally supplied the means through which European Americans defined their freedom and identity suggests that exceptionalism is inextricable from African American's experience and presence within the nation. By



juxtaposing Morrison's writings on American literature and culture with work on the subject of exceptionalism I will show that by refusing to see institutionalized violence, American slavery, and imperialist wars as contradictions of American ideals but, rather, as central to their formation, Morrison challenges the mythology of exceptionalism. In this way her writing also runs counter to a tradition of African American writing that challenges American hypocrisy but leaves American exceptionalism as an ideal intact. In my close reading of Morrison's critical work I will also elaborate upon a reading strategy that is useful for understanding Paradise and Beloved's original and radical critiques of exceptionalism. This reading strategy is deeply indebted to the approach Morrison outlines in her theoretical work, in which she encourages readers to read the silences and lacunae in the classic white American works in order to detect the Africanist presence. I will use this strategy to argue that Morrison is, in her own elisions, writing a black history of America that critiques exceptionalism. Additionally, I will investigate what, if any, alternative discourses and mythologies these novels suggest.

Expanding upon Morrison's critical work to read Morrison's novels is not an entirely problem free approach. Although I intend to approach Morrison's critical work as primary sources in themselves—as part of the landscape of what I see as Morrison's key works on exceptionalism—her work on reading strategies will also inform my approach to the two novels. Before continuing I will briefly discuss my rationale for using Morrison to read Morrison and include a caveat about the disadvantages of such an approach. First, I do not intend to argue that because Morrison is concerned with the construction of nation and a national canon in her critical work that this is somehow

evidence of authorial intention in her literary works. Instead, I am reading Morrison's relevant work and deciphering what each has to say about America and exceptionalism. In other words, I am drawing out certain similarities (and differences) between these works with the aim of detecting what they might each be able to tell us about American exceptionalism. Further, Morrison, unlike most authors, has written critically useful material for reading not only American literature generally—but for reading her own works. While her critical approach may not be helpful for many—or even most--readings of her novels, for my purposes here it is productive for considering the way exceptionalism and the nation are articulated in these two novels. Although I hesitate to use such a method, Morrison is unique in that she has provided candid and nuanced theory and discussions of literature and her own writing which happen to be useful for my particular purposes. Further, rather than using her critical work “straight” I will modify it to suit the project's needs. By juxtaposing her work with the work of other American literary scholars and race theorists I hope to extrapolate and cobble together an approach that uses and modifies Morrison's emphasis on reading pregnant silences and -- in a not unproblematic departure from Morrison-- searches out the presence of the American state in her works. With these reservations and distinctions in mind, however, I am aware that my approach risks not only appearing to produce a rather totalizing reading but also risks both oversimplifying the relationship between the critical and creative processes, and drawing facile conclusions about her creative work based on her critical thought. These are risks I am willing to accept.

### Definitions of Exceptionalism

Throughout, I will use exceptionalism as both Thomas Byers and Howard Zinn use the term—to refer to the belief in the divine American mission to spread democracy, freedom, and liberty by violence if necessary. While recognizing and appreciating the uses of exceptionalism in its historic role in buttressing arguments for greater social justice and the extension of full citizenship to African Americans, I will, for the most part, consider it as a mythology that, historically, has also bolstered American imperialism. These seemingly paradoxical applications of the mythology exist in tension with each other, promoting social justice and liberty on one hand, while limiting autonomy and justifying atrocity on the other. By outlining the trajectory and relevant debates surrounding the mythology below I will elaborate upon the paradox of exceptionalism as liberatory and exceptionalism as imperialistic, in the hopes of coming to a critical perspective on the mythology that is nevertheless sympathetic with anti-oppression movements' appeals to the ideology.

In American Exceptionalism Deborah Madsen argues, “American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans” (1). The notion of American exceptionalism is a pervasive and versatile national mythology that has both shaped and been shaped by such disparate populations, historical moments, ideas, and institutions as the Puritans, the American revolution, capitalism, American imperial foreign policy, abolitionism, romanticism, and

the enlightenment. The multiple uses to which exceptionalism has been put have made this mythology notoriously difficult to pin down into any one discrete definition. What has persisted, however, is the idea that America -- because of its expanse of land, disavowal of feudalism and (supposed) rejection of a rigid class system-- is an exceptional nation in the unique position to provide an example to the rest of the world.

In his essay “A City Upon A Hill: American Literature and The Ideology Of Exceptionalism,” Thomas Byers offers a useful definition of American exceptionalism. Byers characterizes exceptionalism as an imaginative response to both America’s status as the first postcolonial nation and its bourgeois self-definition. He writes, “American exceptionalism is not only the claim that America is different, but that it is unique, one of a (superior) kind—and generally that that kind carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility” (86). Byers argues that America is, in fact, constituted by the ideology of exceptionalism, an ideology that, by definition, is utterly dependent upon certain exclusions. He writes:

By this definition there are certain ways in which America is clearly different that in fact run contrary to exceptionalism as a faith. Perhaps the most obvious is our history with regard to slavery and race. In recent years exceptionalism as faith has undergone a revival in American political discourse; certainly it was one of the staple of Ronald Regan’s appeal to the American people. At the same time we have had the highest rates of murder and incarceration of any developed nation, and we are clearly distinct among the wealthy nations in gaps between rich and poor, in percentage of children living in poverty, and in our lack of a national health system. But these are not the sorts of distinctive attributes that count in terms of the political uses of exceptionalism. Rather, exceptionalism is an ism, an ideology that selectively defines the attributes of the nation in order to justify and celebrate it...Exceptionalism is at once the ideology that we are, and the fact that, as a nation, we are an ideology (rather than simply, for instance, a political entity or a place with a history) (86).

Exceptionalism as faith refers to exceptionalism as an ideology but also, more centrally, to the historical development of exceptionalism as a Puritan view that overlays faith in God with faith in the nation and the Puritan mission. The idea of Puritan mission, as I will expand upon below, was the Puritan belief that God had charged them with the task of building an exemplary Christian nation that would serve as a model for Europe, which was understood as corrupt and in need of rejuvenation. Byers's bold point is important, not only for its position that America cannot be understood apart from its exceptionalist ideology, but also because he points out that, as an ideology, it selectively defines the nation, excluding facts, persons, and events that may threaten this particular worldview.

Byers uses Joyce Appleby's characterization of exceptionalism as an ideology that "projects onto a nation... qualities that are envied because they represent deliverance from a common lot," (419) to argue that America's version of exceptionalism "imagines the nation as both the surpassing of the past and the hope of the future" (85). From this perspective exceptionalism is a way of understanding history as the history of American development and progress in which, "American exceptionalism is a doubly teleological vision, in which all of history prior to the formation of the Euro-American 'New World' was pointed toward this formation as a goal, and in which that 'New World' is not simply a place, but a mission" (86).

This sense of mission originated in the Puritan belief in America as a "City Upon A Hill," as it was termed by John Winthrop. Madsen succinctly characterizes this Puritan mission writing: "Exceptionalism describes the perception of Massachusetts Bay Colonists that as Puritans they were charged with a special spiritual and political destiny:

to create in the new world a church and a society that would prove the model for all the nations of Europe as they struggled to reform themselves” (1). Madsen continues, “therefore, America and Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and at the same time America and Americans must sustain a high level of commitment to this exceptional destiny” (2). In his prominent study, The American Jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch traces the concept of national promise, or exceptionalism, along with the concomitant uncertainty and anxiety of potential failure that accompanies the ideology by looking at the Puritan jeremiads. He argues that the jeremiad, or political sermon, rhetorically transformed America into both a second Eden and New Jerusalem by fusing sacred design with secular history, thus imbuing the events of Puritan migration and settlement with the importance of divine mission. Madsen describes this fusion of the secular and sacred, writing that, “colonial interpretation obscured the difference between secular and sacred selfhood, confusing the two and fusing them in a spiritualized conception of national identity and what it means to be an American citizen” (13). This spiritualized conception of national identity and citizenship originates in John Winthrop’s declaration that the Puritans had entered into a sacred covenant with God.

In the most famous—and foundational--speech of American exceptionalism, “A Model Of Christian Charity,” Winthrop discusses the model New World as a “city upon a hill,” stating,

we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways

of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are agoing (111).

On their voyage to the New World the Puritans' entered into a covenant with God. If they failed to live up to the promise, their new Eden, as Winthrop hints above, like the original, would also vanish into the wilderness and God would, according to Winthrop, "be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant" (111). As this excerpt suggests, the Puritans' divine utopian mission, although understood as predestined, was, in fact, also attended by anxiety about the very real possibility of failure. Crop failure, wars with Native Americans, hunger, and internal strife were among the central anxieties facing the Puritans.

Madsen describes this "federal covenant," as an

agreement or contract by which the Puritan community could expect collective salvation—just as a redeemed individual exhibited the signs of sainthood through pious behaviour, serious demeanour, and the keeping of God's laws and those of the magistrates, so a redeemed community expected itself to be pious, well regulated and observant of divine and civil laws (3).

The federal covenant was always at risk from the disobedience of the community. Madsen writes, "Backsliding by any member of the community would place in jeopardy the salvation of the entire group" (3-4). In Rites Of Assent Bercovitch describes the symbiosis of anxiety and the idea of utopian mission, stating, "The Puritans' vision fed on the distance between fact and promise. Anxiety became their chief means of establishing control. The errand, after all, was by definition a state of unfulfillment, and only a sense of crisis, properly directed and controlled, could guarantee the outcome" (134). This

anxiety is translated in the 1990's into what is commonly known as the "culture of fear," in which fear and anxiety are repeatedly created and fed by the media and the government, among other sources. As I will discuss in greater detail shortly, the Puritan fear of failure has proven to be an extraordinarily versatile and crucial element of the exceptionalist mythology in its ability to contain critique and debate within a closed symbolic system in which any contradictions between the realities of American life and the ideal of America as exceptional, are reconciled as signs of "backsliding" or as failures to live up to the nation's "real" ideals and promise.

### Exceptionalism, Capitalism, and Imperialism

Madsen explores how, as exceptionalism developed, it was redefined as an ideology that bolstered and justified American capitalism, imperialism, and militarism. Madsen writes, "By the eighteenth century the representation of the errand began to resemble the terms of the declaration of independence: the possession of private property, equality before the law, and the freedom to pursue happiness" (35). Joyce Appleby argues that in the pre and post revolutionary period "white Americans came to view the founding of a free and equal people as their calling in the world, and as they did so, their collective remembrance of the diverse purposes that had animated colonial settlements atrophied" (421). Along with the founding of a free people, the mission also came to embrace a free market system. Madsen argues Benjamin Franklin was key to recasting the Puritan notions of success so that material wealth became more important than



collective salvation. Constitutional freedoms, such as freedom of speech and assembly and freedom of religion were equated with a free market, overlaying the re-cast American mission of spreading freedom with the development and dissemination of a free market system. Madsen argues, “the early years of the nineteenth century saw the rising power of exceptionalist mythology translated into the concept of manifest destiny—the belief that the United States was destined to bring a perfected form of democratic capitalism to the entire North American continent” (47-48). Eventually, “American exceptionalism held that the United States was possessed of a sacred mission to bring the Protestant democratic institutions and the systems of free capitalism to all of the regions of North America and beyond” (100).

The combination of exceptionalism as a sort of capitalist narrative and exceptionalism as a sign of American military might explains how the mythology is a crucial ideological underpinning for American imperialism. Beginning with the frontier and Indian wars, exceptionalism has been an ideology of war and military expansion, in which military superiority is an important aspect of the American errand. This aspect of exceptionalism became especially pronounced after the Second World War when American military superiority placed the nation in the position of a world superpower, supplanting the British Empire in the reach of its influence. Madsen writes,

American foreign policy has historically been determined by, first, the myth of American uniqueness and second, by the myth of American political social and moral (and after World War II, military) superiority. These myths encompassed American isolationism and also Manifest Destiny or American imperialism (162).

With this crucial shift in the sense of mission as a mission to spread capitalism, exceptionalism became a mythology that articulates and justifies American imperialism.

Richard Slotkin's theory of regeneration through violence is helpful in understanding the way state violence and imperialism is understood in America. Slotkin argues that the central myth of America is that of "regeneration through violence," a myth that is part and parcel of the exceptionalist narrative of sloughing off the old world's backsliding to make way for a hopeful future. He argues,

the first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means of that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience (5).

This cycle of violence and regeneration, he argues, developed from a "frontier mentality" that conceived of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, and self-reliant individual. Slotkin writes that America's violent history, particularly the 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian wars, justified and propelled the national sense of mission and that this history was turned into a mythology that performs its own sort of haunting by keeping America locked in a cycle of violence and regeneration. He writes:

the voluminous reports of presidential commissions on violence, racism, and civil disorder have recently begun to say to us what artists like Melville and Faulkner had earlier prophesied: that myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living. It is by now a commonplace that our adherence to the "myth of the frontier"...has blinded us to the consequences of the industrial and urban revolutions and to the need for social reform and a new concept of individual and communal welfare. Nor is it by a far-fetched association that the murderous violence that has characterized recent political life has been linked by poets and news commentators alike to the 'frontier psychology' of our recent past and long heritage (5).

It is not surprising that Slotkin was writing in 1973 and referring, of course, to the Vietnam War. Writing of the Bush administration's response to 9/11 in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Slotkin argues that the "frontier psychology" is again operating in the calls for revenge. His harsh criticism of exceptionalism and call for new mythologies is rooted in his knowledge that, by his own admission, mythology holds an enormous pull and plays a formative role in our conception of nationhood and reality itself.

#### Exceptionalism and Literature

Joyce Appleby argues that over-reliance on the category of exceptionalism impairs literary critics' abilities to respond to multiculturalism in America. She argues:

Concepts and theories, of course, deliberately obscure the multiplicity of details in real situations in order to highlight significant relationships. But this involves deciding in advance which human lives and whose social enactments will be counted as significant. And this is an act of authority, not research design. Specifically, the idea of American exceptionalism projected onto the United States a future more significant than its past, encouraging a neglect of the historic diversity of the United States in deference to an imagined time when progressive, cumulative, irreversible processes of change would have worn away the variety in human experience (430).

As Appleby's comments suggest, exceptionalism has traditionally obscured historical conditions in favour of a mythological understanding of the nation that privileges "progress" over other things such as, say, social justice. Appleby's comments are directed at critics who use exceptionalism as the defining criteria for the "Americanness" of an author and his/her works, thereby excluding authors who may understand the nation in

ways not covered in an exceptionalist ethos. Nina Baym's classic essay "Melodramas Of Beset Manhood," takes to task the traditional, exclusionary gestures of American literary critics. She writes, "an idea of what is American is no more than an idea, needing demonstration. The critic all too frequently ends up using his chosen authors as demonstrations of Americanness, arguing through them to his definition" (126). She continues arguing,

Before he is through, the critic has had to insist that some works in America are much more American than others, and he is as busy excluding certain writers as "un-American" as he is including others...Its final result goes far beyond the conclusion that only a handful of American works are very good. That statement is one we could agree with, since very good work is rare in any field. But it is odd indeed to argue that only a handful of American works are really American (127).

That exceptionalism has traditionally been a privileged category in the way we read American literature has been effectively challenged by a number of scholars, including Baym, and by the move towards building a more diverse canon. Although both Appleby and Baym are correct in arguing that critical emphasis on exceptionalism to the detriment of all other ways of imagining is an impoverished and exclusionary approach to American literature, to do away with exceptionalism as an object of critique would be a mistake. After all, neither authors nor critics can escape their cultural and political milieu. While it is only one ideology among a myriad of others that can be said to influence American political and cultural thought, in contemporary American political life the discourse and images of exceptionalism are invoked almost daily—from the neo-conservative celebration of "color-blindness" to justifications of the war in Iraq. Therefore, it is my contention that in order to understand neo-conservatism, American imperialism, and the

current race politics of the US one must also consider the discourse of exceptionalism. And if effective strategies of resistance are to be employed the various modes of critique, including those offered by literature and literary analysis, need to be examined for their full potential. Investigating the ways in which cultural formations and ideologies, like exceptionalism, manifest themselves in creative work is not only interesting and productive, but is part of what Roland Barthes considers the appropriate work of the mythologist. For Barthes, mythology is almost synonymous with ideology. In Mythologies Barthes argues that what we perceive as “natural” in everyday life is an illusory construction made up of signs that function to mask structures of social power. The role of the mythologist, for Barthes, is to expose signs as constructs with an aim to exposing and undoing the underlying power configurations. This is the way I intend to approach exceptionalism in this project.

Richard Slotkin, as I have already mentioned, argues that, unlike the mythologies of most older nations, American mythology is profoundly textual, emerging from political tracts, novels, poetry, and sermons. This raises interesting questions about African American literature’s relationship to the exceptionalist mythology. In her influential essay “Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text” Mae Henderson takes up issues of history and textuality arguing that because slaves were the victims of enforced illiteracy they faced a challenge in trying to “discover a way of organizing memory, of contriving a narrative configuration in the absence of written records” (67). For Henderson, narrative and textuality are central to “re-membering” both slave women’s history and to structuring a sense of self. She continues,

If it is true, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues, that our sense of self, as we have defined it in the West since the Enlightenment, ‘turns upon written records,’ if ‘our idea of the self...is inextricably interwoven with our ideas...of [writing],’ then what are the consequences of an absence of written records? Quite simply and perhaps startlingly, as a slave ‘one’s sense of one’s existence...depended upon memory.’ ‘It was memory, above all else,’ according to Gates, ‘that gave shape to being itself.’ What these remarks do not address, however, is how one formally shapes and derives meaning from disparate memories. In other words, how does one extract a configuration from a cluster of images or diversity of events? How does one, finally, transpose memories from a visual to a diegetic, or narrative, register? Like Morrison, Sethe must learn to represent the unspeakable and unspoken language—and more precisely, as narrative (67).

Given the inaccessibility of written texts, Henderson and Gates’s point suggests that slaves had a fundamentally different relationship to narratives of American exceptionalism not only because they were excluded from active citizenship but, perhaps more importantly, because from its inception exceptionalism has been a written mythology, emerging from political tracts and literature. Henderson’s question-- how does one convert memories, the stuff that gives shape to slaves’ being, from a visual to a narrative register-- presents an interesting question for how to consider the representation of slaves as American citizens. What happens when a slave attempts to become a citizen when her/his memories bear little resemblance to the narratives of nationhood and citizenry? How do these memories –and the attempt to construct a narrative from these memories-- rub up against exceptionalist narratives of the American nation? In Beloved, I will argue, Morrison offers Paul D’s memories of the American landscape as a way of exploring slaves’ unique relationship to the exceptionalist narrative and the conflicts that emerge from their attempts at imagining citizenship.

### Exceptionalism and Contradiction

For Byers, exceptionalism is a highly problematic response to American conditions. Although he acknowledges that the ideology has been creatively productive for American writers, most notably Emerson and Whitman, it has also obscured the lived conditions of many Americans who are excluded from the “American dream.” He writes:

First, there was an obvious contradiction between the ideology of exceptionalism and the material reality of a nation in which all were clearly not in fact equal. The white man’s “own world” was built in significant part by the labor of black men and women he owned, and the ostensibly free and classless opportunity allegedly guaranteed by open land was (or quickly became) more imaginary than real, and in any case depended upon the erasure of the Amerindians and their prior claims to the land. A second, and related, way in which the promise of American exceptionalism was highly problematic was in its going beyond the political to the mystical, beyond history to destiny. Three things must be said about this strain of exceptionalism at the outset. First, it should be taken as a proof and a reminder that imaginary formations do have real material effects: the notion of “manifest destiny” was not merely an apology, but an energizing force, for American imperialism. Second, this sort of exceptionalism has done far more harm than good; the genocidal effects of the doctrine of manifest destiny alone demonstrate this, even without invoking such other ugly aspects as the connection between exceptionalism and the eugenics movement of the early part of this century (89).

Byers makes two excellent points here: first that imaginary formations have real material effects, and, second, that exceptionalism’s erasure of history in favour of visions of destiny has had extraordinarily negative effects. However, by claiming that there is a contradiction between the “real” social condition of America and the ideal of exceptionalism Byers inadvertently participates in exceptionalist rhetoric. Exceptionalism as a mythology that is representative of America as a democratic nation of “free” men has generated a great deal of protest literature concerned with how the real,

lived conditions of Americans—especially women and people of colour—contradict or fail to live up to the national promise of freedom and democracy. This literature has largely employed the discourse and rhetorical strategies of more “positive” exceptionalisms that, in fact, constitute an important and sustaining element of exceptionalist ideology. One important example of this literature is Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in which he invokes imagery of America as a city upon a hill in order to advance the cause of civil rights. In this speech the oppression of African Americans is characterized as a contradiction of the American promise, or dream. As I mentioned earlier, the anxiety of failure that has traditionally attended exceptionalist rhetoric contains these contradictions and transforms them into a sort of unity or consensus by placing them within a closed symbolic system in which not only does opposition exist symbiotically, but where, more specifically, any contradictions between the realities of American life and the ideal of America as exceptional are reconciled as signs of “backsliding” or as failures to live up to the nation’s “real” ideals and promise. While King’s speech is doubtlessly effective in its appeal to exceptionalism—not in small part because of its use of a long-standing American rhetorical tradition—it is also true that this approach has its drawbacks, making it necessary to forge other ways of agitating for social change.

In Rites of Assent, Sacvan Bercovitch argues that the discipline of American Studies was crucial to the development of a discourse that interpreted those facts that did not suit the exceptionalist myth as “contradictions.” He writes,

it was their [Americanists] task to reconstitute history itself as American; and, as we might expect, they did so most appreciatively when they repressed the adverse



facts of American history, or else, more emphatically still, represented these as a violation of the nation's promise and original intent (11-12).

He effectively points out that the oppressive tendencies in America have always been in a reciprocal relationship with what he calls “oppositionalists” or those who oppose the oppressiveness of America. Together, they make up an American tradition that is inseparable—indeed, he argues that many of the “oppositionalists” rely upon the rhetoric of “American destiny,” and are thus crucial to the maintenance of exceptionalist ideology, since, according to Bercovitch, any challenge to the American system is, ironically, afforded an outlet within this hegemonic framework. He writes:

these dissenters, it seemed clear, had miscalculated not just the power but the nature of rhetoric. They had thought to appropriate America as a trope of the spirit, and so to turn the national symbol, now freed of its historical content, into a vehicle of moral and political renovation. In the event, however, the symbol had reconfigured the moral and political terms of renovation—had rendered freedom, opportunity, democracy, and radicalism itself part of the American way. But the results of their miscalculations, as I traced these back through the nineteen hundreds, had unexpected consequences. What I learned from that century-long lesson in co-optation altered my views both of American protest and of the radical outlook I had brought to it. The culture, I discovered had indeed found ways of harnessing revolution for its own purposes; but the ways themselves were volatile, even (to a point) open-ended. They tended toward subversion even as they drew such tendencies into persistent, deeply conservative patterns of culture. In short, the issue was not co-optation or dissent. It was varieties of co-optation, varieties of dissent, and above all varieties of co-optation/dissent. America was a symbolic field, continually influenced by extrinsic sources, and sometimes changing through those influences, but characteristically absorbing and adapting them to its own distinctive patterns. And in the course of adaptation, it was recurrently generating its own adversarial forms. The “alternative Americas” it spawned were (like the originating symbol) ideology and utopia combined. They opposed the system in ways that reaffirmed its ideals; but the process of reaffirmation constituted a radical tradition of a certain kind (19-20).

Bercovitch's argument articulates the dialectic process between criticism and affirmation that the exceptionalist ethos relies upon. Bercovitch goes on to argue,

the theory of co-optation... assumes a basic dichotomy between radicalism and reform, as though one could be for or against an entire culture; as though not to be against a culture fundamentally (whatever that means) was to be fundamentally part of it; and as though one could hope to effect social change by advocating ideas or programs that were alien to whatever held together the society at large – which is to say, to its strategies of cohesion (21).

Further, to be either fundamentally for or against a culture gives rise to its own fundamentalisms. Although I argue that Morrison challenges exceptionalism, she does not take the “oppositionalist” stance that Bercovitch outlines above. Yet, by binding her narratives to American history and African American culture, along with her use of the iconography associated with America (for example, Washington's cherry tree in Beloved) her approach remains embedded in American culture. Morrison's critique then attempts to circumvent the “oppositionalist” position that is crucial to the exceptionalist dialectic yet manages to remain legible in her appeal to American history and use of other equally American discourses and images. Furthermore, she argues that America's “strategy of cohesion” does not necessarily adhere to one ideology, but, rather, that the nation is fundamentally “unified” by its “Africanist” presence and increasingly fundamentalist in its unification.

This unification is demonstrated in Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms when Wilson Jeremiah Moses writes,

The winning of the American Revolution fortified the belief of Americans in their destiny. They came to interpret their covenant as obliging them not only to preserve Christian ideals, but to uphold the natural rights of man. Enlightenment ideology was well in accord with protestant doctrine on the subject of national

purpose. And, yet, there were certain nagging questions in the backs of American minds. If the bondage of the colonies to England was similar to the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, was not the bondage of blacks in America an even more perfect analogy? If Americans, by virtue of the ideals of their revolution, were in fact a covenanted people and entrusted with the mission to safeguard the divine and natural laws of human rights, was there not a danger to the covenant in perpetuating slavery? (31).

These “nagging questions” about slavery represent a new manifestation of the anxieties that inevitably attend exceptionalist rhetoric and ideology. Similar to Moses’s argument is Morrison’s contention in her introduction to Race-ing Justice, En-Gender-ing Power, that national issues are contested and worked out on black bodies. Rather than reading “these nagging questions” as signs of a new-found interest in social justice and “equality” for black people, which, I am sure was indeed foremost in the minds of many abolitionists, they become ways of paradoxically enacting social unity by placing the focus of national anxiety upon slavery and the bodies of African Americans. Perhaps more importantly, this excerpt also demonstrates the importance of what Morrison terms the “Africanist” presence in America to the ideology of exceptionalism.

#### Morrison’s Critical Work and Exceptionalism

By the “Africanist” presence in America, Morrison does not mean to refer to the actual lives of African Americans. Instead, she uses it to mean, “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (6-7). This Africanist presence, Morrison argues is central

to defining “Americanness” and American public discourse, including discourses of exceptionalism. She writes,

In what public discourse does the reference to black people not exist? It exists in every one of this nation’s mightiest struggles. The presence of black people is not only a major referent in the framing of the Constitution, it is also in the battle over enfranchising unpropertied citizens, women, the illiterate....It is there in theological discourse...the concept of manifest destiny and the preeminent narrative that accompanies (if it does not precede) the initiation of every immigrant into the community of American citizens. The presence of black people is inherent, along with gender and family ties, in the earliest lesson every child is taught regarding his or her distinctiveness. Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness—from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrating twentieth century self (65).

In this passage Morrison alludes to many of the elements that characterize exceptionalism, in her references to immigrants’ visions of the American Dream, the lesson of “distinctiveness,” and in her reference to manifest destiny. If, as I have been suggesting, exceptionalism is important to understanding America, a consideration of the Africanist presence in the rhetoric of exceptionalism is necessary.

Bercovitch writes of the exclusion of “others” from the “dream” stating,

America was not (like the Frenchmen or the Latin American) a member of ‘the people.’ ...Thus (in the notorious paradox of the Declaration) he [sic] could denounce servitude and oppression while concerning himself least, if at all, with the most enslaved and inadequately represented groups in the land. Those groups were part of ‘the people,’ perhaps, but not the chosen people; they were in America but not of it (43-44).

While he is correct in identifying that marginal groups of Americans were not defined as the chosen people, it is misleading to say, “they were in America but not of it.” Morrison’s argument shows how, by their very exclusion, African American people were *essential* to the creation of American “unity.” This centrality is hinted at in Madsen’s

statement, “To be perfected, in exceptionalist terms, is to be Europeanized; to be European is to be Caucasian and it is certainly not to be black” (150). In other words, in order to define themselves as exceptional, European Americans required an internal population whom they were exceptional to. As Morrison points out, “in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (38). Morrison later expands on the importance of African Americans to the development of “Americanness.” She asserts,

as a metaphor for transacting the whole process of Americanization, while burying its particular racial ingredients, this Africanist presence may be something the United States cannot do without. Deep within the word “America” is its association with race...American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen...For the settlers and for American writers generally, this Africanist other became the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and aggression; permitted opportunities for the exploration of ethics and morality, for meeting the obligations of the social contract, for bearing the cross of religion and following out the ramifications of power (47-48).

Bercovitch’s understanding of exclusion and exceptionalism also reflects Morrison’s discussion of how literary critics have traditionally assumed that the “canon” of American literature and culture is somehow free of any signs of the Africanist presence. She writes that critics,

hold that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of first, Africans, and the African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence—which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture—has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of

our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States (4-5).

It is Morrison’s contention that the metaphorical uses of race occupy a definitive place in American literature and culture, and that this must be of major concern to scholars who attempt to understand the nation’s culture or literature. Morrison sets as her task in both this lecture and in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” the development of a critical strategy that plays with the paradox of presence in absence, reading in the apparent lacunae and silences of literature and culture traces of this Africanist presence.

Morrison’s critical writing emerges from the context of the post-civil rights era, a period marked both by a hegemonic belief in America as a “color-blind” society and by mounting evidence that the gains of civil rights were inadequate to undoing more than three hundred years of racism. This belief in the “color-blind” society, that America is not racist because the constitution does not discriminate on the basis of race, has been offered as proof of the validity of American superiority. Yet, the discourse of color-blindness is not only an erasure of empirical evidence of racial oppression but is also a discourse that promotes America as a model nation of democracy and social justice at the expense of acknowledging and working to change the actual lived conditions of African Americans. Systemic racism, according to the theory of color-blindness, is rendered invisible, the discourse silencing attempts to draw out systemic inequalities in its overemphasis on legal equality. In other words, American exceptionalism is strengthened by the way America

responds to the “problem of the color line,” even when such responses—such as the belief in color-blindness—operate to the detriment of actual social justice and equality. By seeking the “Africanist” presence in American literature, Morrison makes it impossible to conceive of America as “color-blind” by proving the presence of racial thinking in every American discourse.

In her opening remarks to Playing in the Dark, Morrison writes,

These chapters put forth an argument for extending the study of American literature into what I hope will be a wider landscape. I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use the map to open up as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest (3).

While her allusion to “the mandate for conquest” may seem like an off-hand remark about her commitment to anti-imperialism, it is in fact an important reference to the exceptionalist covenant. She is referring to the covenant as the traditional critical geography that she hopes to extend into a “wider landscape” divorced from imperial conquest in its ethical preoccupation with what has remained “unspoken” in American literary criticism and cultural commentary.

In her remarkable essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” Morrison often employs the language of nation and war to discuss the “Africanist” presence in American literature and to develop reading strategies that are able to read the deliberate absences and silences that attend much American fiction.

Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic

principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested (8).

Morrison explicitly links aesthetics to empire and systems of national defense. What this section highlights is the shocking lack of discussion on matters of state and war in her work, when clearly this is a crucial part of her literary and critical project. Furthermore, it links traditional approaches to American literature and the “canon debates” to American exceptionalism as an imperialist ideology. Her outline of a critical (and literary) method then, is also a strategy that can be used to critique American exceptionalism using the tools of literary criticism.

Morrison discusses “quality,” race, and canon building. In her discussion she develops an approach to canon formation that neither dismisses the term “quality” nor maintains that there can be one universal criterion for determining quality’s meaning.

She writes,

it is to my great relief that such terms as ‘white’ and ‘race’ can enter serious discussion of literature. Although still a swift and swiftly obeyed call to arms, their use is no longer forbidden. It may appear churlish to doubt the sincerity, or question the proclaimed well-intentioned selflessness of a 900 year old academy struggling through decades of chaos to ‘maintain standards.’ Yet of what use is it to go on about ‘quality’ being the only criterion for greatness knowing that the definition of quality is itself the subject of much rage and is seldom universally agreed upon by everyone at all times? Is it to appropriate the term for reasons of state; to be in the position to distribute greatness or withhold it? Or to actively pursue the ways and places in which quality surfaces and stuns us into silence or into language worthy enough to describe it? What is possible is to try to recognize, identify and applaud the fight for and triumph of quality when it is revealed to us and to let go the notion that only the dominant culture or gender can make those judgments, identify that quality or produce it (2).

When quality is defined by the dominant culture it is a term that is nicely aligned with notions of exceptionalism as a state of perfection. The pursuit of a “quality” national



literature both embodies and contains an exceptionalist ethos and is, in fact, a matter of the state. After all, as Baym points out, the quality of American literature has always been determined not by aesthetic criteria, but, rather, by how well it conforms to particular definitions of “America.” “Others” that speak and write on their own terms are a threat not simply to the terms of “quality” but to the conditions of exceptionalism, since what they might have to say about their nation and its literary tradition may not be at all flattering to the dominant construction of America as exceptional and to the ruling classes. Worse, and more threatening still, as in Morrison’s challenge to the canon, they may change the terms of the discourse entirely, moving the definition of American nationhood, its literature, and criticism away from discussions of exceptionalism (or its failures to live up to its liberal ideals) to something entirely new that is based in the experiences of a diverse group of people—this move is far more of a threat as it deflates the notion of exceptionalism entirely. Producing a body of literature and criticism that is truly inclusive is not simply a matter of altering tastes and accommodating a diversity of expression that nevertheless continues to operate under the traditional rubric of “American”, but is, in reality, a more radical gesture that poses a threat to the traditional, hegemonic definition of America—a definition that, because it relies on ideas of its exceptional nature, is also predicated on repression and exclusion.

Morrison develops a reading strategy that seeks out the voids and silences in literature and is thus potentially able to discover what she characterizes as “the ghost in the machine” of American literature and culture. She writes,

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so

stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighbourhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. Looking at the scope of American literature, I can't help thinking that the question should never have been 'Why am I, an Afro-American, absent from it?' It is not a particularly interesting query anyway. The spectacularly interesting question is 'What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?'...the exploration I am suggesting is, how does one sit in the audience observing, watching the performance of Young America, say, in the nineteenth century, say, and reconstruct the play, its director, its plot and its cast in such a manner that its very point never surfaces? Not why. How? Ten years after Tocqueville's prediction in 1840 that "Finding no stuff for the ideal in what is real and true, poets would flee to imaginary regions..." in 1850 at the height of slavery and burgeoning abolitionism, American writers chose romance. Where, I wonder, in these romances is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled? Where does it heighten, where does it dislocate, where does it necessitate novelistic invention; what does it release; what does it hobble? (12).

While this reading strategy is of obvious importance to deciphering the importance of the Africanist presence in discourses of exceptionalism, more importantly for my purposes, Morrison explains how she herself uses a strategy of deliberate silences and absences in her own writing. Morrison performs a close textual analysis of the first lines of each of her novels using this reading strategy—explaining that the spaces are a deliberate part of her writing strategy. Of this reading and writing practice she writes,

These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. That is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness. The reader as narrator asks the questions the community asks, and both reader and 'voice' stand among the crowd, within it, with privileged intimacy and contact, but without any more privileged information than the crowd has (29).

I intend to argue that in Beloved and Paradise Morrison brings African Americans to the fore of her work and in so doing she exposes how they were transformed into "a void"

within hegemonic articulations of America and American exceptionalism. As Morrison tells us in the passage quoted above, she also creates her own paradoxically pregnant absences that are “arresting in their intentionality.” I will discuss the significant absence of a direct discussion of the nation and exceptionalism and its importance to slavery, African Americans, war, and capitalism in the two novels; and how, instead, the lives of African Americans and African American communities become the eyes through which the nation and its mythologies are seen and understood.

This is not intended to be a direct reversal of Morrison’s discussion of the “Africanist” presence, but instead is aligned with bell hooks’ discussion of whiteness in the black imagination. Playing in the Dark is part of an emergence of critical work on whiteness. This work attempts to challenge whiteness as the accepted norm and trace the meaning of whiteness and how it has been historically constructed. Morrison’s discussion of the “Africanist” presence demonstrates how whiteness in America has been inextricably connected to the way white people imagined blackness, and is also therefore an ideological configuration. While much of the work in critical whiteness studies focuses on the construction of whiteness, some, like bell hooks’ essay, “Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” focuses on what whiteness means from the perspective of African Americans and other racial minorities. hooks writes,

In white supremacist society, white people can ‘safely’ imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze...to be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. These looking relations were reinforced as whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks...of relegating them to the realm of the invisible (168).

hooks argues it is necessary to begin investigating the way black people have imagined white people not only to expose the power white people have traditionally held—to terrorize and avoid black people’s gaze---but also to move towards a more comprehensive representation of both whiteness and black subjectivity. My approach to the representation of European American exceptionalism will be informed by both Morrison’s ideas of the “Africanist” presence, her strategy of reading silences in literature, and hooks’ demand to interrogate black representations of whiteness.

Chapter Two: Beloved

“124 Bluestone was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (3). The first line of Beloved is deliberately disorienting, so the reader, like the people coming off the ships of the Middle Passage, find themselves in an unknown landscape without context or a map to guide them. The unknown landscape is, of course, the American landscape, implicitly figured as a land where stolen people are taken, a place whose customs and discourses, like 124 Bluestone, are spiteful and initially inarticulate to the stolen Africans. Beloved’s first line does something else as well. The first words evoke the Blues in the house’s name. The blues comes out of the disappointments of Southern Reconstruction, when the American dream was not extended to free black people as many had initially hoped. Instead, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were marked by extreme violence toward America’s black population, sharecropping that was little better than serfdom, and high levels of poverty among African Americans. The blues, “promised no heavenly grace or home but offered instead a stylized complaint about earthly troubles, a complaint countered, if at all, by the flickering promise of an occasional good time or loving companion” (Norton Anthology of African American Literature 22). Invoking the blues in the first line as well as in the novel’s primary setting, the novel appeals to a tradition in the African American vernacular that is both a response to the failures of the American promise and offers a temporary, imperfect reprieve from earthly injustice and an outlet for complaint that does not seek transcendence or offer utopian hope.

Although much of the critical work on Beloved is implicitly about the American nation, very little of it explicitly places Beloved in a context of what Morrison sees as slavery's central role in the formation of American mythologies, notably exceptionalism, and none links this to the novel's critique of capitalism. While the critical work on Beloved is both productive and necessary in that it correctly treats Morrison's novel as both for and about black people in slavery and constitutes a significant achievement in the field of black feminist criticism, this body of criticism also tends to treat this history as somehow apart from historical and contemporary American mythologies like exceptionalism rather than as crucial to their development. This is an interesting gap in the criticism considering the work on Sethe's attempt to overcome master discourses (as most powerfully argued by Mae Henderson) and develop/re-appropriate her own discourse and narrative. At the same time, when the novel is treated as part of a "larger" American history it is often read as showing how slavery "contradicts" American ideals of freedom and democracy rather than as showing how slavery is part and parcel of these ideals. Deborah Madsen's discussion of Beloved is representative of this critical tendency. Madsen's argument assumes that the history Morrison is accounting for is somehow discrete from rather than crucially linked to a narrative of exceptionalism. On the one hand she does argue that,

it was the abolitionist focus upon America's actual departure from the idealism of the national mythology that introduced race as a troubling element [to the exceptionalist narrative]...Toni Morrison does not rehearse these ideas in her writing; rather, she goes beyond to expose the history that is obscured by an exclusive focus on a narrative of American history that is motivated by the mythology of exceptionalism (150).

While she is correct, on the other hand, Madsen's argument is incomplete. Morrison, I would argue, does say history needs to be expanded from this "exclusive focus"; however, in Playing in The Dark, as I noted in the previous chapter, Morrison argues that the way American culture came to know and define itself is inextricably linked to how it imagined and treated black people. Her assertion that the ideals of the enlightenment, especially in its emphasis on mastery, are created by slavery speaks to a parallel creation of exceptionalism in the new world. Madsen, however, puts black literary works in a binary frame of "oppositionalism" and critique of American for not living up to its exceptionalist ideals (as in the slave narratives) or, in her own overly simplistic reading of Morrison, as discussing a separate, "alternative" history.

### Beloved and Post Civil Rights

Morrison writes in her introduction to Playing In The Dark that her project arises from "what I know about the way writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the ways they tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text" (4). If this is true, then it makes sense to consider the political and cultural climate of the US at the moment of Beloved's writing. In "Politics of Genre in Beloved" Dubey Madhu notes, "Beloved is as much (if not more) a novel about the 1980s as it is about the 1860s and 1870s." Beloved was written during the Reagan years, when just as the president was announcing that a new dawn was coming for America—a direct appeal to renew America's covenant with God and to a

millennial conception of history—the civil rights and women’s liberation movements were fizzling under a neo-conservative regime while the American people themselves, particularly black Americans, were becoming poorer. Moreover, in the 1960s and 70s, the ideology of American exceptionalism had taken a blow with the war in Vietnam, as both American military strength and moral superiority were openly questioned. Omi and Winant argue that, in part, neo-conservatism emerged as a reaction to the convergence of this damage to the exceptionalist myth and the new racial formations that developed as a result of the activism of the 1960’s. While many in the post-civil rights era found the overtly racist language of the new and traditional right disconcerting, the neoconservative emphasis on “colorblind” policies and individual rights and responsibilities was an appealing alternative. Yet such policies perpetuate de facto racial segregation and oppression by failing to account for more entrenched, systemic sources of racism and inequality. By attributing the loss of the American Dream to the advances of civil rights and shifts in the understanding of race, neoconservatives advanced the idea that the way to regenerate America’s fortunes and restore the American dream was through the advance of individual (‘colorblind’) rights over social justice. In 1986 Omi and Winant write,

the right wing reaction [to civil rights] has captured the popular political imagination—its analysis of the ills which beset the nation and its prescription for reclaiming the ‘American Century’ have resonated with large parts of the American public. Popular support for the Reagan administration...testifies to the eclipse of New Deal liberalism and provides political justification for the rightward trend in social policy. Racial policy has been dramatically affected. The Reagan administration has demonstrated its opposition to affirmative action, reconstituted the US Civil Rights Commission in order to fight ‘reverse discrimination,’ relaxed or eliminated government action against racist practices



and institutions, and in general attempted to reverse the political consequences of [1960s advancements in social justice] (141).

Dorothy Roberts's Killing the Black Body, demonstrates the criminalization of black motherhood in the 1980s by showing how the sensationalism surrounding “crack babies” and “welfare queens” was code for the denigration and scapegoating of black mothers. While during slavery the control over black women's bodies focused on increasing black female reproduction for the purposes of profit; with the end of slavery black motherhood increasingly became the locus of American racial policy and control, with the emphasis shifting towards developing ways to curb black reproduction. Beloved's emphasis on motherhood and the radical “choice” Sethe makes by attempting to kill her children is most certainly a reflection of the scapegoating of black mothers for the nation's problems during the Reagan years.<sup>1</sup> Omi and Winant argue that the neoconservative attacks on welfare and the scapegoating of welfare recipients was an attempt to restore faith in America's exceptionalist mission. By placing the responsibility of the economic and social crises of the 1970s (which were caused in large measure by the oil crisis and the war in Vietnam) on welfare recipients (read: African Americans) Reagan was not only able to rescue the myth of exceptionalism from obsolescence, but was able to give the rhetoric a new vigor (126-135). The rise of neoconservative power, then, cannot be understood separately from exceptionalist mythology and the African American presence in America.

At the same time, from the perspective of those actively working towards racial justice, the “dream” was damaged by the disappointments of and backlash against the

civil rights movement, a movement that, as Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech testifies, effectively appealed to the democratic and egalitarian elements of America's mission in order to further the ends of black rights. Despite achieving equal status under the law and desegregation, by the 1970s and 80s black Americans were still disproportionately living in poverty, were more likely to be incarcerated, and were often shut out of powerful positions in government and business. Howard Zinn reports in his discussion of increased poverty and economic disparity during the Reagan years, "at the end of the eighties, at least a third of African-American families fell below the official poverty level, and black unemployment seemed fixed at two and a half times that of whites, with young blacks out of work at the rate of 30-40 percent" (582). The "American dream" that had seemed possible for African Americans with the advent of civil rights was, by the eighties, seeming not only more impossible and more unattainable because of the institutionalized racism present in the confluence of government policy (with the enormous attack Reagan launched on welfare) and American capitalism but the idea of the dream itself was becoming more difficult to plausibly use to advance racial and economic justice. It is against this background of damage to the myth and increasing economic disparity that Reagan adamantly re-asserted its validity, recalling the image of the cowboy, a "good" warrior. Reagan was wildly successful in re-vitalizing the "American Dream" along the lines of American military, cultural, and economic superiority—his success a reminder of the power of national mythology. Reagan's (rather amazing) success in revitalizing this mythology can be seen in its widespread currency in contemporary American politics—particularly in the ways the current

capitalism, she nevertheless upholds the idea of national promise and mission. Virginia Cope argues that “her goal throughout is to reach a land where she imagines she will live the bourgeois life glorified by free-labour ideology, a life in which she will ‘by dint of labour and economy’ be able to provide a safe home for her children” (6). Cope continues arguing that Jacobs’s dream, “is a quintessentially capitalistic one, for the home earned through labour and made domestic through marriage was emerging as the most powerful symbol of the promises of a free and voluntary labour market in which toil would bring material and moral rewards” (11). The Puritan covenant and promise of a New World utopia were at this historical moment being translated into the quintessentially American promise of the free market, a promise Jacobs hopes will be extended to her once she becomes free.

Frederick Douglass’s narrative takes the form of a journey from slavery into literacy and then freedom. It is a sort of quest narrative that, in its broad outlines, echoes the European American journey from Europe to the New World promise of religious freedom and that reaffirms the capitalist and democratic values of the North. In the appendix to his narrative Douglass engages in a lengthy condemnation of Christianity in America that calls on the nation to return to the principles of “true Christianity.” His use of the Jeremiad all at once undermines American claims of their model Christianity by pointing out the hypocrisy in legal slavery and Christian principles, and then calls on it to become a nation of model Christians –something that can only happen with the abolition of slavery. By using the Jeremiad tradition and pointing out the contradictions of slavery to “true Christianity” Douglass appeals to exceptionalist ideology in its impulses to be

both a model democratic nation and a Christian “city upon a hill.” He concludes his narrative writing,

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging myself anew to the sacred cause, --I subscribe myself (369).

The power of this conclusion relies upon the same images of deliverance and sacred mission as the rhetoric of exceptionalism, a conclusion that was surely designed to play on the hold this mythology had on his white audience.

Appeals to exceptionalism are not only a central feature of the slave narrative genre, but may also account for why these two narratives, of the more than six thousand slave narratives written in the antebellum, are not only included but have become prominently featured in the American canon. As Nina Baym argues even works written by authors from “minority” groups, are more likely to be included in the new mainstream canon if their work re-affirms exceptionalist rhetoric. Appeals to the American dream and promise, rather than the sexual, racial or ethnic makeup—or even “quality”—of the authors, she argues, is one of the central criteria for determining the “Americanness” and canonical status of an author. It may be that the criticisms and work of scholars like Baym, among others, including Morrison herself, have been largely successful; yet, while American studies is no longer the exclusive study of the American dream it is still true that those works that do affirm exceptionalist rhetoric hold a prominent place in the American canon. It is notable then that Morrison’s Beloved has achieved canonical status yet the novel does much to disabuse readers of any notion they may have had of the

nation's position as a uniquely democratic, capitalist state, which is often figured in images and narratives of abolition and the democratic freedom offered by the North. While such an exclusion is no doubt because Morrison is not in the position of appealing for abolition, which required using the terms white Americans would be most likely to respond to, the silence is such that it draws attention to itself in its deliberateness. What has been strategically undermined in Beloved is the idea that America, because it abolished slavery, is a model of freedom and democracy, an exceptional nation on the world stage. The idea erupts in veiled allusions and codes (like the chokecherry tree and Paul D's following of the blossoming trees) but always in a way that makes it impossible to think unproblematically of America the beautiful. This unspoken generic code haunts the text just as the ghosts of slavery haunt the nation, covertly reminding the reader that the ghosts of slavery haunt a very specific conception of the nation as a blessed, exceptional nation of the free.

By setting the novel in both the post and antebellum eras Morrison dashes images of American promise, yet also manages to avoid recourse to the language of "contradiction" and failure by using an a-chronological writing strategy that circumvents a progressive historical account. The linear narrative from slavery to freedom is a characteristic structure of slave narratives that allows readers to overlay a history of American development that sees in the text the nation's millennial promise and progression to a democratic, free "city upon a hill." By using an a-chronological structure that bridges the antebellum, Civil War, and postbellum periods, Morrison disallows such a reading of progress and promise, instead privileging a more complex picture of

oppression, freedom, race and the nation that cannot be easily “solved” or contained in narratives of the American dream (and its failures). Morrison, I will presently argue, evokes the language of exceptionalism only to quickly abandon it and shift the terms of the discourse so that the internal lives of slaves can finally be narrated without their stories being co-opted and transformed into symbols of national promise or freedom.

Early in the novel, before *Beloved*'s appearance and before we are told about the infanticide or given solid details about the difficulties and inequalities of the postbellum era, the novel's a-chronological structure does seem to be able to accommodate the progressive journey from slavery into freedom, and thus of American promise. Morrison offers images of the American dream early on, yet she does so in such a way as to highlight the ways in which she is explicitly *not* appealing to this mythology. She uses these images only to alter their meaning and drain the exceptionalist rhetoric of its power later. For example, when Sethe escapes from Sweet Home and meets up with Amy Denver, Morrison writes, “It was the voice full of velvet and Boston and good things to eat that urged her along and made her think she wasn't, after all, just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours” (34). Amy Denver, an escaped white indentured servant, is traveling North for the sole reason of going to Boston (a conspicuously odd and impractical destination as it is an impossibly long journey of more than 500 miles by foot) and buying red velvet. The connection between Boston and the exceptionalist mythology—it is the location of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it has strong associations with the Puritans and with the founding fathers--makes this a positive invocation of exceptionalism as a narrative that, because of the hopeful future it offers

Sethe, is beneficial for survival. This, after all, was part of the original purpose of the exceptionalist rhetoric, to urge the Puritans on their difficult task of building a community in the wilderness. Amy Denver dreams of entering the market as an anonymous consumer, a role she believes will offer her the freedom and equality she has never had in the South. Since at this point the reader knows that Sethe makes a successful escape with the help of Amy Denver, receiving encouragement in the girl's consumer fantasies, this scene seems to suggest the sort of progression from the "hell" of Sweet Home to the free, capitalist north that marks earlier slave narratives.

A more romantic and stereotypical evocation of America's promise of freedom is offered in Paul D's journey to the North. After his experience of imprisonment and humiliation in Alfred, Georgia Paul D., along with the other captives, manages to escape in a remarkable collaborative feat. The men take refuge with a band of Cherokee living in the woods, who, because they distrust the government and recognize the genocidal plans of the state, have attempted to opt out of the nation and any promises and deals the government offers. After the other fugitives have found places to go, Morrison writes,

Paul D. woke up and, finally admitting his ignorance, asked how he might get North. Free North. Magical North. Welcoming, benevolent North. The Cherokee smiled and looked around. The flood rains of a month ago had turned everything to steam and blossoms. "That way," he said, pointing. "Follow the tree flowers," he said. "Only the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone." So he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut, and prickly pear. At last he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. Spring sauntered north, but he had to run like hell to keep it as his traveling companion. From February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms. When he lost them, and found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him. He did not touch them or stop to smell. He merely

followed in their wake, a dark ragged figure guided by the blossoming plums” (112-113).

The freedom and promise of the north and the image of trees in bloom are linked here in a stereotypical romantic image of exceptionalism. The promise of freedom in the north is linked not only to trees but also to spring, a season of renewal and fresh beginnings, much like the promise of the New World. That “the blossoming plums,” a dark fruit that Morrison employs as an image of blackness, guide Paul D. transforms this into a distinctively black vision of American promise. This image, of course, is not the reality that Sethe—or any of the other women in the novel for that matter (with the possible exception of Amy Denver)—experiences in their journey North. Implicitly, then, the image of the free, individualistic abundance promised in the North is figured as masculine. Whereas Paul D. makes this journey alone, with the land itself almost magically offering up a map of freedom, Sethe requires the help of Amy Denver to both birth her baby and help her across the river. Sethe’s journey is fraught with danger because, as Sethe points out when she first hears Amy Denver, every living thing on earth sees black women as prey. So, even as Morrison employs this exceptionalist imagery, she exposes its limitations by showing that because of the constraints of the body, familial ties, and social position, black women do not have access to the same experience of the “magical north” and the iconography and imagery that goes along with such an ideal.

The natural abundance signifying freedom is also implicitly ironic here. The flowers, a transitory occurrence that speaks of the possibility of fruit and future abundance, mark the path towards the North but, as defined by the very “map” itself,



cannot extend into that territory. If the flowers represent freedom and Paul D's journey ends at the place where the flowers no longer bloom then the possibilities the flowers suggest end with his arrival in the North, marking it as a place in which the possibilities and hope for freedom end. The North then is a sort of oasis, an illusion of freedom forever on the horizon and never arriving. Several pages from the end this reading is affirmed when Paul D. muses,

In five tries [at escape] he had not had one permanent success. Every one of his escapes (from Sweet Home, from Brandywine, from Alfred, Georgia, from Wilmington, from Northpoint) had been frustrated. Alone, undisguised, with visible skin, memorable hair and no white man to protect him, he never stayed uncaught. The longest had been when he ran with the convicts, stayed with the Cherokee, followed their advice and lived in hiding with the weaver woman in Wilmington, Delaware: three years. And in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal, weak with the weight of its own stars, he made himself not love it. Its graveyard and low lying rivers. Or just a house—solitary under a chinaberry tree; maybe a mule tethered and the light hitting its hide just so. Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it (268).

In Beloved freedom, especially when it is associated with pastoral images of the land, is never unproblematic—it is always thwarted somehow, qualified. Even Paul D., whose life is spent traveling around and whose story is most closely linked to romantic images of the land does not have a smooth progress from slavery to freedom. Nancy Jesser writes, “Of course, the harsh lesson of freedom in the ‘Magical North’ is that it offers little to combat the racist institutions, whether in the form of chattel slavery or the brutal enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law” (329). Repeatedly, Morrison brings up the fact that the land is not Paul D.'s to love. He is portrayed as homeless, or perhaps more accurately, rootless, in the country in which he was born. Paul D's love for a land that is not his both evokes

the exceptionalist iconography and patriotic rhetoric and takes it away—showing that he does not have the same access to that discourse as white America. Paul D.’s recognition of his alienation from America echoes Bercovitch’s assertion that black people were in America but were not “of America.” As the “other” against which white America defined its chosenness, they did not have the same access to the construction of Americans as a “chosen” people and were not included in its utopian promise. Morrison shows that although he wants to love the land his enslavement prevents full abandonment to that love.

DeKoven remarks that this passage shows a western configuration of utopia because of the way it “evokes the beautiful (withheld rather than promised) land as the nurturant maternal body” (79). In The Lay of The Land Annette Kolodny discusses the American pastoral and its relationship to women and exceptionalism. Discussing the promise of the New World and the pastoral in relation to the construction of a park she writes,

what is probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy [is] a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as essentially feminine, the total female principle of female gratification...it is a realm of nurture, abundance, and unalienated labor within which all men are truly brothers. In short, the place America had long promised to be, ever since the first explorers...described the new continent as a ‘Paradise with all her Virgin Beauties’... along with their explicit hopes for commercial, religious, and political gains, the earliest explorers and settlers in the new world can be said to have carried with them a ‘yearning for paradise.’ When they ran across people living in what seemed to them ‘the manner of the golden age,’ and found lands where ‘nature and liberty affords us that freely, which in England we want, or it costeth us dearly,’ dormant dreams found substantial root (4-5).

Kolodny traces the genealogy of the American pastoral from the English and links it to America's exceptionalist ethos, arguing that the promise offered by the American pastoral was the promise of a real paradise, offered up as a return to the maternal, nurturant land as Eden. Paul D.'s relationship to the land and nation is one of carefully guarded unrequited love, an echo of the enforced motherlessness that permeates the novel. While I agree with DeKoven's argument that Morrison is evoking a utopian image of America through the maternal body, the analysis does not go far enough. What Paul D. actually says is that the land is not his to love. Like the children of slaves who do not legally belong to their parents, Paul D. "hid in its breast...and tried not to love it" (268). He does not deny that the land as mother is a utopia; rather he is quite literally a fugitive and, figuratively, an orphan (with its associations to the "orphaning" that occurs in the expulsion from Eden) in this utopia, a utopia that relies on slavery and exclusion. In her appeal to an image of "mothering" Morrison manages to link the way slavery decimated family connections to the way that whole populations of people were turned into a sort of "orphan" of America, related, yet forcefully severed from its genealogical and mythological inheritance.

The inevitable exclusions of utopia, the exclusions that, in fact, make utopia possible, and not merely the nonfulfillment, or withholding of that utopian world, are evident in Paul D.'s remembrance of how his "visible skin" marked his exclusion. The carefully guarded exclusions of utopia are again evoked when Paul D. explicitly parallels his feeling of unrequited love for the land with Sethe's feeling that she could finally love her children in Ohio. Before Sethe tells Paul D. about the infanticide she states:

Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?" Paul D. did not answer because she didn't expect or want him to, but he did know what she meant. Listening to the Doves in Alfred, Georgia, and having neither the right nor the permission to enjoy it because in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon—everything belonged to the men who had the guns...He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom (162).

Paul D.'s belief that America belongs to the men with guns implies that the utopian, romantic construction of the nation is literally guarded and patrolled by agents of the state who actively work to exclude African Americans. That Paul D. remembers this as he listens to Sethe's account of the infanticide underscores the connection between America's utopian promise as nurturant mother and the loss of Sethe's paradisiacal experience of free motherhood.

However, the exceptionalist rhetoric is not only linked to a utopian America defined by those who are excluded, but by a state of unfulfillment and future hope for the American mission to usher in (at least in the nineteenth century) universal freedom, democracy, and capitalism. For many white Northerners as well as slaves, the hope for the nation's utopian mission was located in abolition. Therefore the American exceptionalist mission was ironically bolstered by the very existence of Southern slavery, a fact that is strongly suggested in Bodwin's longing for the "better" days of abolitionism. While the days of abolition were, for Bodwin, fond memories when he received much public attention as well as a positive definition of his own manhood in the affection he received from women, for the slaves themselves those days were quite different. He thinks,

Nothing since was as stimulating as the old days of letters, petitions, meetings, debates, recruitment, quarrels, rescue and downright sedition. Yet it had worked, more or less, and when it had not, he and his sister had made themselves available to circumvent obstacles. As they had when a runaway slave woman lived in their homestead with her mother in law and got herself into a world of trouble. The Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery. Good years, they were, full of spit and conviction (260).

For Bodwin, slavery –and Sethe’s infanticide--was a way to feel useful and competent, it marks the “good old days,” when he not only worked on behalf of an exceptionalist vision of the nation but still believed such a mission would be fulfilled in his lifetime. Bodwin remembers the “heady days” of abolition. He thinks, “those heady days were gone now; what remained was the sludge of ill will; dashed hopes and difficulties beyond repair. A tranquil Republic? Well, not in his lifetime” (260). This scene, coming at the end of the novel, brings up the exceptionalist aspirations of abolitionists and the hope that America, once slavery was abolished, would finally become the city upon a hill, the ideal republic of free men. Instead, there are “difficulties beyond repair” and he is ambivalent about the possibility of a “tranquil republic.” Although the reader should not doubt his good intentions-- his work undoubtedly furthered the cause of justice and improved the lives of many of the characters (he did prevent Sethe’s execution) nevertheless, slavery was also a way for him to demonstrate his own moral convictions, and more importantly, it provided a way for him to exercise these convictions on behalf of the nation. He fails to recognize that his own racist behaviour and attitude is part of the “sludge of ill will” and that social justice, not personal satisfaction, was the aim of abolition. Bodwin’s longing for the days of abolition, which, for him, was the work of utopia and American mission, is literally

dependent upon slavery—once slavery is over so are his (and Schoolteacher's) best days. Bodwin, then, also signifies a critique of the white liberal establishment post-civil rights.

As Bodwin's longing suggests, much of the novel's conclusion takes up the themes of disappointment and the absolute betrayal of the nation's exceptionalist mission.

Stamp Paid recalls the brutality of the postbellum years,

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. Stank up off the pages of the North Star, out of the mouths of witnesses (180).

Slavery was abolished in 1865, so by cataloguing this list of horrors, Morrison again makes it clear that the narrative is not about national promise, nor is it about national failure. It is an attempt to get at what these years were like for slaves and their descendents, an exploration that would be incomplete if it did not consider their disappointments in their aspiration for social and political justice. Nancy Jesser argues that,

Morrison's historiography provides a way of escaping the notion of millennial progress. By eliminating the possibility of an end time, she makes us pay attention to history, not as an already written story condemning us to act and suffer in roles assigned to us by a damaged and damaging past, but as an unfinished process and a working through of traumatic events and daily, repeated violences (327).

Jesser's argument gestures toward, but does not fully articulate, the ways in which Beloved can be read as a challenge to America's exceptionalist narrative.

Exceptionalism's emphasis on building a perfect earthly paradise depends upon a

millenarian view of history in which a future golden age of peace, justice, and prosperity, typically predicated on an end to the existing world order, comes into existence. By setting Beloved in the Antebellum, Civil War, and post-bellum periods, Morrison is able to blur the distinctions between these periods in a way that upsets a progressive vision of the nation. While Stamp Paid and Paul D. both initially express their willingness to believe in a millennial vision of national progress it seems that their willingness is a set up—we are given brief glances of their belief in exceptionalist America only to see it knocked down. Morrison suggests the exceptionalist narrative only to mark its absence. Not to rail against the nation's failures in her own novelistic jeremiad, but to say something else about the internal lives of slaves and to suggest alternate ways of imagining freedom and community. She registers the disappointment and the bitterness at the nation's failure to extend its ideals of freedom, equality, justice and democracy to her characters, but not in such a way that the novel tips over into the realm of the jeremiad. It is important that she sets the narrative present during the reconstruction, because during this era America and Americans sought to reconstruct the nation according to the Puritan vision of the city upon a hill. (Norton Anthology of African American Literature 461-462). By refraining from this language Morrison not only alters the slave narrative but also comments on the progressive narrative of the reconstruction.

Morrison, however, is not content to simply register her characters' disappointment in the failure of abolition to extend the promise of freedom and democracy to African Americans—or for their disappointment in the ability of that freedom to combat racist violence and exploitation. As I have already suggested in the

discussion on Bodwin Morrison also shows how the construction of America as either a land with a god-given mission or as a utopia is, at least in part, predicated on the existence of slavery and (in the postbellum) racism. Again, one of the most telling ways in which she registers this critique is through images of the land and trees. In Sethe's initial description of rememory Morrison writes, "Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing" (6). In this description of rememory, the scent of the trees is linked to the intrusion of memories of slavery. The ink that Sethe makes for Schoolteacher is made from cherry gum and oak bark and is connected to memory. The connection of the much-discussed ink with the trees that, according to Arthur Redding "forest this novel" (169), links the discursive construction of race and Schoolteacher's proto-eugenic ledger with the land. It is from materials provided by the American landscape, a landscape that Paul D sees as utopian, and that was constructed as utopian by the Romantics, that Schoolteacher is able to write his narrative of racial and sexual domination. Immediately then, Morrison is dissociating trees from a romantic construction of the nation's promise of freedom and associating them with slavery. For Sethe, a cherry tree does not mean Washington or New World promise, instead it is bound up not only with memories of brutality and enslavement but with the way in which she was forced to participate in her own domination in her task of making the ink. The smell of the trees are not there, yet we are meant to understand that their presence would also have the power to evoke Sethe's "rememory" of slavery. By describing the



evocative potential of these trees through the absence of such evocation reminds the reader of the absence of the American dream symbolism that is so often linked to trees. By creating such a void Morrison opens up room to create new and different associations with the trees that both critiques the narrative of exceptionalism that is written on and by these trees and also allows the trees to tell a different story, that is just as American and just as rooted in the landscape, memory, and history of America. By doing this Morrison manages to change the iconography of exceptionalism, loading it with the weight of slave memory and the brutality of that history.

For Sethe the American pastoral, a mode that is bound to exceptionalist ideology, does not evoke feelings of national promise or unity, but rather every “leaf on that farm” makes her want to scream. The trees and Sweet Home are loaded with both the pastoral iconography of exceptionalist narratives and with Sethe’s personal experiences of them as sites of brutality. Morrison writes,

Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off—on her carelessness in taking a shortcut across the field just to save a half mile, and not noticing how high the weeds have grown until the itching was all the way to her knees. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; of Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that (6).

Shame is mentioned twice in this passage in relation to the tree imagery. The trees are shameless and Sethe is ashamed of her memory of the beauty of the trees. This association seems to me a way to shame the nation's lack of historical memory in favour of narratives of a utopian new world but it is a gentle shaming, that acknowledges the power of beautiful and persuasive iconography of the American pastoral that is able to "beat out" the historical reality of lynching. The image of lynching, evocative of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," a song that is also a powerful critique of exceptionalism and racism in America, makes this tree iconography an accessory to murder and to slavery. The murderous uses and associations of the land are not figured as contradictions of its beauty, which in the logic of American exceptionalism would be its "real" essence or existence; rather, Morrison says "It never looked as terrible as it was" a statement that privileges the material conditions of slavery as the "reality" of Sweet Home and its pastoral beauty as the contradiction of this reality. This is a significant reversal of exceptionalist rhetoric in that it resists positing the ideal as the "real" essence of America, a tradition that transforms material conditions—and any attempts at critiquing these conditions and striving for social justice—into "contradictions" of a paradoxically "real" ideal. In this way Morrison immediately attempts to shift her critique towards one that privileges the historical material conditions of America. Slavery and the pastoral, utopian, image of America are inextricably bound here, suggesting that the pastoral of Sweet Home is inextricable from the existence of slaves. This, of course, is literally true given that it is the slaves' unpaid forced labour that makes Sweet Home what it is. DeKoven writes that Sweet Home

is Morrison's ineluctably clear indictment of the possibility of utopia in a slave country. The acerbic irony of that plantation's name exceeds its allusion to 'home Sweet Home,' forcefully undercutting America's claim to Edenic status. As in Eden, the power of naming at Sweet Home belongs to the patriarch; in this case, in this country, he is the white patriarch (78).

Morrison shows that for an ex-slave, participation in this construction and naming of the American landscape is highly problematic, because, as in Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," the beautiful landscape is not only marred with the memories and images of violence and lynching but is literally cultivated by the unpaid labour of slaves.

Of course the most obvious way in which Morrison invokes tree imagery is in Sethe's scars, which Amy Denver tells her resemble a chokecherry tree. As I've already noted, Sethe's journey looked nothing like Paul D's series of blossoming trees. Instead, what bloomed was a "tree" of scars on her back. Paul D.'s journey through the blossoming trees offers one explanation for Amy Denver's assertion that Sethe's back was a chokecherry tree in blossom. Not only does it (helpfully) remind Sethe of her fertility as reason to stay alive, but blossoming fruit trees are also linked to romantic images of America and freedom in the novel. Amy Denver then, consciously or not, links this mound of sores with Sethe's escape from slavery to construct an image (an image she clearly believes in given her utopian imaginings about Boston and velvet) of freedom either to serve her own image of the nation north of the Mississippi or to serve Sethe's escape, to remind her of the promise that lay beyond the Ohio and that she is almost free. That Sethe can't see this construction of herself is significant. It suggests that although the ability to construct a romantic, abstract image of hope and progress is something she does not have direct access to it is also a narrative that is violently and intractably written

all over her body. She provides the imaginative ground upon which such a construction of the nation is possible. The chokecherry tree is an ironic condemnation of constructions of American freedom—of the American north as a pastoral place of freedom and the blessed. After all, Amy Denver twice remarks about the sores “What God have in mind?” evoking a divine pattern of historical progress. DeKoven alludes to the utopian association of the tree by way of its allusion to Genesis, “The tree planted on Sethe’s back by Schoolteacher’s student’s whip is the Edenic tree of knowledge with a vengeance. There is no possibility of antebellum utopia in Beloved, because, simply, of slavery” (78).

If, as has been variously argued, the chokecherry tree is Sethe’s history branded on her back it is important then to consider what history it is telling. It tells the history of slavery and sexual violence in service of the state and economic exploitation (as has been argued by Henderson and others). But it also tells the story of exceptionalism translated through the American romantic tradition. The chokecherry tree parallels the blossoming trees of Paul D.’s escape and is also an image that fits Amy Denver’s belief in the freedom and beauty offered by the north. The chokecherry tree then, is an ironic critique of exceptionalist narratives that, because it is inextricably yoked to the violent sexual exploitation Sethe suffered under slavery, that makes exceptionalism impossible to invoke without also simultaneously invoking images of slavery, dehumanization, and sexual exploitation. If Morrison is warning against making beautiful stories out of the pain of slavery she is also warning against creating beautiful stories about reconstruction and the progress and exceptional status of a nation that has abolished slavery.

Redding points out, “a wilderness throngs at the borders of any provisional solace that can be cleared in and from a past that is nothing less than a tribunal of brutality, just as the woods ring the clearing, where Baby Suggs preaches” (169). Redding looks at trees in Beloved in terms of dismembered genealogies (family trees), as menacing, and, most importantly (for his purposes) as haunted with the bodies of lynched black people. He explores the ghosts of Beloved and the way multiculturalism haunts American history and identity. By the term ghost he means,

that which survives, singular, jealous, persistent, and beckoning—specters, absences that refuse to absent themselves, which would rise from the graves to which a national history has hastily consigned them. For me, this is the manner of muckraking appropriate to a haunted contemporary American cultural theory (176).

Redding writes of Beloved, “the pull of the slaughtered, the sacrificed, is insistent, selfish, dangerous, and its gravity works against the American myth of individualist mobility and self-reliance, of flight away from the strictures of the social” (169). Redding makes an excellent point here. The ghosts in Morrison’s work function so that the present can never be conceived as solitary and independent just as individuals themselves are not solitary but are burdened with the ghosts of the past. This haunting, then, given that it disturbs the myth of individuality disturbs the romantic vision of America. Further, as Baby Suggs points out, every house in America is filled with the ghosts of black people, meaning the ghosts of Beloved are also something of a national curse. Haunting then dispels any claims to exceptional status, since as a cursed nation America is adamantly unblest.

Redding links problems of developing or maintaining a “unified” community within a multicultural nation to the construction of national history. He uses the idea of “ghosts” and haunting as a framework to investigate, “the resonances of a haunted past within the context of a multicultural society” (173). He writes,

ghosts may be historically situated, and they may be produced as that which cannot be said—the unspeakable—in order for the fantasy of nation to maintain itself. Infanticide, a condensation of the many unspeakable ‘sins’ at the heart of Beloved, is a symptom of ... historical pathology (173).

He continues arguing that, “Given the difficulties of producing a fantasy of a ‘national’ heritage in so large, heterogeneous, and complex a country as the United States, ‘a country of plural memories and diverse traditions’ and an achievement at best, of staggering violence, we are afloat rather than rooted in history” (173). His argument echoes the idea of the exclusions and contrasts necessary to construct America as an exceptionalist nation. Redding concludes,

the dead demand that we interrogate the alternative possibilities that seem to have withered and disappeared. In other words, the ghost is a figure by which we might imagine bridges across difference, but also recognize—and honour—that which is lost or sacrificed in any act of exchange or translation of history—that which is abandoned, left behind (180).

Redding considers ghosts to be a haunting that problematizes American history. He writes,

in what I term the abortive epic of American expansion, examples of which range from the Leatherstocking tales to the Cold War western cinema, the cultural entombment, the ceremonial purges and the banishment of ghosts—the ghosts of difference—to their proper place, fails, over and over again. Entombment is a policy of cultural inscription and ascription, pursued through means of Indian removal, for example, slavery, genocide, ghettoization, misogyny, a centuries long effort, as Hortense Spillers writes to, ‘keep difference under wraps’ (167).

In other words, America is supposed to be a place without ghosts. His framework provides an excellent way of approaching the multiple references to ghosts, as well as the phenomena of rememory, as a strategy by which Morrison forces a reconsideration of exceptionalism. Morrison's own suggestion in Playing In The Dark invites such a reading. She writes, "We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized" (46). Pointing to the Africanist presence in the narrative of innocence Morrison asks what, exactly, is it that Americans are so insistently innocent of? Redding astutely recognizes that, "Hauntings entangle progressivist myths and narratives of destiny, insofar as narrative participates in assigning borders, limits, and places to threatening aspects of excess and difference" (178). Therefore, the haunting of America in Beloved, along with its a-chronological structure, makes it impossible to project a progress model of history onto the text and onto the story of slavery.

Redding's exploration of ghosts in the novel suggests another way in which Morrison complicates America's exceptionalist narrative. As I discussed in the introduction, Richard Slotkin argues that the central myth of America is that of "regeneration through violence," a myth that is part and parcel of the exceptionalist narrative of sloughing off the old world's backsliding to make way for a hopeful future. Slotkin argues it is only by recognizing and tracing the material roots of these mythologies that people can begin to consciously alter them. Ghosts in Beloved serve as a way around the pattern of regeneration through violence. While on the one hand ghosts

can be seen in terms of resurrection this is not entirely appropriate since ghosts, according to North American common sense assumptions, typically engage in repetitions of the past, are somehow “stuck” on the earthly plane, and have some sort of unfinished business that needs to be taken care of before they can be fully excised. Morrison’s own conception of ghosts is rooted in African American culture. She claims that growing up, ghosts were simply a matter-of-fact part of life; to question their existence was akin to questioning the existence of germs. Ghosts’ haunting then cannot be seen as regeneration but as an impediment to regeneration. They neither allow the violence of their deaths to be forgotten, nor do they allow for any traditional form of renewal or re-birth. After all, ghosts are the trace of what has died or been destroyed—they are history as palimpsest, rather than history as regenerative cycle. They trouble regeneration because they refuse to be destroyed—in both of Morrison’s novels that I consider here the ghosts, even when they seem to be excised or gone, still lurk with the potential to resurface again in the future. In their refusal to vanish they do not allow the living to regenerate themselves through the destruction of the now ghostly other. By no means do I suggest that all ghosts are negative presences; on the contrary, haunting can be a powerful refusal to submit to oppression or destruction. While the idea of ghosts as spectres of a history that refuses to vanish may imply that there is no hope of liberation or reprieve extended to future generations I think that it is this idea of hope through the killing of others that both novels considered here attempt to disturb and shake up. There is something morally perverse about offering hope through the deaths of others, especially when those deaths are part of an institutional structure of racism and/or genocide, and it is a perversity that



the ghosts (half) embody and refuse to allow. The hope that is offered, if hope is what one must search for in the endings of novels that stare into the lived conditions of oppression, must be discovered in another plane and not in the fates of the dead. The hope, instead of residing in the successful killing of “others,” and exorcism of those others’ ghosts, is to be found in how the living respond to the haunting. This is quite a different relationship between sacrifice and redemption than that outlined by Slotkin. Hope for the future then lays in the decisions the reader and the living characters in the novels make. In this way, the novels walk the edge between a sort of nihilism and hope. The appropriate response to these ghosts, Morrison seems to suggest in the conclusion’s repetition of “this is not a story to pass on” (275) is to neither repress them nor allow them to impair life in the present.

### Economy

If Morrison is shifting the discourse on America away from exceptionalism and regeneration through violence, it is important then to consider what (if any) alternative vision she proposes. By looking at the alternative economy she proposes I will argue that Morrison is attempting to conceive of a new, incomplete, distinctly imperfect vision of America and community. In Balancing The Books Erik Dusserre makes it clear how justice became conflated with the market through the privileging of the ledger, a document that is all about balance and equivalency. His argument provides one explanation for how America’s mission has so easily been accepted as the mission to spread American justice and freedom by way of the market. Discussing slavery as a

model of an American non-capitalist economy, Dusserre asks, “how does one criticize market capitalism without recourse to nostalgia for slavery, or at least a nostalgia for the racial boundaries by which communities tend to define themselves?” (99). Ultimately, however, he argues that Morrison figures the market as more or less positively associated with freedom and that self-ownership is presented as an almost entirely unproblematic route to freedom. Given the cataloguing of horrors associated with any ownership of humans, and Sethe’s unanswered question at the end that positions her as a “thing” this is a highly dubious conclusion. Instead, I argue that Morrison is attempting to appropriate and hybridize the gift economy of the South to make it available as an antidote to the rather significant abuses of the Northern free labour market. Rather than setting up a dichotomy that equates southern agrarianism with the past that Northern capitalism transcends in its democratic mission, she is trying to imagine a different economy that is not entirely foreign to the language and mythology available to Americans but that nevertheless avoids positively equating capitalism with progress, freedom, and democracy. Dusserre hints at such a reading of the novel but does not adequately follow through on this reading when he argues that Morrison

is concerned with the dilemma facing blacks in the wake of slavery, for whom freedom means coping on some level with economic structures that once enslaved them. She elaborates the dangers and possibilities for black economic success and entry into the middle class, the question of whether the African American dream lies in the journey from the slave market to the free market (11).

Dusserre outlines how the ledger made is possible to effect a “quantification of qualities” in which unlike things were made comparable through their economic value. Obviously, this ability to drain specificity in the process of commodification is central to the ability

of slaveowners, as exemplified by Schoolteacher's ruthless calculations, to dehumanize their slaves and equate them with commodities. Beloved, he argues, registers a strong critique of such balance sheet logic. He writes,

The dangers of balance-sheet logic are made clear in Morrison's own chillingly parodic version of the ledger: the chart that the slave owner, schoolteacher, asks his students to keep concerning the slaves...The form of this written chart, with its precision and balanced columns, recalls the ledger –a quantitative, clinical, and objective means of describing human action and being. By having Schoolteacher delineate Sethe's supposed human and animal attributes, Morrison renders explicit the ability of accounting to assert equivalency between human slave and animal livestock (27).

Therefore, Dusserre argues, "given such a set of accounts, Morrison creates her narrative specifically out of the knowledge that the books can never be balanced" (27). If the books can never be balanced and America conceives of freedom and justice in terms of such economic balance, what then does Morrison propose as a route towards achieving a sort of "imbalance" that is also just? The answer, I think, lies in her delineation of the gift economy.

In The Gift, Lewis Hyde outlines the gift economy as it relates to artistic production and the imagination. His outline of an economy of the gift is useful in thinking about the way Morrison tracks how the gift operates as an ideological cover for a system as exploitative as slavery, a system that could more appropriately be called a theft economy. Because gift exchange is inherently unequal, resulting in indebtedness on the part of the receiver, it is easy to see why the language of giving, rather than taking, serves as an ideal ideological cover for the actual exploitation and coercive nature of exchange under slavery. Hyde argues that one of the key ways in which the gift differs from the

market is that it creates a debt, or imbalance whereas the market must always maintain at least the illusion of balance. This imbalance, however, while it can be a sign of power differential and status, as in the Southern antebellum gift economy that I will discuss below, it also significantly differs from the market in that it creates an emotional bond between giver and receiver whereas in the market economy no such emotional bond need exist.

In Honor and Slavery Kenneth Greenberg discusses at length the relationship between slavery and the gift economy. He writes:

The institution of slavery was deeply implicated in the meaning of gift giving in antebellum Southern society. Between master and slave, gifts could only flow in one direction. A slave could own nothing and therefore could give no gifts. One of the central characteristics of the condition of enslavement, as seen through the eyes of masters, involved the inability to give gifts. Similarly, since a slave could make no contractual or other demands on a master, everything he or she received came as a gift. According to the logic of the slave regime, masters did not give gifts to slaves only at Christmas. All transactions involved the giving of gifts; food, clothing, and shelter were supplied as gifts by the master. The same was true of nonmaterial transactions. Every “howdy” or kind word that a master bestowed on a slave assumed the form of a gift. Clearly, market and other motives frequently played a role in a master’s decision to supply the necessities of life to slaves. Masters would make no money if slaves died of malnutrition or exposure. The neighbours might gossip about a master who dressed his slave in tattered rags. The slaves would not work if they were not properly supplied. But these kinds of selfish motives are often present in gift exchanges, and they need not fundamentally change the nature of the transaction in the mind of the giver (65).

Looked at through the lens of Greenberg’s analysis, Schoolteacher and Garner differ primarily in their relationship to the gift. Schoolteacher is more willing to nakedly keep his mastery in the realm of (supposed) biological and scientific superiority, whereas Garner defines his masculinity, ethnic identity (white Kentuckian), and mastery by the

level of his benevolence. Ultimately, both Garner's and Schoolteacher's methods are exposed to be two Janus faced images of master-slave relationships, which can never be redeemed.

Although Schoolteacher also uses the language and logic of the gift, he is far more explicit about the profit motive underlying the master-slave relationship. Schoolteacher's profit-based form of mastery is exploited by Sixo who, when he is caught stealing a pig, outlines the economic benefits he was "giving" to Schoolteacher by his actions. Sixo recognizes the interaction between profit and the gift, exploiting Schoolteacher's stinginess. In the gift economy of Southern slavery by claiming the role of "giver" Sixo insults Schoolteacher's masculinity and claims for himself the role of honorable Southerner.

Greenberg also outlines the gift in relation to emancipation:

The gift relation was just as deeply implicated in emancipation as it was in slavery. Prior to the abolition of slavery, masters could liberate individual slaves only by rewarding them freedom as a gift. Slaves could never purchase themselves in market transactions because they could give nothing to their masters. Masters might permit slaves to purchase themselves, but that was only a roundabout way of giving slaves a valuable gift. But an emancipation that assumed the form of a gift from the master could only be partial. Because one of the distinguishing characteristics of a master was the ability to give gifts, and one of the distinguishing characteristics of a slave was the inability to give gifts, an emancipation that assumed the form of a gift paradoxically reconfirmed the master-slave relationship. Such an emancipation might destroy the legal institution of slavery without attacking the heart of the dependency relationship—at least as it appeared in the minds of the masters (66).

Baby Suggs recognizes this "partial" emancipation when Garner drops her off in Ohio after Halle has bought her. As Garner lists off the ways in which he is a benevolent master, figuring her freedom as a gift given to her by both him and Halle, she recognizes

that he has made an excellent profit off of her while still possessing her son, his labour, and any money he may earn.

Trudier Harris addresses coin imagery and how it is related to images of debt, gift, and money in Beloved, and asks if, “the very psyches of these former slaves [have] been so saturated with the prices placed on them (Schoolteacher taught Paul D ‘the dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future’) that they cannot conceive of worth in any other way?” (334). Harris differentiates between ownership and possession in a way that links economics in Beloved to the haunting, or possession, that permeates the novel. She writes,

Ownership and possession are characteristic of slavery. They reflect the monetary exchange involved in that system of dehumanization as well as the psychological control usually attendant upon the physical imprisonment. I am using ‘ownership here to refer to the practice of masters having legal rights to the bodies and labor of their slaves. I am using possession to refer to the psychological dimension of the relationship, in which masters were able to convince some slaves to believe in the institution of slavery and to concede that their situation was hopeless (330).

Harris argues this possession was achieved in a variety of ways including isolation tactics like the destruction of family units and linguistic codes to physical punishment. She writes, “all of these tactics were everyday reminders to slaves that the masters possessed their very minds and memories—had indeed erased if not destroyed their histories—even as they owned their bodies” (330).

Harris argues Stamp Paid is a prime example of somebody who was owned but not possessed in slavery and who learns to separate his vision of himself from the vision of the slaveholders. She writes, “when he actually frees his body, he turns to collecting what slaveholders owe black people by ferrying recently escaped slaves into the free

territory...His activities are also a recognition of what he articulates as his debt to his fellow blacks” (330). Perhaps Stamp Paid’s actions can be read as a challenge to capitalism. He is the one character in the novel who considers everything in terms of exchange and economy. He considers his ticket paid because he acquiesces to the rape of his wife. He shows how everything, even rape and psychological trauma, is translated into a financial transaction under capitalism. He seems to agree with this and attempts to find ways to use the system to free black people. So, if everything, even human emotion and sexuality is reduced to a financial transaction that then means that slaves can buy their way out of slavery with the capital they accumulate through trauma. This is the genesis of his name Stamp Paid. Morrison writes,

with that gift, he decided that he didn’t owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off...so he extended his debtlessness to other people by helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery. Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; give them their own bill of sale, so to speak. ‘You paid it; now life owes you.’ (185)

Here, Stamp Paid’s logic is a complex blend of the economy of the gift and capitalist economy that manages to translate human suffering under slavery into a sort of currency. By giving his wife he ironically moves from the economy of the gift—where his labour, sexuality, intimate relationships, and emotions are all given, to the logic of capitalism in a way that serves his own freedom. Then, because he considers himself free, because he is no longer obliged to give, he is able to shift back into an economy of the gift in a way that is helpful to other slaves. He is able, in other words, to pull people out of the slave economy through a modified market that accepts trauma as currency, in order to move

back into the realm of the gift to “give” other slaves their freedom and to place them in a position of being owed rather than owing.

Reading Stamp Paid as locating freedom in the gift economy is consistent with Greenberg’s thesis. Although Greenberg is critical of the Southern gift economy’s relationship to slavery, he differentiates between the gift *giving* that disguises the exploitative economic relationship of slavery with a veneer of benevolent paternalism and marks relations of domination from gift *exchange*. He writes,

gifts involved more than degradation when they were part of a system of gift exchange among men of honor. Gifts flowed in only one direction in the master slave relationship. Men of honor, on the other hand, both gave and received gifts. To be immersed in a system of reciprocal gift giving was to be part of a community of free men. In fact, gift exchange was one of the defining features of that community (70).

Of course, in the pre-Civil War South, only white men could be “men of honor;” for a black man to enter into a gift exchange was a highly subversive act.

While much has been written about the party scene in Beloved, critics have not discussed the implicit comparison Morrison makes between the economy (and the way lives are lived in this economy) of the party and the economy under slavery. Yet, this comparison is invited. Not only is this the apex of what is explicitly called the only 28 free days of Sethe’s life, it is also the economy of the party that is both the source of its pleasure and, ultimately, the source of the community’s suspicion. I quote the scene at length because it is significant enough to deserve an extended consideration.

But the baby’s thrilled eyes and smacking lips made them follow suit, sampling one at a time the berries that tasted like church. Finally Baby Suggs slapped the boys’ hands away from the bucket and sent Stamp around to the pump to rinse himself. She had decided to do something with the fruit worthy of the man’s labor and his love. That’s how it began. She made the pastry dough and thought she



ought to tell Ella and John to stop on by because three pies, maybe four, were too much to keep for one's own. Sethe thought they might as well back it up with a couple of chickens. Stamp allowed that perch and catfish were jumping into the boat—didn't even have to drop a line. From Denver's two thrilled eyes it grew to a feast for ninety people. Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry. They woke up the next morning and remembered the meal-fried perch that Stamp Paid handled with a hickory twig, holding his left palm out against the spit and pop of the boiling grease; the corn pudding made with cream; tired overfed children asleep in the grass, tiny bones of roasted rabbit still in their hands—and got angry. Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati—over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make punch—became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug. 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and her job alone (137).

The answer to the question “where did she get it all” is, presumably, that it came from the guests, from other people who reciprocated the gift until it turned into a large feast. Baby Suggs' wish to extend the gift beyond a reciprocal exchange with Stamp Paid comes from her desire to not accumulate “property” but to stay in the realm of the gift where, in the act of exchange or giving, property perishes for the giver.

The party is implicitly contrasted with the stinginess of Sethe and Halle's wedding, the only other celebration in the novel, for which, significantly, they have to steal all of the traditional accoutrements of the ceremony. This contrast plays up the difference between the gift and theft economy. The party is a source of both regeneration (that counters Slotkin's regeneration through violence) and generates bonds between Sethe and the community. Although they sour, these bonds ultimately compel the community to give Denver food when they see the family starving. This implies that the

women eventually come to understand the gift economy as a source of care and regeneration that is quite different from the “gifts” they were forced to give—something that is otherwise known as theft-- under slavery. This theft economy—as opposed to the gift economy—is perhaps most clearly and powerfully illustrated in the language Sethe uses to describe her rape. She repeatedly describes the trauma as an effort to steal her milk, an act that is quite different than the way she ardently desires to give her milk to her children for nourishment once she is out of slavery.

However, I think Beloved also effectively shows how a gift economy can, potentially, provide an alternative to a capitalist economy and exceptionalist ideology. The problem, she seems to say, is that people’s perception of the gift has been unduly influenced by the way it is used as an ideological cover and does not lie in the economy of the gift itself, a reading that points to the damaging effect slavery has on generosity and giving. The gift is a system of exchanges that results in an imbalance that can counter the “balance” of the market, and more importantly, leaves people interconnected by emotional debt-bonds. While the emotional debt-bonds of the gift are certainly open to exploitation these bonds can also constitute a reprieve from the alienation that characterizes the market. The party scene is key to understanding how the system of gift is at first embraced, then mistrusted by the community, who misinterpret the event as a sign of their own enslavement and poverty, as well as an attempt by Baby Suggs to assert superiority. They see the party as a display of the exceptional nature of Baby Suggs and of the amount of goods and status she and her family have accumulated. They begin to see Baby Suggs as too proud, and because of this they fail to warn her of Schoolteacher’s

impending approach to take Sethe back into slavery. It is this mistaken interpretation of the economy of the party—a mistake that is understandable given the fact that gift economies are used as ideological justifications for slavery—that impels the community to ignore schoolteacher's voyage to collect Sethe. Yet, in fact, there is almost nothing at the party that has not been brought or made by one of the party members themselves as a gift that circulates among the guests. The party is figured as one of the only utopian moments in the novel in which Sethe, along with her children, enjoy the freedom of giving and receiving food and emotional connection within beloved community. The party initially serves to mark Sethe's entry into freedom—a freedom that is quite different from the freedom of the individual man without bonds to society.

The community interprets the gifts of Baby Suggs as a sign of their own enslavement and they interpret her and her family as part of the master class because they see her as giving gifts and do not recognize the actual relationship of exchange and reciprocity that made the feast possible. Yet, Morrison figures this gift exchange as fundamentally different than that of Garner's and even the Bodwin's "gifts." For Garner the gift ultimately proves his own superiority, prevents slave revolts, and allows him to see his slaves as "men" while also alleviating any guilt he might feel in owning people. When Stamp Paid gives the blackberries to Denver and Baby Suggs his motivation is affection for the child. Stamp Paid's gifts, while they mark him as a free man and allow him to define his freedom, are also done out of affection and desire to create community. That his gifts do have this effect is demonstrated by the fact that he is allowed into any house without knocking. The gifts of the black community and of Stamp Paid are a way

to negotiate the market system, which proves to be oppressive and exploitative. Gift giving becomes a way to demonstrate freedom outside the realm of self-ownership and the market, and in a way that is genuinely helpful and beneficial to others. If in the original slave narratives the freed slaves' entry into the market traditionally signalled America's promise and the nation's extension of freedom, then by problematizing this entrance into the market system—and offering up an alternative-- Morrison is also countering one of the key ways in which the classic slave narratives appealed to exceptionalist rhetoric.

If exceptionalism positions America as superior because it is a capitalist, democratic land of free, equal men, then the gift economy does much to challenge this notion while also providing an alternative economy based on responsibility (as defined by Morrison as response-ability) and emotional and ethical bonds. In a gift economy freedom is conceived of as the ability to give and receive freely. In capitalism freedom is conceived of as the freedom to buy and own something, a problematic freedom mentioned again and again in Beloved. Within a gift economy people are necessarily constrained and indebted, but in a way that is quite different from the constraints and debts of capitalism. The constraints and debts on the individual in the gift economy are those that mark interrelated community and that are based on ethical choice, emotional bonds, and responsibility. It also, crucially, prevents the accumulation of wealth. At the party all of the food is consumed, illustrating that the gift is property that perishes and that works to prevent the accumulation of wealth that marks capitalist exchange. It is this that most clearly differentiates the gift economy from the slave economy of theft that

disguises itself as gift, because the “gifts” in slavery always work to ensure the accumulation of wealth of the slaveholder at the expense of the slave. No wonder then America was able to conceive of itself as blessed by god and no wonder the romantics are able to appreciate the bountiful gifts of the land when they have an internal population—slaves, who are seen to be eternally accepting and subservient and who are, in fact, forced to “give” their lives and labour for the profit of white people. It’s no contradiction to say that America is a bountiful land of plenty and that Americans are the blessed while there is slavery. It is not a contradiction because it may, in fact, be the existence of slaves who contribute to this sense. The ideology of plenty erases the labour and exploitation of slaves by transforming it into a sort of magical gift from god rather than a large scale, institutionalized theft.

Chapter Three: Paradise

“They shoot the white girl first” (3). With this opening the reader is thrust into the violence around which Paradise centres. A group of men, we soon learn, have invaded a house of women-- a place that used to be a convent but now houses a group of female drifters-- and are determined to shoot them all. Although we quickly learn much about the history of the town Ruby and the Convent in the opening scene, significantly, we learn very little about the men committing the crime and, of course, we never do learn the identity of the white girl. By initially obscuring individual identities in favour of a communal history, Morrison inextricably links the massacre to the relationship between the two communities and the racially defined, patriarchal exceptionalism of Ruby. Morrison continues, “With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent, but there is time and the day has just begun” (3). This first paragraph highlights the town—and the convent’s—isolation. Time is repeated twice and is linked to the geographic isolation, lawlessness, violence and expansive future characteristic of the frontier. “Time” conveys the men’s authority and confidence that they will not be caught, or, given the handcuffs and guns they carry, shows they are the law. By implication, then, time, and therefore history, belongs to these men and works against the convent women.

While criticism on Beloved may have little to say about exceptionalism and the nation, this is not true of the critical work on Paradise. Critics of the novel often discuss Morrison's engagement with American history. While some discuss the novel in relation to the narrative's contemporary history of the 1960-1970's civil rights movement, race politics, and racism, linking this context to the political and historical context of the novel's publication in the 1990's, others, like Katrine Dalsgard, discuss the novel's exploration of American mythologies of exceptionalism and utopia within a broader history of Puritanism, colonialism, and empire building. However, these approaches are not brought together to consider the way the novel's engagement with exceptionalism relates to the contemporary history of the 1990s and the new millennium. Yet the novel's engagement with American history(s) and its national mythologies of exceptionalism importantly warns against, predicts, and delineates the mechanics and development of neo-conservative power and ideology. The novel is therefore useful for understanding the mechanics and development of neo-conservative power and the justifications Bush uses for the war in Iraq. As Richard Slotkin argues in the September 28, 2001 edition of The Chronicle Of Higher Education, "when a society suffers a profound trauma, an event that upsets its fundamental ideas about what can and should happen and challenges the authority of its basic values, its people look to their myths for precedents, invoking past experience—embodied in their myths—as a way of getting a handle on crisis." Paradise's engagement with how community responds to trauma –how the community mobilizes its mythologies in the service of violence—is useful for understanding the way mythology is implicated in American violence.

Although some work on Paradise does address the novel's engagement with exceptionalism, none of it discusses the novel's treatment and allegorization of American wars of aggression. Yet, it is in this way that Paradise has much to say about contemporary America. In light of the current American war in Iraq, a war that is often justified in terms of both defence and America's unique and solitary role in world affairs the novel has, perhaps, become more relevant to national politics than when it was first published in 1997. Its relevance stems from its interest in its own contemporary history and debates about race and racism in America and how this context has both shaped and been shaped by various American histories and mythologies such as exceptionalism, utopianism, scapegoating, and violence. Yet in the critical work that engages the novel's treatment of exceptionalism, none of it accounts for how exceptionalism generally functions and is understood in the twentieth century-- as a myth about capitalism and militarism.

Katrine Dalsgard's article "The One All-Black Town Worth The Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and The Critique Of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's Paradise" approaches Paradise as a historical novel about the mythology of American exceptionalism. Dalsgard narrowly defines exceptionalism, limiting it to a Puritan ideology in her reading of how Morrison explores and critiques this idea in Paradise. While acknowledging that later generations of Americans actively shaped and altered the Puritan exceptionalist mythology she nevertheless limits her definition of exceptionalism to the Puritan worldview, writing, "the Puritans' exceptionalism...developed into a central American literary tradition." It is against this



background that she discusses a related but separate African American exceptionalist discourse, outlining the ways in which the founding of Haven and then Ruby echoes the Puritan mission of building the city upon a hill. She argues that the town's movement westward, reliance on the jeremiad, concern about "backsliding" youth and the Salem-like massacre, are all roughly paralleled to the Puritan notion of exceptionalism and constitute an African American "version" of this history. She writes, "I am aware that arguing that Morrison discerns an exceptionalist strain in African American discourse is risky business. Because of the slave experience, African Americans have always stood in a fundamentally problematic relationship to the exceptionalist narrative" (235). She acknowledges African American scepticism towards exceptionalist ideology writing:

the African American skepticism toward exceptionalism has not been least pronounced in the last quarter of a century, in which African American writers and critics have sought to establish a separate cultural tradition. Rather than being seen as a small and aberrant part of a largely white tradition, the argument goes, African American texts should be studied in relation to culture patterns and forms of expression developed in Africa, during slavery, and among Southern black folk (235).

However, Dalsgard sees this argument as insufficient given the hegemony of European American culture. She writes, "while the Afrocentric insistence on cultural separatism has generated a wealth of important new knowledge about African American culture, the hegemonic character of European American culture implies that exceptionalism is not so alien a concept to African American culture" (236). Ultimately she argues that,

In Paradise Morrison does not assume the position of a black outsider criticizing a predominantly white exceptionalist America for excluding her. That is, she does not maintain an exceptionalist ethos in the universalist way of implying that, if only African Americans were allowed full and equal participation in the American nation, the nation would indeed be in a position to redeem its paradisiacal

promise. Rather, taking as her starting point the idea that the African American community lives its own version of the exceptionalist narrative, she explores its function within this community (236).

Yet, I would argue that while Morrison does outline an African American version of exceptionalism, she does, in fact critique European American exceptionalism. The critique does not take the traditional form (and controlling) outlet offered by the jeremiad, in which the nation is criticized for its failure to extend the dream to African Americans—although some characters, like Misner, do register this critique. Instead, Morrison critiques the notion of establishing an American paradise entirely, pointing out how exceptionalism necessarily relies on exclusions, creating an underclass, which, traditionally, has been made up of people of colour and poor whites, and has been maintained by controlling the sexuality and reproduction of women, most notably (and abusively) women of colour. Further, by limiting her definition of exceptionalism and its rhetoric to the ways it was developed and used by the Puritans—and by focusing her analysis on drawing direct parallels between the Puritans and Ruby, Dalsgard fails to see how the novel is speaking to the way exceptionalism functions currently—as an imperialist, capitalist, and militaristic mythology. While it is interesting to consider how the African American community lives its own version of the exceptionalist narrative I am instead interested in addressing Morrison’s critique of European American exceptionalism for what it may contribute to discussions of racial and sexual oppression and to critiques of American imperialism. In Playing in The Dark Morrison writes, “More interesting is what makes domination possible; how knowledge is transformed from invasions and conquest to revelation and choice” (8). In Paradise this is precisely

what Morrison is asking—what makes domination possible. Specifically, she is exploring what makes domination possible in the U.S.-- what specific configurations, stories, and ideas have been crucial to U.S. domination. At least part of her answer is exceptionalism.

The issues of American history and communal mythology that the novel explores are hinted at in the novel's opening pages. The convent is, as Patricia McKee characterizes it, a palimpsest of its history as first “an embezzler's folly” and then of its time spent as a convent, with the nuns who attempted to remove the ornateness of the place and restyle it, adding plainer fixtures and a schoolroom where “stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget” (4). It is a house that evokes the history of the west and imperialism—with its layers of speculators and missionaries and natives, now given over to a group of women about whom we know little save that they cook and once had babies residing with them. The convent's architecture functions like the ghost of Beloved—as a trace of the past, reminding us that this history still haunts the present and cannot be entirely buried or forgotten. By writing the history of the Convent as palimpsest what Morrison leaves unsaid is, that despite the fact that the men “have time” enough to get away with the violence, past times in this place do not vanish and thus this event will be impossible to erase. This is evident in the way the opening scene unfolds. Juxtaposing a description of the Convent with the present moment of armed men roaming the house, Morrison writes,

The ornate bathroom fixtures, which sickened the nuns, were replaced with good plain spigots, but the princely tubs and sinks, which could not be inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt. The embezzler's joy that could be demolished was, particularly in the dining room, which the nuns converted to a

schoolroom...now armed men search rooms where macramé baskets float next to Flemish candelabra (4).

This massacre, then, is another history that will leave a trace on the architecture, haunting and disrupting Ruby's exceptional self-narrative and any attempt at erasure and reinterpretation.

As the opening paragraph suggests, Paradise is concerned with the way historical events become communal mythologies. More specifically, the novel explores the exclusions—of fact and persons—necessary in the development of an exceptionalist mythology. In “This Side of Paradise,” and interview on Paradise, Morrison states,

mythologizing can end up hurting more than helping. These people [of Ruby] have an extraordinary history, and they were sound people, moral people, generous people. Yet when their earlier settlement collapsed, and they tried to repeat it in Ruby...well, the modern generation simply couldn't sustain what the Old Fathers had created, because of the ways in which the world had changed. The Ruby elders couldn't prevent certain anxieties about drugs, about politics. And their notions of women—particularly about controlling women—left them very vulnerable, precisely because they had romanticized and mythologized their own history. It was frozen, in a sense (11 par.).

Morrison is sympathetic to the town and how it comes to adapt a rigid, oppressive exceptionalist mythology of itself, yet does not let it off the hook for the crimes—most notably murder and misogyny—that extend from their mythologizing. The problem with Ruby's mythologizing, she seems to say, is that it is incapable of coping with the changes happening to the nation at that moment. If Morrison believes mythologizing can end up hurting more than helping, the alternative she seems to offer, although it may be accused of its own utopian tendency, is a mythologizing that is responsive to historical fact and does not seek to exclude those persons or facts that do not fit. Absolute faith in and

romanticization of mythologies—to the point where facts must either be contorted to fit the myth or suppressed altogether—is one of the key problems the novel confronts. Instead, a willingness to question one’s worldview and history and co-exist with alternate mythologies is the “solution” the novel offers to the town’s exceptionalist myth. This alternative is clear not only in the Convent’s architectural history, but in the way the women who live in the Convent respond to that history. Connie, who once sat and learned with “those stilled Arapaho girls” knows much about the history of the place, indeed, she has lived through two parts of it, but does not attempt to create a controlling mythology or attempt to make the place’s past incarnations dominate the way the house lives in the present. By keeping the traces of both histories—of the nuns and the embezzler—and adding their own touches to the place, such as the nursery and the drawings of their bodies, the women allow the place to be a visible sign of the disjointed, contradictory and unsavoury history of the place. By refusing to either glorify or suppress either part of its past, the women of the convent manage not to repeat the imperialism of the nuns and the embezzler, opting instead to forge their own way of life.

Peter Widdowson offers an excellent approach to the histories outlined in Paradise. Widdowson contends “the novel is a fictional intervention in contemporary American historiography” (318). He argues, “it is only by way of the continuous interpretations of past and present, and the contorted interrelationships among and between the communities in the novel, that Morrison’s political positions can be articulated” (314). His reading strategy can be slightly extrapolated to incorporate how these “contorted interrelationships” of history are also in dialogue with the present

historical moment, which is marked by American imperialism and racism, and to draw out the novel's contemporary relevance by way of its engagement with American history and mythology. Widdowson attempts to trace the complex, vexed, and interrelated history Paradise tells of America and African Americans. He writes, "In effect, what Paradise represents is an attempt to write several concentric histories of the American experience from a distinctively African American perspective. The novel, in other words, is a black history of the USA from just before its founding moment" (314). Appropriately, Widdowson's goal is "to trace the connecting narrative filaments across the novel in order to bring into view the structural positions informing it" (314). These "structural positions" are crucial to connecting the novel's historical interests to the contemporary political context if an exceptionalist ethos is taken as one of these "structural positions." I want to narrow Widdowson's view slightly to look at how Paradise traces a black postcolonial feminist vision of American exceptionalism, a central theme of the novel.

Like Widdowson, Richard Schur is interested in Paradise's involvement with American history. He places Paradise in the context of race and racism in post-civil rights era America. His thesis that "due to its engagement with critical race theory Morrison's novel translates paradise from a universalized concept that transcends race, class, nation, and gender toward a smaller, more local, and more 'manageable vision'" (276) links the novel's exploration of utopia to the successes and disappointments of the civil rights period and the distinctly non-utopian milieu of the 1990's. Schur suggests that Ruby's tensions are a result of the rapidly changing meaning of race in the post-civil rights era. Schur reads Paradise as enacting anti-racist struggle and theory from the civil

rights to post-civil rights critical race theory, stating that Paradise seeks to “uncover the ongoing dynamics of racialized power, and its embeddedness in practices and values which have been shorn of any explicit, formal manifestation of racism” (280). Ultimately, he argues, the problem of Paradise, like the problem of post-civil rights America, is how to live in a world where formal racist barriers have been dismantled. He writes, “Morrison shares a vision and a strategy for social justice with legal writers who see that the battle must now turn to the psychic and cultural effects of race” (289). Arguing that, “by situating the novel in the late 60s and early 70s, Morrison captures the shift from the civil rights movement to the post-civil rights era, in which the realities of racial integration and gender equality, as putative paradises, were first being examined” (280) Schur draws out the way Paradise traces the disillusionment and anti-utopianism that marks the post-civil rights period.

The Civil Rights movement’s appeal to the American Dream and its utopian vision was a substantial source of disappointment when African Americans and others who struggled for Civil Rights learned that legal rights did not in fact end racism or lead to the extension of the American dream to black people. Yet, the disillusionment of the era was not only because of the disappointment of Civil Rights. The war in Vietnam was also a significant factor in the crisis of American exceptionalism in the 1970s. In Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms, Wilson Moses, writing about the 1970s and the erosion of the Jeremiad and messianic traditions in African American culture writes,

The erosion of traditional black messianism is parallel, of course, to the disintegration of the myth of destiny that once flourished at the center of American consciousness. The loss of direction experienced by black America

since the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King is symptomatic of the loss of purpose experienced by the entire society since the debacle of Vietnam (15).

Similarly, just as Vietnam and other American wars are alluded to in veiled references throughout Paradise, so too is the death of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. One of the first things we know about Mavis is in the opening pages when one of the men notes two dates marked on a 1968 calendar. One of those dates is the day Martin Luther King was assassinated. Of course this is narrated from the perspective of one of the veterans roaming the Convent in an attempt to kill the women. That the war in Vietnam and the death of MLK are evoked together in the first few pages of the novel, as the men attempt to restore their own utopian dream to the town that, to their minds, is beginning to “backslide,” knots together the two blows to exceptionalism Moses outlines above with the massacre at the Convent.

In the current political climate, exceptionalism is again at the centre of American thought and culture, used by the current U.S. administration to justify an internationally unpopular war against Iraq, making Paradise’s exploration important to contemporary life. Although much of the critical work on Paradise does address its engagement with American mythologies, and, particularly the myth of exceptionalism, surprisingly little of it considers the central connections between these mythologies and the novel’s treatment of American wars of aggression. Yet, it is in this way that Paradise has much to say about contemporary America. Currently exceptionalism functions not only as a myth of divine providence but, perhaps most crucially, as a myth that justifies and celebrates capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy. In Paradise exceptionalism is treated as a utopian



mythology about a chosen people that relies on scapegoating and violence for its maintenance. In light of the current American war of aggression in Iraq, a war that is often justified in terms of both defence and America's unique and solitary role in world affairs the novel has, perhaps, more to say about American foreign policy than when it was first published in 1997. Its relevance and prescience stems from its interest in its own contemporary history (and, perhaps, the first Gulf War) and debates about race and racism in America and how this context has both shaped and been shaped by various American histories and mythologies such as exceptionalism. Specifically, the novel's engagement with the domestic war on black people, in the form of lynching, rape, and other "random and organized evil" (16), along with the mass incarceration of black men and women has much in common with the contemporary concerns about American imperialism when seen through the lens of the exceptionalist worldview. Morrison invites such a connection between the war at home and the wars abroad when Soane feels like a "fool" because she thought that in Vietnam her sons would be:

safer than anywhere in Oklahoma outside Ruby. Safer in the army than in Chicago, where Easter wanted to go. Safer than Birmingham, than Montgomery, Selma, than Watts. Safer than Money, Mississippi, in 1955 and Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963...She had thought war was safer than any city in the United States (101).

The war, for black people, was on American soil, rather than abroad. The implication here is that abroad, her sons would not be the targets of racial attacks by fellow Americans in the same way they would be in America outside Ruby. That she was mistaken about the safety of war invites the reader to make an ethical parallel between the violence of domestic racism and the violence of racist, imperialist wars.

In an interview entitled “This Side of Paradise” Morrison discusses the way she attempted to write about violence and utopia in the American context. Speaking about how the original title for Paradise was ‘War,’ she states,

the novel wasn’t about war as we know it, with armies, navies, and so on. I was interested in the kind of violent conflict that could happen as a result of efforts to establish a Paradise. Our view of paradise is so limited: it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people—chosen by God, that is. Which means your job is to isolate yourself from other people. That’s the nature of paradise: it’s really defined by who is not there as well as who is (6 par.).

Morrison is speaking of limitations of a peculiarly American view of paradise in which the nation is a land of the chosen. The thesis of Playing In The Dark is echoed in her words, with her assertion that paradise is defined by who is excluded and rendered invisible. That Morrison understands exceptionalism as an isolationist mythology defined by those who are excluded means that, for her, as I suggested in the first chapter, scapegoating is an absolutely essential feature of both the mythology and the nation. Morrison pointedly demonstrates how the town’s conflict with the convent creates social cohesion when the women from the convent disrupt a wedding held in Ruby. Their presence distracts the townspeople from their own internal quarrels that were threatening to break out at the reception. Morrison writes, “Whatever else, thought Anna, the convent women had saved the day. Nothing like other folks’ sin for distraction” (159).

Morrison transforms dominant American society into a void, which she claims has traditionally been reserved, for white Americans at least, for imagining blackness. She writes, “Out there: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose” (16).

Ruby's exceptionalism, then, is also defined by the violence and racism of America. Ruby denies America's exceptionalist self-narrative while developing a parallel narrative for itself. Schur argues that the idealization of whiteness haunts both the Convent and Ruby, spaces that are seemingly free from racism and white people; similarly, European American exceptionalism and its exclusions haunt the novel. Members of Ruby were barred from the European definition of the "chosen"—indeed, their exclusion after World War II is what prompts Steward to come up with the idea of moving and establishing Ruby—and it is this dominant American world that makes up a significant body of people whom they are excluding from their definition of "the chosen." As David Goldberg argues,

In states that are racially conceived, ordered, administered, and regulated, the racial state could be said to be everywhere. And simultaneously seen nowhere. It (invisibly) defines almost every relation, shapes all but every interaction, contours virtually all intercourse. It fashions not just the said and the sayable, the done and the doable, possibilities and impermissibilities, but penetrates equally the scope and quality, content and character of social silences and presumptions. The state in its racial reach and expression is thus at once super-visible in form and force and thoroughly invisible in its osmotic infusion into the everyday, its penetration into common sense, its pervasion (not to mention perversion) of the warp and weave of the social fabric (98).

Goldberg's statement makes it clear that just as Ruby cannot avoid being shaped by the American racial state, neither can any relation and interaction in Ruby be separated from its racially defined vision of exceptionalism. The pervasiveness of the racial state and its simultaneous visibility and invisibility is similar to Morrison's arguments about the way race is central to American self-definition and mythologies. In her reversal of racial tropes Morrison defamiliarizes European American exceptionalism, making it more visible yet dangerously elusive. For example, in Paradise, like the Puritans who imagined dark

people thronging at their borders, the people of Ruby (with, perhaps, more cause) imagine dangerous white people lurking outside their boundaries. By reversing the categories of the “chosen” and “unchosen,” the dangerous and the protected, she exposes the structures of racial thinking underlying much exceptionalist rhetoric and attempts to undo its language.

Goldberg further argues that sexual domination is a central practice, indeed, a condition of racial rule. Although the novel’s first line would seem to indicate that Ruby is defined by its exclusion of white people, which in large part is true, it is women who are in fact most consistently excluded from the paradise of Ruby. While a particular sort of woman—“ladies,” “8-rock” wives and mothers—become almost mythological figures to the town’s patriarchs, figures that they then use to justify the isolationism and attack on the Convent, women who do not fit into this narrow racial and sexually obedient mould, are perceived as threats to the patriarchal paradise. This is because in order to preserve a genetically defined racial group, women’s bodies and sexuality must be carefully monitored. Without this patriarchal control over women there can be no assurance of the “racial purity” that makes ideas of racially based visions of “chosenness” possible.

Control of women’s bodies and reproduction is also necessary to maintain the lines of inheritance. The novel first hints of fissures in the community, appropriately, in the meeting over Arnette’s pregnancy. Beneath the rhetoric of female sexual purity and corruption what is at stake is the distribution of Morgan wealth. Morrison writes,

However disgusted both were, K.D. knew they would not negotiate a solution that would endanger him or the future of Morgan money. His grandfather had named his twins Deacon and Steward for a reason. And their family had not built two towns, fought white law, Colored Creek, bandits and bad weather, to see ranches

and houses and a bank with mortgages on a feed store, a drugstore and a furniture store end up in Arnold Fleetwood's pocket. Since the loose bones of his cousins had been buried two years ago, K.D., their hope and their despair, was the last male in a line that included a lieutenant governor, a state auditor and two mayors. His behaviour, as always, required scrutiny and correction (55).

K.D. is painfully aware of the way patriarchal bloodlines are patrolled by his uncles, especially in light of his affair with Gigi, a convent woman. Underlying this concern with blood is the fact that the Morgans wish to maintain their own wealth, and thus do not want to see any of their possessions end up in the hands of Fleetwoods, who are, ostensibly, included in the founding families, and should thus, in the rhetoric of community that the twins publicly value pose no threat. Instead what their concern demonstrates is that what is important to the Morgans over and above any care bonds or history they may have with the Fleetwoods is their own profit, possessions, advancement, and superiority. It is this love of material goods, a threat that, significantly, comes in the form of an unplanned pregnancy that first demonstrates the centrality of patriarchal bloodlines to the town's burgeoning capitalist economy. Until she gives up the baby to the women at the convent (a baby who eventually dies) and the two marry later in the book, Arnette, as a non-Morgan, is a threat to inheritance, the Morgan's patriarchal rule, not to mention the exceptionalist worldview of the town that prides itself on the fact that there isn't "a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town" (8).

The "Old Fathers" named the town Haven, an apt name for a place that represented reprieve from the violence and racism that existed outside the town's borders in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth century. "Ruby," the new town's name, represents a clear shift in the way the town functions under the "New Fathers." Ruby is ostensibly the

name of a woman, the only person who ever died in the town, but it is also a valuable jewel. Instead of representing a haven, the new town has become a sort of fetish object and a place where economy and money matters a great deal.

Discussing the town store's loss of business, Dovey questions the benefit of Deek's adherence to the accumulation of personal wealth.

'He used to do all right.' Deek tipped a little coffee into the saucer. 'Ten years ago. Five.' The dark pool rippled under his breath. 'Boys coming out of Vietnam, getting married, setting up. War money. Farms doing okay, everybody doing okay.' He sucked at the saucer rim and sighed his pleasure. 'Now, well...'

'I don't understand, Deek.'

'I do.' He smiled up at her. 'You don't need to.'

She had not meant that she didn't understand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problems to help them out. Why, for instance, couldn't Menus have kept the house he bought? But Soane didn't try to explain; she just looked closely at his face (107).

Dovey is critical of his capitalist tendencies and how they sacrifice their friends' livelihoods. To Dovey, capitalism is incommensurate with caring relationships, which, for her, exist in the realm of the gift.

Deacon ironically re-affirms Dovey's view when we are shown how he likes to drive his black sedan just to show off his family's wealth. Morrison writes,

Every day the weather permitted, Deacon Morgan drove 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 neatly 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. His car was big and whatever he did in it was horsepower and worthy of comment: how he washed and waxed it himself—never letting K.D. or any enterprising youngster touch it; how he chewed but did not light cigars in it; how he never leaned on it, but if you had a conversation with him, standing near it, he combed the hood with his fingernails, scraping flecks he alone could see, and buffing invisible stains with his pocket handkerchief. He laughed along with his

friends at his vanity, because he knew their delight at his weakness went hand in hand with their awe: the magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money (107).

The twins, who are said to “own the town” and who are the ones who “remember everything” about the town’s history are also the ones most consistently associated with preserving Ruby’s exceptionalist self-image. The difference between Deek and Steward’s behavior and overemphasis on personal property and the accumulation of wealth contrasts sharply with Deek’s memory of the “Old Fathers” and how they ensured Haven’s prosperity. Morrison writes,

against all odds, in 1932 Haven was thriving. The crash had not touched it: personal savings were substantial, Big Daddy Morgan’s bank had taken no risks (partly because the banks locked him out, partly because the subscription shares had been well protected) and families shared everything, made sure no one was short. Cotton crop ruined? The sorghum growers split their profit with the cotton growers. A barn burned? The pine sappers made sure lumber ‘accidentally’ rolled off wagons at certain places to be picked up later that night. Pigs rooted up a neighbour’s patch? The neighbour was offered replacements by everybody and was assured ham at slaughter. The man whose hand was healing from a chopping block mistake would not get to the second clean bandage before a fresh cord was finished and stacked. 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 (108-109).

For Steward, Deek, and several of the other patriarchs this is no longer true. Deek and Steward took their friend Menus’s house when he was unable to make the payments because their profit was more important. Whereas Haven functioned and managed to survive the depression because of the gift economy, in Ruby, private property, inheritance and the accumulation of private wealth are more important.

The American economic system, according to Misner, is key to how “the Dream” has been withheld from African Americans. Misner thinks about the loss of the American dream for African Americans:

Since the murder of Martin Luther King, new commitments had been sworn, laws introduced but most of it was decorative: statues, street names, speeches. It was as though something valuable had been pawned and the claim ticket lost. That was what Destry, Roy, Little Mirth and the rest were looking for...In any case, if they couldn't find the ticket, they might break into the pawn shop. Question was who pawned it in the first place and why (117).

Misner's metaphor of the pawnshop is especially telling given that it is used in the context of his criticism of Steward and Deek's bank. The American dream, to his mind, has been sold—and not just sold but traded in a particularly exploitative and cheap way. It is arguable that for Ruby the patriarch's capitalism and violent exclusions, both of which require domination of and control over women, ultimately lead to the loss of their utopian vision and culminates in the massacre at the convent.

It is surprising that critics have not addressed the way Paradise interrogates American wars and their relationship to the exceptionalist rhetoric of the men of Ruby. Morrison's original title for the novel, as has already been mentioned, was “War.” Although she argues in that same interview that the novel is not about traditional war as we know it, traditional American wars are certainly mentioned enough times throughout the novel to merit serious attention. Morrison never depicts actual battle scenes, never brings the narrative into the middle of official war fields. Instead, the context and background of the novel and its characters are saturated with war, making it one of those pregnant “voids” Morrison actively creates in her work. Like the opening to Sula, in



which Morrison mentions the year of the armistice but does not go so far as to mention the war itself (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 26), understanding much of Paradise’s events and the character’s motivations—especially as they relate to a reading of Morrison’s critique of exceptionalism--hinge on watching out for the brief allusions and veiled references to American wars.

One of the first things we learn about the men who go out to the convent to kill the women is that they are all veterans. Morrison writes, “But he and the others, veterans all, had a different idea. Loving what Haven had been—the idea of it and its reach—they carried that devotion, gentling and nursing it from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart, and they made up their minds to do it again” (6). The line “do it again,” refers to establishing the town. By describing them as veterans and by showing the way their love for Haven grew while they fought in wars, Morrison links their mission—both at the Convent and for their town—to the American mission as it became linked to American military power. She shrinks nationalism to a regionalism, patriotism to a violent civic pride. This opening scene then, becomes a sort of war scene, evoking closely related yet conflicted representations of soldiers urged on in battle by their love of god and nation and the icon of lawless American “heroes” in the Vietnam war fighting battles in villages largely populated by women and children. What is clear here is that the control of women’s sexuality and violence against women is never far removed from nationalism, war, and imperialism, a commonplace in postcolonial feminist thought. The men are ironic mothers of Ruby “nursing” their love for it through war, where presumably they killed and maimed, the polar opposite of nursing. The irony is heightened when

considered alongside Slotkin's theory of regeneration through violence, a theory that takes as its starting point the idea that America regenerates (and reproduces) its fortunes and self-image through violence against internal and external "others." For Slotkin, violence maintains social cohesion in America. The depiction of Ruby's patriarchs as mother-warriors articulates the previously unarticulated gendering of the nation's strategy of regeneration through violence, and demonstrates the absolute monopoly the men wish to hold on definitions of gender, particularly as they relate to national and civic mythology and organization. The men, then, are not only attacking "unruly" women in the name of protecting their town, their wives, and future generations, they are also acting to "regenerate" the town's exceptionalist self-narrative, fortunes, and patriarchal social organization.

When the massacre is re-narrated near the end of the novel we learn that the men are much more interested in power and domination than their initial narrative would have the reader believe. Morrison writes,

You think they got powers? I know they got powers. Question is whose power is stronger. Why don't they just get on out, leave? Huh! Would you if you had a big old house to live in without having to work for it? Something's going on out there and I don't like any of it. No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away. Jesus! No telling what else...they don't need men and they don't need God. Can't say they haven't been warned. Asked first and then warned. If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. But they don't. They meddle. 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 (275-276).

Unlike the "ladies" of Ruby, the women at the Convent are an eclectic group of outlaws and drifters who form an accidental community. They do not get along, live by few rules,

looking to Connie, a woman who drinks too much and does not feel any attachment to the women, as a sort of mother figure who they turn to for advice and re-assurance. The men of Ruby come out to have affairs with the women, or, in the case of Menus, to sober up. The women of Ruby shuttle back and forth between the convent and the town, not only to buy hot peppers but also seeking out the convent when they need refuge from violent family life, pregnancy, or friendship. It is ironic that one of the men notes that everybody who goes near them is maimed, because while this is largely true, it is not the convent women who maim; rather, they provide a retreat and care for the already maimed. Like a colonial outpost, the things that cannot be brought out publicly in Ruby often end up shipped out to the convent. Of course, the importance of the Convent to the social cohesion of Ruby is never publicly mentioned. The convent becomes a place of radical otherness, where the detritus of Ruby, particularly when that detritus has something to do with women and their bodies, is ferried. That “the mess is seeping back into our homes” (278) is not a sign of the dangers of the Convent, but, instead, a sign of how it is being scapegoated, and how, until recently, its “otherness” effectively maintained Ruby’s exceptionalism.

The men’s motivations are less unified and more varied than we are led to believe in the beginning. Nevertheless, when taken as a chorus—which is how the scene is written, with Lone even stating that the silent one is “leading the choir”—the men’s voices clearly point to the way imperialism, nationalism, and the patriarchal control of women’s bodies and sexuality are linked becomes clear. Lone, listening to the men speak tries to discern their motives.

Sargeant, she knew...would be thinking how much less his outlay would be if he owned the Convent land, and how, if the women are gone from there, he would be in a better position to own it. Everyone knew he had already visited the Convent—to ‘warn’ them, which is to say he offered to buy the place, and when the response was an incomprehensible stare, he told the women to ‘think carefully’ and that ‘other things could happen to lower the price.’ Wisdom Poole would be looking for a reason why he had no control anymore over his brothers and sisters. To explain how it happened that those who used to worship him, listen to him, were now strays trying to be on their own. The shooting last year between Brood and Apollo was over Billie Delia and would be enough reason for him to go gallivanting off for the pleasure of throwing some women in the road. Billie Delia was friendly with those women, made one of his younger brothers drive her out there, and it was after that that the trouble between Apollo and Brood turned dangerous...As for the Fleetwoods, Arnold and Jeff, well, they’d been wanting to blame somebody for Sweetie’s children for a long time...and although Lone had delivered some of Jeff’s sick children long before the first woman arrived, they wouldn’t let a little thing like that keep them from finding fault anywhere but in their own blood...Menus, well, he’d be ripe for a raid on anybody...Lone could not count how many times she heard his father, Harper, begin to testify, begin to examine his own sins and end up going on about loose women who could keep you from knowing who, what and where your children are...Lone understood these private thoughts and some of what Steward’s and Deacon’s motive might be: neither one put up with what he couldn’t control. But she could not have imagined Steward’s rancor—his bile at the thought that his grandnephew (maybe?) had surely been hurt or destroyed in that place...nor could she have imagined how deep in the meat of his brain stem lay the memory of how close his brother came to breaking his marriage to Soane...Steward seethed at the thought of that barely averted betrayal of all they owed and promised the Old Fathers. But a narrowly escaped treason against the fathers’ law, the law of continuance and multiplication, was overwhelmed by the permanent threat to his cherished view of himself and his brother. The women in the Convent were for him a flaunting parody of the nineteen Negro ladies of his and his brother’s youthful memory and perfect understanding...He could not abide them for sullyng his personal history with their streetwalkers’ clothes and whores’ appetites; mocking and desecrating the vision that carried him and his brother through a war, that imbued their marriages and strengthened their efforts to build a town where the vision could flourish (278-279).

Lone detects these thought beneath their words, which they speak as one voice. Taken together they represent the worst of patriarchal nationalism. In this scene scapegoating and the ideology of regeneration through violence is overwhelmingly linked to a

particular kind of masculinity—one that is concerned with the maintenance of patriarchal power and the privileges of property, inheritance, ancestry, pride and sexuality that extend from such power. Morrison is inviting a reading of patriarchal power and capitalism as allied motivations, or twin faces, of the massacre at the Convent. While the men verbally claim to be fighting on the “morally correct side” of maintaining the utopian Ruby, this scene, narrated by Lone, is particularly damning in its exposure of unsavoury motivations like revenge, misogyny, and economic gain. Deborah Madsen discusses James Gibson and his use of the theory of “regeneration through violence” as it relates to representations of and attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Gibson argues that the Vietnam War—and American war more generally-- is often represented in America as a rite of male bonding that is essentially moral because it is American. Madsen characterizes this perspective on war, writing,

Americans fight on the morally correct side; Americans are more skilled than their opponents (so might melts right); no one is innocent and any civilian casualties are caused by the bad guys; war does not appear dangerous and the principal heroes usually do not die; war is portrayed as a process of male bonding and a necessary rite of passage to manhood (158).

This is certainly a view held by the patriarchs, who, at the novel’s opening think, “with god at their side, take aim, for Ruby” (18). They see it as both a fundamentally moral venture because it is for Ruby and, less obviously, as a rite of male bonding.

The connection between American exceptionalism, war, and the events at the Convent is elaborated upon by one of the significantly unnamed men:

He turns the fire off under the stockpot. His mother bathed him in a pot no bigger than that. A luxury in the sod house where she was born. The house he lives in is big, comfortable, and this town is resplendent compared to his birthplace, which

had gone from feet to belly in fifty years. From Haven, a dreamtown in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven, a ghosttown in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain (5).

Immediately, Morrison traces a history of Haven that is parallel to American historical events—the emancipation, depression and WWII. WWII marks the “bottom” of Haven’s devolution, linked to stomach crawling (snake like) and its dissolution. Going to the convent to make sure “it never happens again” is an ironic reference to the holocaust and WWII, after which America and other nations vowed they would “never again” have a world war or genocide. Of course, American international aggression only worsened after WWII as the nation developed into a superpower, ushering in the Cold War and proliferation of nuclear weapons. The “never again” slogan was—and is—used to justify their smaller wars of aggression. The men’s violence similarly threatens to usher in a new era of violence, and certainly guarantees the loss of Ruby’s utopian promise, as the final inscription on the Oven’s mouth, written by the younger generation after the massacre ominously reads, “We Are The Furrow Of His Brow,” empowered to police the neighbouring region and those outside the chosen “8-rocks” as they see fit. The reference to WWII also embodies Morrison’s unorthodox, and distinctly black feminist view of this war as articulated in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.” In a reading of *Sula*’s first line she points out the veiled reference to WWII, writing that she originally intended to call “greater attention to the traumatic displacement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people in particular, and throwing into relief the creative, if outlawed, determination to survive it whole” (26). Their use of “never again,” then, also refers to

what is called the “second disallowing,” in the novel. This disallowing occurs after WWII, when black men were lynched and black soldiers were treated with little respect, resulting in the “New Fathers” renewing their covenant with God and “consolidat[ing] their blood,” or chosenness in Ruby.

While the men evoke the language and memory of World War II, the massacre actually occurs in early July 1976, three years after the Vietnam War and one year after the unification of North and South Vietnam. Significantly, this is also the year of America’s bicentennial celebration, a celebration that was marked by the nation’s waning belief in their exceptional status in the world. In his discussion of Vietnam and its aftermath Howard Zinn writes of the bicentennial,

1976 was not only a presidential election year—it was the much-anticipated year of the bicentennial celebration, and it was filled with much-publicized events all over the country. The great effort that went into the celebration suggests that it was seen as a way of restoring American patriotism, invoking the symbols of history to unite people and government and put aside the protest mood of the recent past. But there did not seem to be great enthusiasm for it. When the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Boston Tea Party was celebrated in Boston, an enormous crowd turned out, not for the official celebration, but for the ‘People’s Bi-Centennial’ countercelebration, where packages marked ‘Gulf Oil’ and ‘Exxon’ were dumped into the Boston Harbor, to symbolize opposition to corporate power in America (561-562).

While the bicentennial celebrations were meant to restore hope in the American Dream, as Zinn points out, because of an economic crisis, increasing awareness of government corruption, and the loss in Vietnam, July 1976 did not mark a renewal of the mythology for the American public.

In “Atrocity, Authenticity and American Exceptionalism: (Ir) rationalizing the Massacre at My Lai,” Oliver Kendrick focuses on the way the dream was discredited after

Vietnam. He argues that the massacre at My Lai was crucial to Americans' distaste for the exceptionalist myth after the war. He writes, for many Americans,

the massacre at My Lai...cast into ambiguity not just the ethical reputation of the American military in Vietnam, but that of the nation's martial tradition as a whole. In doing so, moreover, it functioned to undermine the perception that the armed services of the United States, uniquely amongst the national agents of war in the modern era, had been a force for good in the world, an instrument of liberation and the advance of social progress...the conduct of the United States military no longer seemed so distinct from that of other national armed forces, even those of regimes which commonly had been considered beyond the ethical pale (458).

The Convent massacre can be paralleled to the massacre at My Lai, insofar as the victims of My Lai were largely women, all civilians, and unarmed. More importantly, like the massacre at the convent, the event came to symbolize the loss of the American Dream and the dangers of an exceptionalist mythology, particularly when that mythology is used to justify violence. Kendrick writes that after the My Lai story dominated the media, spurring a flurry of different accounts on where responsibility lay for the massacre,

the political significance of the massacre seemed to decline to the point where a number of recent commentators have attested to its near complete absence from contemporary public memories of the war. Perhaps they overstate the case. The sort of pathologies which characterized the massacre at My Lai have never entirely disappeared from cultural representations of the Vietnam experience. Scenes in which American soldiers brutalise Vietnamese civilians have been a feature in many of the most significant films about the conflict (249).

Both Madsen and Oliver point out the way the facts of Vietnam were radically revised to fit the exceptionalist self-narrative. Oliver writes that rather than relying exclusively on the jeremiad for regenerating faith in the American mission,

the restoration of faith in the nation's providential destiny has proceeded not through rituals of public atonement, but instead through displacement and erasure. According to Robert McMahan, this was exemplified by the 'radical historical revisionism' first



evident in the later rhetoric of President Carter and subsequently established as mainstream political orthodoxy during the Reagan administration, when the national commitment to Vietnam was reinterpreted as a 'noble cause,' when the discursive emphasis upon the sacrifices of US veterans elided all mention of Vietnamese suffering, when the more reprehensible aspects of the American military campaign were effectively relocated to the dimmer recesses of official public memory (267).

Similarly, Ruby's patriarchs attempt to restore faith in the town through a revision of the events at the convent, a revision that attempts to displace and erase the casualties of the Convent.

At the end of Paradise Misner suggests that because of the slaughter the community is no longer exceptional, but just like every other town. After the massacre at the convent one of Sweetie's deformed children dies. She is the first person, save the town's namesake, to die within the town's borders. At Save—Marie's funeral Misner thinks of the town patriarchs,

They think they have outfoxed the whiteman 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...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. Unbridled by scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. 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...How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders? (306).

In a sort of a eulogy for Ruby, Misner identifies exceptionalist thinking, authoritarianism, and scapegoating as the cause of their downfall. Like the Puritans, who were one kind of Christian wronged by another kind, they set up a town based on "the absence of the

unsaved,” which is just the sort of void that speaks, that can’t be kept under wraps forever, that must get out every now and then, disturbing the silence and mythologies that rely on these exclusions and silences. The peoples’ immortality was generally taken as a sign of their blessedness and, as Pat believes, as a sign of their covenant with God. That a deformed baby—a result of the town’s eugenic inbreeding—dies signifies that the covenant has been broken. The federal covenant—the nation’s agreement with God making them blessed—was always at risk from disobedience of the community and individuals within the community. If the community became depraved they would call down destruction from God and cancel the covenant. In Paradise, Morrison counters the Federal Covenant by writing an ending in which the community is not destroyed by its acts, but rather in which it becomes an ordinary, unexceptional town. Lone thinks God has given them a second chance, but she does not say this second chance is a second chance to become a utopian community. That death is now allowed in Ruby—making it a “type” of Eden—upholds this idea that there is no federal covenant. It is important to end the novel in this way because it does not say “we must be more vigilant or chaos will ensue”—which is the mentality of the patriarchs—but says the consequences are that the town will become ordinary—a fate that is not so terrible, and that may, in fact, be better for the vast majority of the towns people, particularly for the women and non 8-rocks.

The town’s inability to maintain an exceptional self-definition is echoed by Billie Delia, one of the town’s scapegoats who is considered “fast,” because of her non-8-rock genealogy, in a much more ominous fashion. She thinks,

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? A town that

had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded in swallowing her mother and almost broken her own self. A backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them. She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors but out there (308).

Coming two pages after Misner's eulogy, Billie Delia underscores the feminism implied in Misner's contention that the town's exceptionalism "maims" the town's women and children. Billie Delia opens a window on the possibility of the women becoming a haunting force, disrupting any claims or narratives of blessedness on the part of the town. Billie Delia, of course, as an outsider in her own town sees this haunting as a positive step towards the dismantling of the town's patriarchal rule. In "Racial House, Big House" Megan Sweeney argues,

although the men of Ruby eventually sacrifice the residents of the convent, Paradise concludes with the possibility that the convent women continue to dwell, unvanquished, in some alternative earthly realm. Through this imaginative figuration of the convent women's healing and continued existence, Morrison's novel insistently fleshes out an alternative to the sacrificial logic that allows us, as a community, to disavow profound social problems by 'disappearing' their human evidence behind prison walls (47).

While she is interested in the sacrificial logic of the prison system, the women's ghostly existence most forcefully haunts the town's exceptionalist narrative, cursing them and thus breaking any covenant they may have had with God. Of course, the "sacrificial logic" of the prison system can be understood as part of the sacrificial logic of exceptionalism, which requires difference and threats to the nation's claims to superiority to be bracketed off from the hegemonic culture and kept under wraps. Billie Delia's

dream of the women's return, like the ghost of Beloved, makes the Ruby men's attempts at regeneration through violence difficult, if not impossible.

Tammy Clewell approaches Paradise through the lens of Derrida's theory of haunting as outlined in Specters of Marx, and combines a discussion of historical memory with the formation of community. She writes that Derrida,

suggests that experiences of loss compel us to relinquish the wish for narcissistic selfhood, accept the 'being-in-us' of the lost other which violates any pretense to self-sufficiency, and welcome our own decentring as the very condition of 'hospitality, love or friendship.' Similarly, Derrida's account of spectral history insists that the past cannot simply be absorbed or surpassed by the present. We have not buried Marxism, to stay with Derrida's example, because it continues to stand for more than one thing (3 par.).

Unlike Derrida, Clewell argues, Morrison does not write ghost stories as exemplars of the impossibility of self-wholeness but also "attends to issues of personal and social reconstruction" (4 par.). She continues, "Morrison's writing, in other words, does not tell ghost stories, at least not primarily, as a means of critiquing illusory notions of self-wholeness and social unity, the novel engages multiple figures of haunting as a work of rebuilding interior and exterior dwelling places worthy of human habitation" (4 par.). She argues that Ruby's leaders hold the town together by avoiding addressing the initial losses of the community—the loss of relationships to those different from themselves and the loss of time. She writes,

Morrison, in describing internal pressures that promise to explode in a small town bent on keeping outsiders away, demonstrates the extent to which Ruby's leaders are demonically possessed by their history. Rather than confront their conflicts of interest, the men attack the Convent as a means of projecting onto the outside the differences that threaten to internally divide them (11 par.).

The haunting Billie Delia imagines disturbs the “illusory notions of self-wholeness,” a self-wholeness that, for the town’s patriarch’s is absolutely dependent upon exceptionalist visions.

By narrating the episode of the raid on the convent twice, Philip Page argues that Morrison calls attention to the multiple interpretations and meanings of the event and points to its centrality among the open-ended relationships (639). Page addresses the problem of interpretation for both readers and characters in Paradise, arguing that Morrison makes this act difficult for both. He writes, “multiple, continually created meanings allow—require—both the active imagination and the furrowed brows not only of the author but also of the characters and the readers” (639). She first tells the event with few details, then, Page argues, that after she has told the “how” and “why”, “Morrison retells the story of the raid, this time with names and more details” (640). Yet she resists closure even in the second telling, which Page suggests is to show that even from the authorial and narratorial perspective there is always more than one version. He argues that the doubling of the narration of the raid is like the proliferating mottos on the oven “since no single text, version, or interpretation is adequate, the novel opens up the actuality and the potentiality for multiple perspectives of author, characters, and, Morrison, assumes, readers” (640). However, Page’s analysis of the beginning and ending is too simplistic in its uncritical acceptance of plural narratives. Morrison does not uncritically celebrate the proliferation of multiple viewpoints; certainly the ending articulates a very real danger posed by multiple versions of the same event. Although it is true that how we are to interpret the novel and the massacre is left open in terms of how

to understand the future of both communities, ethical responsibility and a commitment to discerning fact is still valued. The novel demonstrates that just as meta-narratives can act in the service of hegemonic power and oppression multiplicity and plurality is similarly open to abuse. The sheer difficulty of the novel's structure warns about the perplexity that can ensue when multiple viewpoints proliferate and instructs the reader in the importance of attending to and weighing both the details of fact against the perspectives and quirks of characters. The novel then is also dealing with the problems of relativism and what it means in a violent, war obsessed nation that maintains rigid hierarchies of class, gender, and race. Morrison seems to suggest that an ethical approach to events and details, particularly abuses of power, that is open to the work of searching out fact is a necessary stance for navigating such a world--even if such a fact-finding attempt is flawed from the start. The novel makes clear that the search for "truth" is always an already problematic quest and that the ethical quest for fact and truth is not necessarily the same thing as subscribing to universal truths, or meta-narratives.

The ambiguity of the women's deaths is often read as a reluctance to re-inscribe meta narratives, which leaves the novel in a place of radical openness. But I want to propose a quite different reading that is more uncertain about the positive message conveyed by the novel's ambiguities. When read through the lens of American historical narratives and mythologies, particularly through the lens of regeneration through violence the ending suggests the very real possibility of historical amnesia seizing the community. If much of the criticism has correctly involved itself with pointing out Morrison's critique of Ruby's insistence on a patriarchal, authoritative historical record that is not only

inaccurate but relies on the creation and exclusion of others very little of it has pointed out that she also warns against historical amnesia, a very American phenomenon. The patriarchs' historical accounts of Ruby rely on the active forgetfulness of its (male) citizens. So, while they claim to "never forget a thing" in fact there are a great many things that are forgotten or left out. The altered children's play that we see through Patricia's perspective is perhaps the most central example of how whole families are continuously written out of the foundational mythology. The play, an adaptation of Christmas nativity plays, tells the story of the nine founding families of Haven. As the years pass the families shrink to eight, then seven, as they commit some sin against Ruby's 8-rock rules. Similar to the "disappeared" families, at the end of the novel the women's bodies vanish suggesting that, like the play and the hegemonic interpretation of the Oven, a dominant account may not only possibly occur, but will likely occur, given that the only witnesses to the event are not only the propagators of the towns hegemonic historical myths but are also the perpetrators.

While Page is not alone in reading the novel's ambivalent ending as a more or less hopeful, appropriately postmodern conclusion there are others who take a more nuanced approach. In "Sensations of Loss" Michael Woods states,

even the contentious claims in Paradise may seem smoother or more polite than they are, because it is tempting for readers to identify with certain arguments and characters in the novel rather than others, even against others. That is when a character articulates what we think, or what we think we think, or would like to think, this version seems to override all others, to belong to a removed realm of truth, and probably to be the author's own view. Now there may be such a realm, but it is not available to any of the characters in Paradise, and it is not available to Morrison or to us for much of our lives—not available at all in relation to disputes about race and history and memory. However, it is important to see the temptation itself as part of Morrison's art. She is not inviting us to an elementary

relativism (everything depends upon your point of view); she is asking us to think our principles and prejudices through to the point of whatever resists them (117).

While I disagree with Woods in his assertion that Paradise offers the reader no realm of truth (there is clearly enough evidence—from multiple characters, including the perpetrators-- to unequivocally say that the men attacked the convent with the intent of killing the women because of the various threats the women posed to the town, their patriarchal power, and their designs on possessing the land) his argument that Morrison is not advocating relativism is a good one. The novel does not show all positions as equally valid, and by learning how to read the juxtapositions and overlaps in the characters' and the narrator's accounts and opinions Morrison points to a strategy for thinking and understanding violence, war and state power in a postmodern context. In this way, the novel is engaged in the messy business of figuring out how to challenge war and the impulse to war in a postmodern world, where, as is the case in the war in Iraq, leaders rely on obfuscation, relativism, and the proliferation of multiple perspectives to cloud fact and consensus and thereby justify invasions. So, the celebration of the novel's open-endedness needs to be tempered by Morrison's insistence on ethical responsibility and critique of community built on exceptionalist lines.

Lone's thoughts on the multiple interpretations that emerge after the massacre point to the problem of ambiguity posed by the novel.

As for Lone, she became unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good. Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation. Although the DuPreses, Beauchamps, Sandses and Pooles backed up her version, even their reputation for precision and integrity



could not prevent altered truth from taking hold in other quarters. If there were no victims the story of the crime was play for anybody's tongue (297).

The lack of victims speaks to the way dominant stories of American violence are easily re-written as acts of defence, warning, or protection. The victims, traditionally, have been prevented from speaking for themselves, either because they have been decimated or because they lack access to print—the dominant mode of American mythologizing. Just as the massacre at My Lai and other events of the Vietnam war were eventually re-written to fit America's exceptionalist mythos, so too are the events at the Convent.

Billie Delia's conviction that the women are out there and, like all things repressed, are simply waiting to return offers a palliative to this erasure, and a serious challenge to the patriarchs' ability to re-write this event to suit their hegemonic mythology. To see the second chance as emanating from the disappearance of the bodies, as several critics argue, is to re-inscribe and re-invigorate the cultural amnesia that typically goes along with the "regeneration through violence." Therefore, the existence of competing versions of the story, while certainly troublesome, does not need to be as grim as Lone's interpretation. Instead, the existence of competing narratives, while it may ultimately serve to let the guilty off the hook, also opens up a space where alternative narratives, ones that are markedly different from the exceptionalist narrative and the Jeremiad can be voiced.

For example, when Anna and Misner go to the convent to investigate the massacre they see an apparition that is interpreted by one as a door, and by the other as a window. On the way home the two joke about who is the optimist and who is the pessimist, a

direct reference to the ambiguity of reading Paradise's perplexing and complex ending. Like the apparition, the ending is neither hopeful nor pessimistic—but is balanced somewhere in between, leaving it up to the characters to decide for themselves what will become of their future—and for the readers to consider their own actions and beliefs. Its openness also allows the reader to decide for him or herself whether Ruby's fallenness is a positive or negative thing. Although Jill Jones argues that Paradise is a jeremiad, I argue the opposite. The novel is a sort of anti-jeremiad, discrediting the jeremiadic tendencies of men like Steward and Reverend Pulliam by carefully avoiding either condemnation or absolute hope in salvation for the town and the convent, and resisting the dialectic process of hope, failure, and renewal that marks exceptionalist rhetoric. On one hand, while the town's uncertain future and the way the ending can be read as alternately hopeful or hopeless (it can be read so that the community is damned to repeat its mistakes because they re-write the massacre in order to maintain their self-image of privilege, as the youth have thoroughly internalized and celebrate the massacre as a sign that they have been empowered by God) can be seen as following the genre of the Jeremiad the fact that, no matter how you read Ruby's "fall", Ruby's fate is to become a normal town without a covenant with God, taking it out of the realm of the Jeremiad, which relies on this covenant and the nation's utopian potential. Therefore, the novel's structure—from the multiple perspectives it employs, its anti-authoritarianism, and, most significantly, as an anti-jeremiad, forms a powerful critique of the rhetoric of exceptionalism. At the same time, this structure also opens a window for new discourses to emerge that don't follow the structural form of exceptionalism or the jeremiad. At the

end of Paradise the community is no longer special, but just like every other town. While the fragmentation of the community reflects the actual material conditions of black towns after de-segregation, a condition that is a sign of “progress,” as bell hooks has argued throughout her oeuvre, also signifies a loss of political and communal solidarity. This fragmentation, however, is also a sign of the town’s abandonment of the exceptionalist claim. It is this abandonment that is the source of potential redemption in the end.

Bercovitch argues,

What our major writers could not conceive, either in their optative or in their tragic-ironic moods, was that the United States was neither utopia at best nor dystopia at worst, neither the ‘world’s fairest hope,’ as Melville put it, nor ‘man’s foulest crime,’ but a certain political system; that in principle no less than in practice the American Way was neither providential nor natural but one of many possible forms of society (368).

Paradise, then, constitutes a major intervention into the possibilities of writing about the nation, of what is “said and sayable,” that allows an exploration of the national mythologies without denying that they operate in a real world political system.

### Conclusion

“My project rises from delight, not disappointment. It rises from what I know about the ways writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the ways they tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text. And rises from my certainty that writers always know, at some level, that they do this” -- Playing In The Dark (4)

This project began as a question: what does Toni Morrison have to tell us about contemporary American racial politics and their relationship to contemporary foreign policies? What stories are being told about America as a nation in her novels? I hoped to discover common “structural positions” between Morrison’s work on slavery and utopia and the contemporary political milieu. Initially, the question came to me while reading Paradise for the first time since the attacks of September 11 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Like many, I was fascinated by the way the war in Iraq was being justified by the Bush administration and how the reasons for war gradually shifted from (the dubious) issue of defence to the need to spread democracy. This shift—and the willingness on the part of many news outlets and much of the American public to accept such a shift in rationale—was amazing to me. How was it, I wondered, that two such seemingly different rationales were made to appear as congruent, even logical outgrowths of each other? What was it about these rationales that were structurally alike? Re-reading Paradise I was struck by the way Morrison’s engagement with utopia, feminism, and post-civil rights America seemed to speak to much of what was happening in America post 9-11—a community isolating itself from the outside world, leaders attempting to

consolidate their power in the scapegoating of ‘others,’ a ferociously defended exceptional self-image. Although initially the violence against the women at the Convent struck me as having something to say about the war in Iraq, as I began the investigation I became fascinated with exceptionalist ideology and the way this was translated in Morrison’s writing. As the project progressed it became clear that not only is the rhetoric of exceptionalism crucial to American foreign policy and public political discourse (in part explaining how the rationale for war was shifted so easily), but that literature and the tools of literary studies are useful for thinking about and challenging the politics of exceptionalism. Specifically, Morrison’s work strives to push readers towards both questioning the social and power configurations that live beneath stories and towards imagining the nation in new ways. She does this by inviting the reader into the pregnant spaces she writes into her work and evoking yet altering the national mythologies and narratives in ways that both critique the existing myths and open them up to accommodate alternative meanings and possibilities.

In other words, it has been the implication of much of this project that Morrison’s work has something to say about contemporary, post-9/11 politics. Morrison’s work, I argue, offers an imaginative, critical contextualization for how we got here. My concern with our contemporary context has always formed the background of my inquiry and reading—this social grounding has been translated in my writing into a critical inquiry of Morrison’s work. I hoped to discover how Morrison translated her own social grounding as a politically and culturally astute novelist writing during a resurgence of exceptionalist discourse and politics. More importantly, I hoped to discover how she critiqued

exceptionalism, operating under the assumption that the strategies and critiques offered in her novels and critical work can be useful for launching a critique of the current administration's exceptionalist policies and rhetoric. Beyond these immediate, contemporary concerns, my hope was also, of course, to bring Morrison studies into the new millennium.

I have argued that Morrison's exploration of the interlocking racial, gender and economic oppression of African Americans in America is absolutely crucial to the development and maintenance of America's exceptionalist ethos. Defining themselves against its black population, European America was able to develop a powerful exceptionalist self-image. Bodwin powerfully illustrates this tendency in America's "progressive" exceptionalist narratives, defining his moral innocence through the way he imagines African Americans and slavery. Beloved suggests the exceptionalist narrative not to rail against the nation's failures in its own novelistic jeremiad, but to say something else about the internal lives of slaves and to suggest alternative ways of imagining freedom and community. The novel translates Reagan's appeal to exceptionalism in its resistance to the traditional generic codes of popular slave narratives, which tend to use the form of the jeremiad in their appeals to abolition. Morrison registers the disappointment and the bitterness at the nation's failure to extend its ideals of freedom, equality, justice and democracy to her characters, but not in such a way that the novel tips over into the realm of the jeremiad. Instead, she offers an insistent historicizing that thwarts recourse to a binary discourse of promise and failure. While at times characters may long for a utopian America, the novel does not propose that such a thing is possible

In part, Morrison's resistance to the possibility of a utopian America is because of the violence and erasure that has traditionally attended the American mission. Morrison imagines quite a different relationship between sacrifice and redemption than that outlined by Richard Slotkin. Morrison passes on creating a narrative of regeneration through violence, refusing to bury the ghosts of slavery in service to a progressive, exceptionalist image of the nation. While such a refusal may imply that there is no hope of liberation or reprieve extended to future generations it is the very idea of hope and regeneration through the killing of others that the novel attempts to disturb and shake up. The hope the novel offers cannot be discovered in the fates of the dead, but must be looked for elsewhere. The hope, instead of residing in the successful killing of "others," and exorcism of those others' ghosts, is to be found in how the living respond to the haunting.

Paradise is concerned with the way historical fact is translated and altered to fit an exceptionalist mythology. The novel registers a harsh critique of the processes of scapegoating and violence that attend a patriarchal, exceptionalist worldview. American capitalism and wars of aggression are suggested in veiled allusions and brief references, forming a solid background against which the violence at the Convent and the exceptionalist rhetoric of Ruby are to be understood. Yet, Ruby's exceptionalism as a response to America's racist exclusions in its own utopian mission both articulates exceptionalism as a reaction to oppression and particularizes Ruby, resisting turning its story into an allegory of America. Ultimately, Morrison suggests that only by giving up

its exceptionalist mission can Ruby—and America—become places that are able to offer new, albeit imperfect, visions of social justice and community.



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