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# From strange fruit to fruitful kitchens: The space of the kitchen in Toni Morrison's novels

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From Strange Fruit to Fruitful Kitchens: The Space of the Kitchen in  
Toni Morrison's Novels

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English  
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## Dedication

I would like to thank all of those who have encouraged me over the many years it has taken to finish this degree. To my sons, Eric and Donnie, who have known nothing but a mother in school. To Alan, who has given me strength and guidance through the last push to finish. To my mother and father, Alva and Judy, who have always believed in me even when they did not always understand me. To Aunt Maxine, whose question, "Aren't you finished with that thing yet?" kept me going. To Jan, who has become a valuable friend. To my lunch table over the years--Ellen, Wanda, Gail, Greg, Bill, Jeanine, Tracey, Debra--who listened to all the trials and tribulations. To everyone else who touched my life--thank you.

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Toni Morrison's Novels

Betty J. Chroninger

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's recovery of the African-American presence in her novels is uniquely tied to the space of the kitchen. The recovery of the African-American presence has been accomplished in various ways for various groups: historians, critics, authors, sociologists. They have named names, recalled incidents, and "discovered" texts. Recovery has been accomplished by reconstructing culture through songs, storytelling, folklore and myth. Morrison establishes a connection between the space of the Garden that represents a white male empowered world in which African-American women have difficulty establishing power to a space of the kitchen where we see how well each character has been able to confront the public sphere (garden) and maintain her sense of self and a sense of empowerment. Each character's interiority is reflected in the activities and her relationship to the kitchen.

## Chapter 1

### Where is the Promised Land?

The first European pioneers so firmly defined the meaning of the New World as the Garden that their descendants have not yet been able to find another meaning for their social experience.

David Noble

The contemplation of [the] black presence [in American literature] is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.

Toni Morrison

There is a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours.

Toni Morrison

The African-American<sup>1</sup> has been excluded politically, socially and literarily from a white articulation of American experience. The African-American woman, in particular, is excluded from the American vision because she suffers from race, gender, and class biases. This exclusion is dealt with in African-American women's writing as these female writers inveigh against a culturally prescribed unproductive, barren, empty existence. Many African-American women define their female characters against this view of black women, but to say that African-American women's works are only a reaction against this societal view would be to reduce their writing to a reactive state. In truth, these women's works are proactive visions of the African-American woman--sometimes creating models against the stereotypes, but more often investigating the complexity and beauty of the African-American woman in her own right.

Because the African-American woman is left bereft of a space in which she is important and can define herself in American society, we see black female writers finding spaces for their women--Alice Walker, for instance, in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* identifies a creative space in her mother's flower garden. Walker is talking about what is and is not art and what should and should not be, in general, so she is identifying margins and center, just as many African-American

women are doing--identifying the margin of African-American women against the center of white culture. One such writer who investigates the richness and complexity of the African-American woman in American society is Toni Morrison. Morrison defines the black woman by her relationship with a space of the kitchen. In this space, Morrison examines, frames, and heals her female characters.

### Expulsion from the Garden

In order to delineate African-American women's exclusion from a white American articulation of history and culture, I want to show to where she is relegated in one of the more important and pervasive American mythic ideals--the Edenic myth. Because the myth, in part, defines space--a new place to begin, a "city upon a hill," a paradise on earth, a place for solace--the African-American woman's lack of adequate space in the myth inherently implies a lack of empowerment. The white Eden represents a place of origin, of stability and identity for white Americans. As this identity was established, it also absented non white peoples from it. Both the Native American and the African-American are associated with the wilderness as opposed to the City upon a Hill (white civilization and paradise). While I could utilize other areas in American culture, history, and literature as a place to show the African-American's

exclusion, the Edenic myth is particularly appropriate because of the metaphorical implications, as will be discussed, with respect to the "strange fruit" image, the hanged black body, and because of this myth's pervasiveness in American society as noted by David Noble in his discussion of the Edenic myth in *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden*.<sup>2</sup>

The white American culture's articulation of its place in the Garden takes on monumental proportions in the Edenic myth, the journey to the promised land, the hope for a new nation. The journey to the promised land is an integral part of the American experience, permeating history, literature, folklore and myths, and views on life, a journey that prompts thoughts of paradise in the wilderness of the Americas.<sup>3</sup> This metaphoric and literal journey dovetails with a search for identity in the American experience, one that is documented in early texts embodied in the view of the promised land. Puritans defined themselves through their relationship with God, as in the idea of the "city upon a hill" to which William Bradford refers in *Of Plymouth Plantation*; secular identities followed as Americans strove to define their role in the world: Benjamin Franklin's emblematic rise and his discussion of the perfectibility of man in his *Autobiography*, early Romantic attempts at defining a unique American literature, and Transcendental optimism for humanity.

The Eden trope in the American experience begins as early as William Byrd II who exemplifies these attributes when he describes his tracts of land for sale as a Land of Eden where "the climate is perfect" and "disease is practically unknown" (qtd in Wright, Louis B. 44). It is a land where even the old can come and feel "much stronger, much more light-footed, and in every way much more comfortable than before" (qtd in Wright, Louis B. 44). William Bradford in his *Of Plymouth Plantation* also indicates that the New World will be "a city upon a hill"--a biblical reference to paradise. John Smith describes the New World as a place of plenty, unmatched by any other. While the Edenic myth has a number of permutations throughout American history and literature, the myth of the Edenic qualities of America persists. This early image of America as a place to escape to a better life full of luxury and perfection permeates the white social experience. Elements of a promised land can be found in each century of the American experience; even in the disillusionment of the early twentieth century's waste land resides the hope of the "fresh, green breast of the New World" (Fitzgerald 189).<sup>4</sup>

The African-American has no place in the early articulations of a white Garden. Puritans, for example, omitted African-Americans as a matter of course: their belief in the elect justified stratification in society that marginalized and excluded. J. Lee Greene notes that, in

African-American literature, references to an Edenic myth, or an African-American space in it, began as a conscious refutation of Thomas Jefferson's claim, which mirrored popular claims at the time, that African-Americans were an inferior race.<sup>5</sup> The Edenic trope in African-American literature is a "tradition . . . preoccupied with the generic experience of being black in a society that denigrates blackness and valorizes whiteness" (Greene 2). During the Civil War, the African-American was absented both rhetorically and literally: Ted Ownby indicates that from the correspondences of the Confederate soldiers, they showed "little evidence" of seeing their slaves in heaven (qtd in McKee 38).<sup>6</sup> While the African-American journey to the promised land has been no less a part of the American experience, s/he has seldom been represented in that identity--the black male is represented as an evil that must be eradicated, and the black female is expected to reproduce in order to supply a work force. This type of marginalization has occurred from the beginnings of the American tradition; the African-American cannot partake of paradise.

That African-Americans have been denied entrance into a white paradise is most appropriately represented by "strange fruit" that, as Greene indicates, in "popular and vernacular culture [. . .] has come to signify a lynched black man" (116). Strange fruit is an image that Abel Meeropol created in his poem that would become a racial protest

song sung most notably by Billie Holiday. It is an image that has lived beyond the lynchings of the thirties, the decade that the song was written and first sung. It refers to lynching explicitly but also to any prejudiced treatment of blacks and minorities even today. Our society has not yet come to terms with lynching and hatred among us. It is why the song has gone from its first tentative voice in the Cafe Society by Holiday to its place in college classrooms and critical texts. Fans of the Billie Holiday song "credit it with helping awaken them to the realities of racial prejudice and the redemptive, ameliorative power of art" (Margolick 19). Upon hearing the song for the first time, listeners are struck by the stark, naked truth of the lyrics and the haunting music. This "strange fruit" image has surfaced figuratively, if not literally, in African-American novels, appearing implicitly in *Beloved*, for example. Morrison describes the hanging of Sixo as an oddity rather than a direct reference to his hanging: "Next time I saw him he had company in the prettiest trees you ever saw" (Morrison, *B* 197).<sup>7</sup>

This "strange fruit" image is one of the strongest in support of African-American status with respect to the Garden. Lynching suggests an exclusion of the African-American who, if s/he rebels, must suffer lynching as punishment and forfeit his/her life; lynching also suggests the expulsion of evil from paradise as the black man

becomes, in the white imagination, a manifestation of evil that preys on white women. The expulsion from the Garden is made manifest, in part, in the complexity of lynching: "[A]bstracted into a symbol, the generic white woman came to represent the holiness of whites' efforts to reinstate the mythic Eden of the Old South" (Greene 107).

Lynching was a way of purifying the South as the "black male body" became a "manifestation of the devil, an evil force that threatened the purity of the entire white South" (Greene 107).

The sexual implications that attend the image of strange fruit suggest the black man as a manifestation of evil that must be excised before he can violate the white woman.<sup>8</sup> He is a type of fruit hanging from a tree--an apple that has tempted the white woman--effectively placing black men outside paradise as a temptation that must be controlled. Even after the Civil War, lynching was utilized as a way to "create a separate space/act" that "reverse[d] the progression toward humanity that Negroes gained as a result of Reconstruction amendments" (Robinson 105).<sup>9</sup>

As exclusion, the metaphor of strange fruit bears further examination in its apparent contradiction because the African-American is fruitful in his/her strangeness. Hangings of slaves occurred because of their rebellion against white authority.<sup>10</sup> In rebelling against white authority, the African-American becomes an

individual, so s/he becomes productive by this act of claiming the self. S/he becomes unproductive, however, when lynched for this assertion of self. The moment that the African-American claims identity verbally or in an act of rebellion is the moment that s/he loses that identity by being hanged. White men exacted a punishment for the African-American rebellion: hangings that by the 1880s and into at least the 1930s also involved burning, castration, beheading and other forms of torture. Symbolically, lynching suggests the double bind in the life of black slaves as they were cut off from each other, from themselves and from freedom, and the only way to bring themselves closer to their families, to themselves or to freedom was to risk being killed.

By implication, the black woman too is expelled, but her expulsion is different, for not only is she expelled from paradise along with her man, but she is refused rhetorical status in the white articulation of paradise. Whereas the black man has representation as a manifestation of the devil, the black woman has no rhetorical status--she is rarely mentioned with respect to the myth. While she does not desire the rhetorical status of the evil body of the African-American man, she does desire recognition. Though black women were hanged both before and after the Civil War, indicating their presence in the "strange fruit" image, descriptions of hangings from the time period exclude mention of women.<sup>11</sup> The role of black women

in the white paradise is as a reproducer of a work force. As such, she does not merit a description in the myth.

While the hope of a promised land after emancipation was strong for African-Americans, the reality of the promise was less than fulfilling. It is, however, no less a part of their experience as can be seen in the titles of many texts relating to this topic.<sup>12</sup> Still, the pervasive awareness of having their American experience omitted from an articulation pervades African-American history and African-American literature. Even David Noble omits an articulation of the Garden from an African-American woman's perspective in his book, from which the epigraph comes, and in which he talks primarily about the Edenic myth in America from a white male perspective.<sup>13</sup>

Ralph Ellison underscores this type of omission as a powerful oppressor in an essay published in 1953: "[p]erhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word. [. . .] For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison, and destroy" (24). The power of the word, while not the only oppressor, is a primary oppressor of the African-American woman. While the oppression of slavery is real and documented enough, the rhetorical exclusion of the African-American from society is equally real.

Omissions surrounding the act of lynching have become even more acute in the last few decades. Sandra L. Richards in the foreword to *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* indicates that that anthology "is a challenge to a collective, historical amnesia that would forget" these events--an amnesia by blacks who "don't want to remember the utter degradation and helplessness" and by whites who "don't want to remember the dastardly acts" of their relatives (iv).<sup>14</sup> But Richards also asserts that "our very lives depend on this remembering and resistance" in order to "face and reject the harvest of hatred and fear with which we presently live" (x). That we as a nation have not yet dealt with our lynching past is manifest in our fascination yet with lynching in the Without Sanctuary exhibit in the 1990s. We are fascinated yet by not only the horror of the lynched (and frequently burned, castrated, beheaded and multiple gunshot wounded) bodies, but also the apparent eagerness of the audience for these acts. Not allowing omission and forgetfulness is, in part, the artist's realm.

### Search for Space

The African-American woman's search for space as empowerment has been problematic and different from the African-American man's search for identity. Of the minority groups working

toward equality in the twentieth century, the African-American woman did not have a movement that specifically addressed her concerns. Women's suffrage spoke to middle class white women and the black Civil Rights movement of the 1960s spoke to the black man's concerns. While the African-American woman benefited from both of these movements, she also suffered because her specific concerns were not effectively addressed in either one. The women's suffrage movement was a primarily white and middle class movement that ostensibly spoke for the rights of all women, but rhetorically excluded African-American women. It was a movement whose goals were incompatible with the African-American view of the world because most African-American women were unwilling to absent themselves from the issue of ethnicity and separate themselves from their male counterparts' attempts at equality in the same way that white middle class women were attempting to separate themselves from their male counterparts. The African-American woman wins because women's suffrage did benefit all women in many ways, but she loses because her concerns became subsumed under the plight of white women.

In addition, the Civil Rights movement for African-American men, while ostensibly fighting for the rights of all African-Americans, rhetorically excluded the African-American woman. While many women actively participated in the Civil Rights movement, they were

underappreciated for their efforts. Other writers have discussed this exclusion of the African-American female including Lynne Olson in *Freedom's Daughter* in which she details the "lost" women of the Civil Rights movement. Many women participated in the Civil Rights movement and were barely recognized for their efforts, and Olson attempts to reclaim the African-American woman from her invisibility.<sup>15</sup>

In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks identifies a restriction in the growth and movement of African-American women that can be documented early in the twentieth century when the rhetorical lines were drawn. As the battles were fought along those lines, African-American women were placed in a double bind that indicated the failure of both the feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement for them. For African-American women "to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism" (hooks 3). While logically the Civil Rights movement should have more benefits for African-American women than the feminist movement, the reality was that "to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant [African-American women] no political voice" (hooks 3).<sup>16</sup> Morrison may be referring to this dynamic in *The Bluest Eye* when Pauline's white mistress tells her that she must make

a choice between her job or her man, Cholly. Pauline recalls: "But later on it didn't seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman" (Morrison, *BE* 120). Even though she is being abused by Cholly and leaving him would be in her best interest, at least physically, the promise of the middle-class white woman holds even less appeal than her relationship with Cholly.

So a crucial area in which African-Americans have fought to reestablish identity is in response to the Edenic myth. Noble indicates that the Edenic myth is so intricately tied to American identity that our "social experience" is envisioned through its lens. While the white imagination finds solace and comfort in the paradise of the Edenic myth, the African-American has no solace or comfort in the Garden which is instead a place of forced production and labor--working in the fields as slaves for the harvest from which they enjoy no fruits.

Because the African-American is systematically denied entrance into the Garden, African-American literature indicates a conscious or subconscious reaction to that exclusion. Greene in *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century* delineates the history of the Eden trope in African-American literature from 1850 to 1950. He notes that as the Edenic myth changed in the American experience over the decades, African-American literature responded directly to these changes. A counter image adopted by African-Americans

included "corporeal and psychological sufferings among slaves in the Southern Garden" (Greene 41). At first, the paradise could be found in an escape from slavery and movement north. This paradise, however, was never realized as African-Americans were unable to live successfully free of racism in the North either. A back to Africa movement ensued that was expected to fill this void, an attempt to "recapture an Edenic ideal, which existed more in their imaginations than in reality" (Greene 153-54). Greene concludes that throughout the history of the Americas, the African-American has been effectively excluded from paradise, a "black Adam--tempted, seduced, destroyed" (Greene 169).

#### Identification of Kitchen Space

The white Edenic myth means escape, freedom, fecundity and identity. It is a space that invokes the public sphere of white male empowerment. For African-Americans, this public sphere means humiliation, exclusion, and death. In response to this white myth, according to Greene, African-American writers have responded to their marginalization from the Garden in their attempts to find a space for themselves. The recovery of the African-American presence has been accomplished in various ways by various groups: historians, critics, authors, and sociologists. They have named names, recalled

incidents, and "discovered" texts. Recovery has been accomplished by reconstructing culture through songs, storytelling, folklore and myth. African-American writers, also, have attempted to find an answer to the question of identity, not always successfully. Emerging, then, from the virtual invisibility of the nineteenth century, African-American women have fought for identity in a world that has systematically denied them representation. Being unable to claim space the way white Americans did demands another strategy, and in the works of Morrison, the kitchen becomes a space of creation, rebellion, and consumption.

There exists an undeniable historical connection between African-American women and the kitchen. From the time of slavery, African-American women have been intricately and stereotypically tied to the kitchen in the imaginations of white Americans--the Aunt Jemima character, for example, the stereotypical Mammy who dutifully takes care of the white family. Bebe Moore Campbell, discussing interracial marriages between African-American men and white women, indicates from personal experience the extent to which this stereotype pervades American thought. In her remembrances of her childhood, Campbell recalls the face of Aunt Jemima on the syrup bottle and thinks "Aunt Jemima has a new, modern hairdo now" (125). She is still the epitome of "a sturdy, sensible woman, not

unpleasant to look at, but clearly one who is meant for servitude and not adoration" (Campbell 125). Campbell laments that the image of Aunt Jemima is all that some people see even today when they look at an African-American woman. This space of servitude rather than adoration constricts African-American women.<sup>17</sup>

As a metaphor, the kitchen, like Virginia Woolf's room in *A Room of One's Own*, has been an important image for a number of women writers, theorists, and feminists as an architectural space that has been designated as the woman's purview, a space that has been identified as characteristic of industrial capitalism, as a place to reproduce and subvert patriarchy, as a marker for market economics, and, in combination with the yard (and garden), as indicative of the ambiguity of life for young African-American girls.<sup>18</sup> The space of the kitchen as important to women has been set out in a number of studies. In *Race, Class and Gender*, Esther Ngan-Ling Chow indicates that the "homeplace and community [are] sites of contradiction and contested terrains where opposing forces are intricately interwoven into women's everyday lives" (xxiii). Minrose C. Gwin identifies the kitchen as a place where women have the ability to "re-envision and expand those spaces; that is, to displace and 'un-think' history" (57). In varying ways, the texts she discusses empower African-American women. She uses three texts to demonstrate this empowerment.

From *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones, Gwin speaks of Ursa who gives her daughter "back to herself" because the mother speaks of "exert[ing] control in the arenas of sexuality and reproduction" (Gwin 57). Beth Henley's play *Crimes of the Heart* presents the tale of women who "through laughter [. . .] dismantle the grandfather's power over them" (Gwin 58). Finally, women maintain the limiting positions in the kitchen in Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* and reinscribe their own disempowerment until they are able to move out of the kitchen. This relationship of African-American women to the kitchen is one that is carried out in Morrison's novels, as well.

#### Toni Morrison's Kitchen

Morrison's literary investigation of African-American women suggests Greene's historical description of the African-American's attempts to achieve freedom and identity. How Morrison's characters deal with the public sphere of the Garden informs their relationship to the kitchen. The Garden symbolically represents the white world from which the African-American has no rhetorical status except as evil and as absence. As Morrison's women attempt to breach this world of white male empowerment, each has experiences, then choices to make. Her choices in the Garden inform her life in the kitchen. The

more the character is damaged in the Garden, the less fulfilled she is in her own kitchen.

Empowerment is in the Garden of white male privilege, the public sphere. Many African-American women are defeated in this realm, and this defeat is mirrored in her relationship to the kitchen. Some women are more successful or are better able to hold onto their sense of self, her sense of who she is in the face of this public realm. These women's relative empowerment is mirrored, as well, in their relationship to the kitchen. The power of each African-American woman's self love becomes reflected in the space of the kitchen. Therefore, we see characters like Pauline Breedlove who has no self love and no fruitful space in her own kitchen, and characters like Pilate who has a strong sense of self love that allows her to thrive in her own kitchen, and allow others to thrive there as well.

Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* that an Africanist presence exists in the texts of white American writers: "Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence" white writers indicate an African-American presence that exists as an absence (Morrison, *Playing* 6).<sup>19</sup> It is Morrison's belief in the lost presence of the African-American that has led her to

investigate this omission in her own novels. Much critical inquiry into Morrison's novels places reclamation for the African-American woman in the community itself. I am suggesting that a crucial space that reflects the empowerment of the women in Morrison's texts is the kitchen. While the kitchen is also communal, it is the individual's space that concerns me here. Patrick Bryce Bjork concludes his *The Novels of Toni Morrison* by stating: "These characters acknowledge, however vaguely, that they must search for identity by returning to the neighborhood and to the communal experience" (163). Many critics have noted a similar salvation for Morrison's characters only or primarily in communal ties,<sup>20</sup> but I contend that the individual women are themselves as important as the community. Stanley Crouch underscores this lack of understanding of Morrison's women when he says about *Beloved* that Morrison makes "sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn't weaken" (Crouch 205). Here he speaks to both an understanding of the plight of Morrison's characters and a misapprehension of the strength of her characters. African-American women have had difficulty developing agency, but the issue that Crouch and others have missed is that Morrison's characters do stretch beyond the circumstances that would seem to identify them as victims. Morrison's women are no more victims than they allow themselves to be, and

their connection to the kitchen suggests their strength.

African-American women emerge from Morrison's novels and the abiding restrictions of the slave kitchen to create an identity that transcends that kitchen. Even though Morrison's characters may be circumscribed by a kitchen that is reminiscent of slave labor, the characters are also able to transcend that circumscription. Gwin opens her article about the empowerment of women and the kitchen investigating the role that the kitchen has in her world specifically and in Southern women's worlds in general, and she concludes that "these Southern women's kitchens [are] transformative, radical and profoundly woman-centered" (55).<sup>21</sup> While Morrison is not Southern nor are many of her characters, many of them, like Morrison, have roots in the South; and her articulation of the Southern experience hints of fermentation, of things happening, of changes and improvements in the (re)appropriated kitchen. For Morrison, the kitchen is a similar place from which her women gather strength, and, by looking at the trials of her characters, one can more easily identify with the arduous process of gaining identity that the African-American female has had to endure. From the kitchen that Gwin describes as a "space which has been physically, psychologically and culturally confining for women--a tight squeeze," African-American women have been able to emerge as more self assured (Gwin 56).

Within Morrison's novels, we will follow the African-American woman's choices made and regretted, and choices made and rejoiced; Morrison's characters illuminate the soul and inspiration of the African-American woman's day to day life as she carves out her space. Looking at Morrison's characters in their kitchens serves to underline the difficulties of African-American women in finding their identities and agency: the missteps and miscalculations, the gains and losses, and the problems that are inherent in finding a way in the world. Thus, the kitchen is both a space of corruption and a space of regeneration. It is a space of ambiguity because Morrison's characters are learning and growing and because they do not always make the right decisions.<sup>22</sup>

### Limitations

The space of the kitchen as an empowering space comes with limitations. The kitchen has been historically a space of constriction for women. It is a Colonial space that has identified African-American women as Aunt Jemima. It is a patriarchal space assigned to the woman that has limited her to a private rather than a public realm. I do not intend to reinscribe the kitchen as *the* space for the African-American woman. I see kitchen space as a space in Morrison's novels that defines constriction in the kitchen as a historical fact and then

uses the kitchen space to redefine African-American women as they become agents in the world.

In chapter two, I will discuss how Morrison's novels show the African-American woman's exclusion from the Garden. When Morrison's female characters are associated with a garden, they find little solace; in fact, frequently the garden suggests hardship--Sethe loses her children, and Sula's relationship to her community suffers, for example. In each novel, the garden is inadequate at best, harmful at worst. Images of the garden are varied; one is Frieda and Claudia's dying garden in *The Bluest Eye* that symbolically represents Pecola's predicament, and another is Ruth Dead being smothered by garden vegetation in *Song of Solomon*. Sometimes the garden functions symbolically as a harbinger of evil; Baby Suggs is toiling in the garden when she becomes aware of Schoolteacher's arrival to take her daughter-in-law and grandchildren back to Sweet Home; the community has not warned them of the slave owners' arrival. At other times, characters are identified as evil. These characters' are implicitly associated with the garden, like Sula who is seen as evil by the community. Sometimes these evil characters are explicitly associated with the Garden, like Dorcas whom Joe identifies with paradise. These characters do not function well in their lives or in their communities.

In chapters three through six, I demarcate the space of the kitchen as a theoretical concept set against this "failed space" of the Garden and as a space for African-American women in Morrison's texts, a theoretical space that encompasses a number of images. By indicating the Garden as emblematic of the absence of the African-American woman from the American experience, I can then identify the space that she has found for herself. Many writers, especially African-American women, identify a place for her women in some way, and Toni Morrison's women can be figuratively identified with/in the kitchen. So in chapter three, I discuss the kitchen as a refuge that suggests the womb in its security. Characters feel protected and loved there because it is a space where they can retreat in order to find themselves, a space where they can construct a self away from the pressures of the outside world: the women of the Convent in *Paradise* escape to its sanctuary; Ruth Dead escapes to Pilate, Ruth's husband's sister, and her kitchen sanctuary. By utilizing the theoretical work set out by Gaston Bachelard and Henri LeFebvre and the historical record of the kitchen by Ellen Plante, I will indicate the importance of a space to the house, and the importance of the kitchen to the American experience. I will discuss the limitations of the space of the kitchen because of the historically limiting kitchen site in a patriarchal society. Then, I will identify the kitchen as a space of

identity and solace for Morrison's characters, producing feelings of belonging and communion (food consumption); it produces a space to escape the world.

In chapter four, I look specifically at kitchen conversations. The space of the kitchen allows conversations to take place that are healing. Many times characters return from years of absence to talk in their kitchens--Sula and Nel in *Sula* have one such conversation, and it is a renewed feeling of happiness that Nel identifies. These conversations are enlightening and healing. Along with these conversations, are conversations that are overheard. These conversations occur as a woman is passing by a kitchen and overhears important information about herself. These revelations lead to internal questioning, realization, and growth for the character. Sethe realizes her place as an African-American woman as a result of one of these conversations, and Sula begins a path of self-realization because of her overheard conversation.

In chapter five, a contradictory yet related notion of the violation of the kitchen will be examined in the kitchen as womb. While the womb suggests protection and comfort, the womb may also be violated: violations that take the form of corruption. Morrison investigates corruption that she believes needs to be purged from society. Violation-as-kitchen will be examined both literally in the idea

of misplaced and displaced kitchens and figuratively in the idea of sexual violations of and by characters in the kitchen. Misplaced and displaced kitchens occur in varying forms--from the literal misplacement of the Oven in *Paradise* to the figurative displacement of the kitchen in its misuse: Plum's use of the kitchen spoon for his drugs, for instance. I will examine the sexual violation of some African-American women as displacement of the kitchen--as a disempowering of these women that reaches the confines of the kitchen, of which Cholly Breedlove's rape of his daughter, Pecola, in the kitchen is the most obvious and heinous example. I will examine the sexual violations that are from inside themselves arising from some African-American women's misinterpretation of sexuality as freedom. Associating some of her women with the Jezebel myth allows Morrison to indicate two types of women: those who are sterile because they play out the myth, either consciously or unconsciously, and those who gain freedom because they rebel against this myth.

Where in chapters three, four, and five, the examination of characters shows them inside the kitchen or inside the home with relation to the kitchen, in chapter six I will investigate the gaze through the kitchen window and through the kitchen door for its symbolic meaning. Characters bound by the frame of the window have less freedom and less strength than those characters who are

bound by the frame of the door. Women who frame the outside world through the kitchen window or who are in the world but framed by the window are bound to remain confined within that frame. Her confinement suggests that she is unable, even after the healing effects of the kitchen, to effectively leave the kitchen. When women frame the world through a kitchen window, they have no movement to the outside world because they have not learned the lessons of the kitchen so that they can enter the world successfully.

The same is true of a man who frames a woman through the kitchen window; he frames one who is subjugated by life and/or by her man. She is not able to lead a productive life. Ruth Dead is such a character. Even after the healing of Pilate's kitchen, she is bound by her confining role as wife of Macon Dead.

Framing the outside world through the kitchen door, contrarily, indicates joy and contentment in women's lives. Women are able to lead this joyful life if they have come to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and these women may successfully leave the kitchen. These women have successful movement into the outside world and are the most productive and fulfilled of Morrison's characters. Pilate is one such woman; she leaves the confines of her brother's kitchen--leaving Ruth alone.

In chapter seven, I will examine wage labor in the kitchen and the possibilities for work as a development of the self. These women's productions of self are predicated on their connection to the work of the kitchen; and the closer the women are to self knowledge, the more they own their space in the kitchen. The work one does has the ability to define a person--not only African-American women. The women who work in the kitchens in Morrison's novels--Pauline, Pilate, Corinthians, Ondine, Denver, and Violet--are defined , in part, by that work in the kitchen.

## Chapter 2

### Strange Fruit in the Garden

What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence.

Toni Morrison

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Sung by Billie Holiday

Written by Abel Meeropol

Morrison demonstrates exclusions of African-American women in her novels in varying ways in the black community itself. By

examining her references to lynching we can see a pattern of exclusion for African-Americans. Additionally, specific references to a garden take on symbolic importance. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* symbolically mark the exclusion of African-American women by a dying garden. In *Song of Solomon*, the garden smothers its female characters, and in *Beloved* the woman's placement in the garden is an omen of evil.

One way in which Morrison shows black men's and women's exclusion and expulsion from the Garden is by calling attention to lynching. Morrison must recall the events of lynching for both African-American men and women because white culture has excised blacks by the act of lynching and because even black people have "forgotten." In *Beloved*, for example, Sethe recalls passing "right by those boys hanging in the trees. One had Paul A's shirt on but not his feet or his head" (Morrison, *B* 198). Sethe's memory of the image is an intriguing mixture of denial and awareness. She is aware of the hangings and the reasons for them, but there is a gap in the memory she herself feels in the shame of "remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys" (Morrison *B*, 6). The African-American in the white Garden must be excised, and "forgetting" must be enacted by the black culture for its survival.

Making explicit the African-American's connections to lynching is only one way that Morrison shows the failed space of the Garden for the African-American. Morrison places a woman in a garden where she is, frequently, excluded from some productive aspect of life. In the Garden, the African-American becomes strange fruit, lynched if s/he becomes a threat to the white paradise. The garden thus suggests exclusion, a place where African-Americans can find no hope; in fact, mention of the garden frequently suggests disaster for the characters.<sup>1</sup>

#### Playing in the Dark

As I mentioned in the introduction, Morrison speaks directly to the issue of African-American absences in literature when she discusses, in *Playing in the Dark*, an "Africanist" presence in white American literature, a presence that is a shadow or ghost of the African-American. As readers, we are haunted by this presence that we experience as absence. While at first it might appear that there is an absence of characters or little meaning ascribed to those characters who do represent the Africanist presence in white literature, Morrison indicates that white American literature is, indeed, shaped by the Africanist presence. In her explication of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, for example, Morrison notes that, though

the story is about a white mistress, a careful exegesis indicates much more about ethnic issues. Many critics consider the novel one of Cather's weakest, for varying reasons, but Morrison insists that its weakness is not because it has less artistic genius than Cather's others but because it deals with issues that are difficult to negotiate: "the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism" (Morrison, *Playing* 28). The issue in *Playing in the Dark* of the representations of African-Americans in white literature suggests an interest that has worked itself out in Morrison's own novels. A preoccupation with presence and absence is central to Morrison's work because she describes characters who, when she places them in the Garden, are ghosts of women, women who are unable to develop strong senses of who they are.

Morrison's novels appear to be working out J. Lee Greene's theoretical discussion of the Edenic trope in novels written by African-American writers. These novels have been, according to Greene, a reaction to the Anglo-American vision of itself, which has been based on the Edenic myth and which has, subsequently, marginalized African-Americans. Though Greene does not specifically deal with Morrison's novels (his analysis only examines works to the 1950s), the history of African-American exclusion from the Garden permeates her work.<sup>2</sup> A garden is viewed, as if in response to the denial of

paradise in the white cultural myth, as lacking paradisaical attributes. The elements in Morrison's novels that are represented by the garden--ways to reappropriate paradise in the world--are frequently failures.

### Dying Garden

One of the images that indicates the failure of the garden occurs early in Morrison's work: the image of a garden that will not grow. In *The Bluest Eye*, exclusion from the Garden is suggested by exclusion from the white world of beauty that assaults the sensibilities of Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove. The "Dick and Jane" primer at the beginning of the novel is presented and then subverted throughout the text in both the content of the novel and the presentation of the primer itself. Many critics have noted the importance of the primer as stressing the "undeniable contrast between this pervasive white, middle-class myth and the tragic desolation (sic) of the novel's central character, Pecola" (Bjork 32). This exclusion from the white, middle-class myth serves to underline all the characters' exclusion from the white myth of the Garden, an exclusion that is complete because neither girl has the power to overcome her circumstances. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer blame each other; Claudia says that "For years I thought my sister was right: it

was my fault," but it is the outside world that does not provide a fertile place for their growth as Claudia much later realizes "that the earth itself might have been unyielding" (Morrison, *BE* 5). The garden has excluded both girls from its paradise even as the girls believe that everything will be all right if their garden of marigolds grows: "if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right" (Morrison, *BE* 5).

Unfortunately, Pecola's baby dies, and, coincidentally, the flowers do not grow. Claudia and Frieda believe that the two are intricately tied in a cause and effect relationship that dooms Pecola's baby to death, dooms Pecola to a life of insanity, and dooms the MacTeer girls to a life of powerlessness in the society at large.

Paradoxically, Frieda has some personal measure of pride and inner strength that is associated with the garden. Frieda leaves the kitchen and escapes to the garden for her family's support because Mr. Henry has touched her inappropriately. She leaves the kitchen for the garden--a seeming reversal of the importance of the garden and kitchen as I have set it out. However, because Frieda is so young and does not understand fully the ramifications of the events to follow, what is symbolically important is the weeding activity that the mother and father are engaged in in the garden. As Frieda describes what has happened to her, her father proceeds to "weed out" of their lives the

bad influence of Mr. Henry as Mr. MacTeer throws Mr. Henry off the porch and takes a shot at him, but the symbolic importance goes beyond Frieda's parents' actions against Mr. Henry. Their actions further indicate that the garden is not satisfactory as is; the white Garden needs weeding. Unfortunately, though there is a kernel of hope here for action, it never comes to fruition for these characters. Frieda is not old enough to act, and the rebellious acts by her older sister, Claudia--tearing off heads of white dolls--is fruitless.

The garden imagery supports the girls' position in the infertile world of the 1940s where the girls "waited for spring, when there could be gardens," but gardens would not grow (Morrison, *BE* 62). In fact, gardens further indicate an exclusion from paradise because gardens are reminders to Claudia of beatings, not of benevolence. Spring, which symbolically connotes youthfulness and hope in the white imagination and literature, is at first benevolent, but quickly becomes something harsh. Claudia remembers "[t]he first twigs are thin, green, and supple. They bend into a complete circle, but will not break" (Morrison, *BE* 97). The newness and hopefulness is soon contradicted, however, because "[t]heir delicate, showy hopefulness shooting forsythia and lilac bushes meant only a change in whipping style" (Morrison, *BE* 97). No hope rests in the garden in the traditional, white metaphor of the spring because all that Claudia

and Freida can look forward to are whippings literally from parents who "beat [them] differently in the spring. Instead of the dull pain of a winter strap, there were these new green switches that lost their sting long after the whipping was over" (Morrison, *BE* 97).

Figuratively, society whips them as well because the girls are not valued because they do not fit the white definition of beauty.

The girls are aware of their lack of value as they speak of their arch nemesis, Maureen Peal. They know it is not her with whom they should be concerned, but the source of the problem can only be articulated as a "thing": "Jealousy we understood and thought natural--a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us" (Morrison, *BE* 74). Maureen is the "disruptor of seasons," a little rich girl who represents everything that is the Dick and Jane primer; Maureen is preferred for her beauty, her economic station in life, and her intelligence (Morrison, *BE* 62). She is described as having the attributes of every season but winter: "There was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk" (Morrison, *BE* 62). Winter's absence in her description suggests her privilege because winter is the season associated with Claudia and Frieda--their seeds do not grow as if it is still winter, still barren. In Maureen, the

absence of winter suggests the societal vision of beauty in her--of everlasting spring.

While Claudia wonders if she planted the seeds too deeply, her greater concern is "that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (Morrison, *BE* 206). Claudia speaks for an entire race that has no place to grow just as "certain seeds [the soil] will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear" (Morrison, *BE* 206).<sup>3</sup> Pecola's madness and Claudia's assessment of it indicate the sterility in America for the African-American woman.

Morrison's words about Pecola go beyond the text of *The Bluest Eye*. Her words apply not only to one little girl who has lost her sanity, but to all little black girls who suffer because this land is not fertile for them. America is a peculiar place because it does not bear certain fruits, those of African-American women. The only African-American fruit this country will bear is the "strange fruit," not parity but death, if not physically then psychologically.

Though they are young, Pecola's and Claudia's relationship to the kitchen reflects their degree of empowerment and the degree of the damage done to them. Pecola is damaged by the white vision of beauty that excludes her, and she is relegated to a life of insanity.

Claudia is left frustrated at her lack of empowerment and expresses that frustration by tearing the heads off her white dolls.

Just as the Garden suggests the inefficacies of the MacTeer girls and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, so the Garden in *Sula* suggests the ineffectiveness of Nel and Sula as they are surrounded by a dying garden. When the girls are twelve, the summer blooms in what Morrison describes as a huge garden: "A summer limp with the weight of blossomed things. Heavy sunflowers weeping over fences; iris curling and browning at the edges far away from their purple hearts; ears of corn letting their auburn hair wind down to their stalks" (Morrison, *S* 56). The burdensome weight of summer in this passage suggests the burden of the garden for the African-American, not only a paradise, but also a place of limpness, of weeping, of browning and curling edges. The garden is literally deteriorating in its bloom and figuratively bears sorrow instead of yielding happiness. This sorrow is the lot for the African-American in paradise.

### Smothering Garden

Another image that Morrison utilizes to show the failure of the garden is a garden that strangles its inhabitants. Ruth, in *Song of Solomon*, represents the African-American woman who is entangled and restrained by both white and African-American male standards.

Her son, Milkman, indicates his mother's unhappy life immediately before he tells his friend Guitar about his mother in the garden: "[s]he's so serious, she's wasting away" (Morrison, *SS* 104). In one of the most powerful dream episodes in Morrison's writing, Milkman (Ruth's son) has a waking dream about Ruth that indicates the hopelessness and helplessness of Ruth's predicament in particular, and of African-American women in general. As she is tending the garden, "[s]ome of the stems began to sprout heads, bloody red heads that bobbed over and touched her back. Finally she noticed them, growing and nodding and touching her" (Morrison, *SS* 105). Milkman sees that they are dangerous, but Ruth does not, and she is overtaken by them as they "covered her and all he could see was a mound of tangled tulips bent low over her body, which was kicking to the last" (Morrison, *SS* 105). While the African-American female may be kicking to the last, she is overwhelmed by outside forces as is Ruth who is subjugated by life, by nature, and by the garden. With no voice in the world, women like Ruth are doomed to be absorbed by that which has ostracized them--Ruth has been emotionally ostracized by her husband who cannot reconcile her having breast fed her son for too long and Ruth's lying in bed and sucking on her father's dead fingers. Ruth is doomed to be smothered to death, and is described by Milkman as "the unhappiest woman in the world" (Morrison, *SS*

104). Ruth's possibilities for a fruitful existence are symbolically represented by Ruth's planting bulbs on a December day that is "as cold as a witch's tit" and hoping they will bloom (Morrison, *SS* 104). The bulbs will not bloom for women like Ruth Dead, as her name would suggest.

Ruth's relationship to the kitchen reflects her disempowerment. In fact, she has no relationship to the kitchen. Hers is a relationship to a barren dining room.

#### Warning Garden

Where Ruth is able to survive physically her smothering, other characters working in the garden suffer death. Expulsion from the African-American culture for Sethe in *BeLoved*, for example, is signified in the garden. Sethe is squatting in the garden when "She saw, floating above the railing [ . . . ] schoolteacher's hat" (Morrison, *B* 163-64). Sethe leaves the garden because the white man wants to take her children back to slavery, the same white man who has his sons write down the animal characteristics of Sethe. The same sorrow that comes from the garden for other characters greets Sethe as well. Coming out of the garden after having seen Schoolteacher, Sethe rushes to her children and makes the decision to murder them. As if to confirm Schoolteacher's assessment of her, Sethe kills with the

viciousness and fury of an animal so that she can keep her children safe. She holds her dead child with "wet fingers that held [the baby's] face so her head wouldn't fall off," and she attempts to kill her other daughter swinging "the baby toward the wall planks" as her two boys are "lying open-eyed in sawdust" (Morrison, *B* 149-150).

The irony of the episode is that Schoolteacher and his son, who see Sethe as an animal, are shocked by her actions as he "took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none" (Morrison, *B* 164) and the son repeats in disbelief: "What she go and do that for?" (Morrison, *B* 150). While Schoolteacher has such a strong aversion to the scene, he has no aversion to the hanging of Sixo and the violent punishment of the other men of Sweet Home.<sup>4</sup> The son does not understand why Sethe acts this way "On account of a beating?" (Morrison, *B* 150). The white men see her behavior as "testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world" (Morrison, *B* 151). Schoolteacher leaves without his prize.

Sethe's act is a symbolic lynching, and, as such, Schoolteacher and his son should be no more affected by this hanging than that of Sixo's, but they are. The act of killing her progeny suggests the hanging of the African-American because Sethe holds "her face so her head wouldn't fall off" (Morrison, *B* 150). Sethe does to her children

what she has "learned" from her masters. The act of beheading her daughter symbolically castrates Schoolteacher. Sethe is defying the white man in an act that approximates his punishment of those African-Americans who rebelled against him. By making her rebellious act a beheading, Sethe turns the act of lynching back onto Schoolteacher, Sethe subverts his power: "It worked [. . .]. They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em" (Morrison, *B* 164-65). The act that is a punishment for African-American slave rebellion becomes the rebellious act itself, leaving no slave/master retribution.

Sethe secondly subverts Schoolteacher's power because the idea of bearing fruit by becoming "strange fruit" evokes one of the African-American woman's main functions in maintaining the Garden of Eden for white plantation owners, that of reproducing a labor force. By permanently removing the fruit of her womb from the Garden, Sethe undermines her reproductive status for the Garden.

The act leaves Sethe in a similar double bind, however, as described in the hanging of African-Americans. She finds strength and power in her rebellion against the white man; however, she is then expelled (cut off) from her own community that labels her act as animal-like. She is denied full representation in the community because it makes her suffer a symbolic beheading herself: the community ostracizes Sethe for her act. Stamp Paid, who visits

everyone, has visited Bluestone 124 only once in eighteen years.

Sethe spent twenty-eight days after her escape living a happy life only to be followed, after the incident, by "disapproval and a solitary life" (Morrison, *B* 173). Paul D, eighteen years later, wonders about her choice in this incident when he finds out about it. "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," Paul D says indicating the animal nature of her choice to kill her children (Morrison, *B* 165). And then leaves her. Eventually, Sethe ends her life in a vegetative state, the product of a poisoned garden: Sethe's "hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow" (Morrison, *B* 271).

Sethe's relationship to the kitchen reflects her choice to murder her children. This act of rebellion, while subverting the power of School Teacher, disempowers Sethe in her own community. Thus, we see a relationship to the kitchen that drains Sethe of her life as Beloved draws that strength away from her.

### Failing Garden

Finally, in order to demonstrate the failure of the garden, Morrison identifies certain characters as evil by creating them with physical or emotional flaws. Certain characters are identified as evil by their communities: Sula is evil, in part, because of her placing her mother in a home, and Pilate is evil because she does not have a belly

button. These last characters have great complexity because their communities see them as evil, yet without the sustenance of the community, these characters have great inner strength. These characters are not exiled for their evil because, as Morrison indicates in an interview with Betty Jean Parker, African-Americans deal with evil much differently from white culture: "We believe that evil has a natural place in the universe" (Morrison, "Complexity" 62). Instead, evil is incorporated into the community as a reminder of the failure of the Garden. While the community does not perpetrate any violence upon Sula, for example, the community's "conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had to protect and love one another" (Morrison, *S* 117). Sula becomes a catalyst, an evil that focuses the community's attempts to be good.

In *Sula*, Morrison shows what can happen when an African-American woman suffers the hatred of her community because she has associated too closely with the white community. Jane Davis asserts in *The White Image in the Black Mind* that blacks who internalize white society are frequently subject to intra racial hatred and violence as Sula is in this novel (105). The snake in the Garden is closely associated with Sula as she takes on evil proportions. To Sula, these people lead restricted lives: "The narrower their lives, the wider

their hips," she thinks (Morrison, *S* 121). "Those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins . . . Those without men were like sour-tipped needles" (Morrison, *S* 122). Sula does not value the women of her own community, and she herself does not belong because she thwarts that community by acting in a similar manner as the developers who have torn out the natural garden of Medallion in order to put in a golf course. She sleeps with their men, and she denigrates the lives of the women; she is, to them, evil. The evil here is not the corruption of one individual by another but a corruption of the self. Sula forsakes her community as she forsakes herself. Sula's relationship to the kitchen reflects this corruption of the self as she is unable to foster any relationship on the kitchen; it is her disharmony with herself that allows her to corrupt the relationship that is harmoniously represented in the kitchen conversation between Sula and Nel by sleeping with Nel's husband, for example.

Dorcas in *Jazz* is dispossessed because she does not have the sense of a "normal" life; her interests are entirely superficial and not communal. Whereas Sula has presumably established a life for herself outside her community, Dorcas has no such outlet. Both cases, however, lead to tragic results: both die as dispossessed persons. Dorcas is a young woman who prostitutes herself to one man (Joe) and who desires money, so she can impress another. Joe identifies

her with the garden in his belief that he can "strut out the garden" with Dorcas, but Dorcas is like every other African-American woman in her dispossession: nothing good can come from attempting to find paradise in the Garden. The relationship will fail as will any African-American that attempts to find inclusion in the Garden, and with the same physical and emotional consequences. No paradise is to be reached, no harvest to be reaped from the Eve who tempts Adam. As Joe himself says: "thought it really was Eden, and I couldn't take your eyes in because I was loving the hoof marks on your cheeks" (Morrison, *J* 133). Tragically, Dorcas' dispossession from self and community causes her own death: Joe's obsession with the marks on her cheeks leads him to shoot her. Dorcas, incidentally, has no relationship to the kitchen. It is this lack of grounding of self that leaves her alone and, ultimately, contributes to her death.

The last failure of the garden can be seen in the failed paradise in *Paradise*. These women are different from Sula and Dorcas, however, in their association as evil. Sula's and Dorcas' actions identify them as malignant to their communities. The Convent women have the same identification of malignancy placed upon them, primarily, by the men of the nearby town, but the women's association comes more as a reaction to what the men do not know about them or as a reaction based on the men's communal

associations with the women. While the women of the Convent are identified as demons, that evil actually comes from outside--the women themselves are not malefic. This distinction between Sula and Dorcas as evil and the Convent women as having evil projected on them is marked out by the other women of the community. In *Paradise*, the townswomen recognize the malignancy as issuing forth from their own men.

The demonizing of the women begins as they have been excluded or exclude themselves from the outside world. Their failure is evoked in the title of the novel, *Paradise*, that becomes ironic because the female centered world that the Convent women successfully create is the men's reason for the Convent's final dissolution. The men of the town are threatened by the freedom that the women of the Convent have and subsequently associate them with evil that "beat[s] out the snakes, the Depression, the tax man and the railroad for sheer destructive power" (Morrison, *P* 17). The fiendishness imposed on the women by the men is actually a barometer for the men's own deterioration. The malice, in fact, rests in the men of the deserted town of Haven, in the "words [that] grew as they snaked through the night air" (Morrison, *P* 274). The men's fear of the women is, in part, because of either the liaisons the men have had with the women of the Convent or the help that their own

women have asked of the Convent women over the years. These episodes are associated with garden imagery, and each of the meetings is ill-fated and a reminder to each man in the town that he is somehow inadequate. Eventually, the men's inadequacies will become focused and projected on the Convent women. Lone believes the men have identified the evil, the snake, as being in the Convent, but Lone rightly identifies the "snaked" words of the men as malice's residence.

The women of *Paradise* are different from those in Morrison's earlier novels, however. Because "evil" of a type identified by the community is associated with Sula and Dorcas, Morrison shows an unfortunate series of events that leads to each character's destruction--Sula's ostracism from the community and eventual death and Dorcas' death. The Convent women, however, because the true malice lies in the men, are the only women who seem to have the strength to redress the men's actions. Morrison indicates this implicitly at the end of the novel--the women are preparing for either a symbolic or an actual battle.

All the incidents in this chapter implicitly indicate the failure of the Garden for Morrison's characters. Only one character explicitly expresses this failure. Of all Morrison's women, the minor character Therese in *Tar Baby* articulates the strongest image of the expulsion

from the Garden when she is speaking to Son. The implicit meaning of the question posed to him--"If you cannot find her what will you do? Live in the garden of some other white people house?"--is that the garden can be a place of limbo, a place where nothing will grow, a potential space of waste (Morrison, *TB* 305).

The characters who have failures in the Garden have difficulty in the kitchen. But the connection between the Garden and the kitchen is much more complex as the characters' relationships to the Garden inform their relationships to the kitchen. Looking at Morrison's characters as they live and love in the kitchen is a way to see their ability to maintain themselves--their autonomy and their own empowerment--in the face of the public space that seeks to denigrate them and to damage them if they cannot find a means to survive, to cope, and even to triumph.

## Chapter 3

### Kitchen Space

It's a feminine concept--things happening in a room, a house. That's where [women] live, in houses.

Toni Morrison

I'm interested in characters who are lawless. [. . .] They make up their lives, or they find out who they are.

Toni Morrison

Morrison's women do not just live in houses; they live in their kitchens: the space that Morrison's women assume as an alternative to the Garden since they can not find security in the white Garden. The white Edenic myth absents them and their African-American brothers from paradise. Space as a social construct beyond its mere physical manifestation takes many forms, from the highly theoretical construction of space in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* to the poetic representation of space in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. A house is theoretically important in the imaginations and

lives of people, but the kitchen is central for women. No other room functions as a space of identity for them, not even the bedroom. In claiming a space of their own, Morrison's women find their identities in that space, in varying degrees. The kitchen is a symbolic and central space, the heart and hearth of the home. The kitchen is not a place of solitude that marks out aloneness. Even as a woman toils in the kitchen alone, she does so because she will prepare food for the family, so the family surrounds her symbolically as she cooks. The kitchen is a space of shared time, of shared lives and of shared intimacy--not at the level of the bedroom, to be sure, but as the domain of the woman, the kitchen suggests nourishment, as if it were a womb, providing everything that a growing individual needs to survive. For the women of Morrison's novels, warmth and solace in conversation suggests the womb, a place where women escape the hurt of the world, a space of comfort, of good times remembered, of female fruitful talk. Many of us have fond memories of grandmother's or mother's baked goods because family traditions, in part, originate in kitchens, in secret family recipes, and all of these remind us as children of family and comfort and protection from the outside world. The kitchen table is the center of family discussions and friendly conversations. As Gaston Bachelard says: "We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our

memories, while leaving them their original value as images" (6). In Morrison's novels, conversations in the kitchen have healing capabilities, and associations to the kitchen can be those of belonging. In some cases, the kitchen is a place of escape, of rescue for women in distress. The more comfortable a Morrison woman is in the kitchen, the more self actualized she is.

### Historical Space of the Kitchen

I must preface my discussion of the space of the kitchen in Morrison's work with a background of the cult of domesticity and the space of the kitchen for women, especially for African-American women. The space of the kitchen has long been assigned to the woman. Since the nineteenth century and the first murmurings of a women's rights/suffrage movement, women have dealt with this space in varying ways from complicity to rebellion. The domestic sphere of the white woman, represented strongly by the association to the kitchen, has changed over time. Briefly, the white woman's kitchen space became, in the nineteenth century, a space wherein the woman worked outside the home and created a space where "the home provided a touchstone of values for reforming the entire society" (Matthews 35). Glenna Matthews notes a "darker side of domesticity," however, where an "entirely house-bound wife might be

prey to debilitating depressions" (39).<sup>1</sup> Even in this age when women were valorized for their roles, domesticity has its victims. Women became associated with the kitchen as a proper space for them--as a space that was private and domestic and therefore not public. Women became relegated to this place by the white patriarchy, and white women began to hate the smallness of this place.

Into the twentieth century, the space of the kitchen and the role of women changed, becoming especially acute after World War II when women were told to go back to the kitchen and to "abjure any interest in changing the world" and to "render personal service to their husbands and to be dependent" (Matthews 199). Because of the changes in society after the war when we became a disposable and convenient society, women's space in the kitchen was affected as well: "as housewifery became increasingly de-skilled, staying home became increasingly unsatisfying" (Matthews 209). In her book *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan, identifies a phenomenon that had many symptoms but no diagnosis as "the problem that has no name" (32). Women were dissatisfied with their domestic lives: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (Friedan 32). Regardless of any apparent freedom of the domestic site for women, they have always been subservient, supportive and sometimes invisible in this site. Though I have not delved into the

political, social, and economic causes for these events, the space of the kitchen, of domestic space, became a constricting and unhealthy site for white women. Hence, the cult of domesticity in feminist scholarship identifies the "feminine conformity and the imprisoning oppression visited on women in the nineteenth century" and a complicit "mass culture" in this imprisonment and the multitude of economic, political and social issues that feminists discuss as a result (Bryden and Floyd 2).

While the African-American woman suffers much the same gender plight as described above, she also suffers race issues because she has been relegated to the white woman's kitchen rather than her own--both during slavery and after (Her choice, generally, was to work in the domestic or institutional realm or in labor intensive jobs more suited to men). In the period after the Civil War up to World War I, many black women took jobs as domestics to either support their families or to supplement their family's income. As a domestic after the Civil war, African-American woman experienced a "work environment [that] remained heavy-laden with the trappings of slavery" (Jones 130). At first, African-American domestics were subject to white women employers who wanted live-in help or, at least, help who were on notice in the night hours, especially if the domestics lived on or near the white woman's household. Soon, the

African-American domestic stood her ground on not being live-in or available twenty-four hours a day, but she was subject to twelve to fourteen hour days with low pay and very little opportunity to take care of her own household. Because the African-American woman had little choice in the matter of a job--frequently because African-American male wage earnings were inconsistent and sporadic because of discrimination--she had to take these domestic jobs.<sup>2</sup> Some respite came after World War II when domestics could demand higher wages, but still the African-American woman was relegated to the kitchen. As a way of keeping her dignity and self worth, she enacted certain "workplace strategies of survival and resistance" that included such limits as not scrubbing floors and disciplining unruly white children (Jones 259). Still, the African-American woman had returned to "age-old battles within white households" (Jones 260).

So the African-American woman dealt with the conscription of space both at home and in the world of work--trading one kitchen for another. Even though African-American women garnered more respect for their advocacy during an era of change in the fifties and sixties, they were still considered subordinate to their men, and this dynamic of a "preponderance of clergyman leaders with female followers," according to Jacqueline Jones, "replicated a larger cultural pattern and at times seemed to stifle the potential of women" (282).

Because the African-American woman has been relegated to the space of the kitchen, this connection draws into question my use of it here as a space of freedom for African-American women. It is not my intent to assign again the kitchen to the African-American woman, to relegate her to a space from which she has been identified as having no freedom. Though some of Morrison's characters are limited, it is not the kitchen that limits them. It is their own lack of self that limits them, but these women do have a specific relationship to the kitchen in Morrison's novels. The characters who are strong in Morrison's texts do have a different relationship to the kitchen so that the kitchen becomes a symbolic representation of the self-empowerment of the women in her novels. Domesticity in Morrison's novels is, as Maria Claudia Andre says in her introduction to the collected articles about minority women's kitchens, "no longer a synonym for house arrest, slavery or feminine submission, where women feel obliged to obey original traditional [. . .] masculine mandate" (6).

### Space in Art

In popular culture, domestic, architectural space and its representational or figurative meanings can be seen in many disciplines such as the decorating principles of Feng Shui and in the designs of architectural engineering.<sup>3</sup> We recognize domestic,

architectural space in a physical sense, but that space can also be represented abstractly in the mind, and that abstraction becomes manifest as writers describe the people in their works. Bachelard sets out a connection between the abstractions in the mind and the physicalness of space in art in *The Poetics of Space*. Space is a construct, he notes, in that the images chosen are more than metaphorical representations, they are emergences "into the consciousness as a direct product of the heart, soul and being of man, apprehended in his actuality" (xviii). Representations of space in art are important, then, because they are intricately tied to the consciousness of wo/man. Bachelard's discussion of the poetics of space with respect to the house brings a greater understanding of the space of the dwelling in the psyche of not only the writer but the reader. The house is a place whose chief benefit, he says, is that it "protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6). Though Bachelard does not discuss specifically the importance of the kitchen to the imagination of poetics, his discussion of the cellar and the attic gives credence to the importance of a portion of the house to the psyche. His discussion is on the importance of the attic and the cellar to the imagination where in the attic "[u]p near the roof all our thoughts are clear. In the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework" (Bachelard

18). The cellar "is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces" (Bachelard 18).

In the imagination of Bachelard, the domestic world is bound by the vertical of the home, represented by the attic and the cellar. For the African-American woman in Morrison's novels, the home is more linear, more horizontal; the portion of the house that binds her imagination is the kitchen. No other part of the house carries as many references as does the kitchen, and this portion of the house is the one that carries the specific dreams of the African-American woman. It represents the psychic link to her past and to her future just as Bachelard indicates the importance in the Western white psyche of staring up the stairs into the attic and staring down the stairs into the cellar. The home as bound in a linear and horizontal manner for the African-American woman suggests the restrictions that historically have been placed on her.

### Space of the Kitchen

The kitchen has been the center of activity for the American family for centuries with little pause. From early colonial times, the kitchen was the center of food preparation to ensure survival, and the place where families frequently met to do other household chores because, for many decades, the kitchen was the best lighted and

most comfortable space in the home. As the house changed over the decades, the kitchen frequently remained the center of attention for the house. While other rooms changed in function and type--dining room, great room, entertainment room, parlor, family room--the kitchen remained essentially the same, with additions as technology improved. While some of the activities not specifically associated with the kitchen become relegated to other rooms, the kitchen still maintains its central status.

Morrison indicates that the African-American woman's safety is not in the other rooms of the house, not in the exile and solitude of the bedroom, nor the conjugal relationships that she may have there. It is not in the bathroom and the leisurely baths and time alone associated with the white woman and her home, not in the living or dining rooms that so closely remind one of serving others--family and owners--in those rooms.

We might, for a moment, consider the bedroom as a fruitful space for the African-American woman. Paul D and Sethe's encounter near the beginning of *Beloved* will serve as an example of the bedroom as not fecundity but death and violation. As Paul D takes off Sethe's dress, he encounters the image of a tree on her back, the scarred remnants of a beating that occurred at Sweet Home, the slave plantation, after her milk had been stolen: He feels and then sees "[a]

chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. [ . . .] Could have cherries too now for all I know," Sethe says (Morrison, *B* 16). Sethe literally carries the garden inscribed on her back, a reminder of the violations of Schoolteacher specifically, and slavery in general, but it suggests, as well, an inability to foster relationships--Halle sees her whipped and loses his mind, thus thwarting their relationship--but her final remark about the possible growth of cherries after eighteen years also suggests a hope for renewal. As Paul D discovers her tree in the kitchen, as he "rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches," his connection to her in the kitchen suggests that this relationship may come to fruition if the kitchen can heal them (Morrison, *B* 17).

Any healing must come in the kitchen without the association to sex, though, and because Sethe and Paul D's sexual encounter is connected to grief, the sex act will not heal the two. The connection to grief is suggested as Paul D thinks of Sethe and Sweet Home--references that are filled with the sexuality of Sethe. He remembers the time the men spent waiting for the young Sethe to choose her man, and he remembers her bedding dress she sews for her wedding night with Halle (Morrison, *B* 10). These reminiscences are preceded, however, by Paul D walking into the house and feeling "a wave of grief [that] soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (Morrison, *B*

9). As Paul D and Sethe begin foreplay in the kitchen, the ghost interferes and they are thrown down by "the grinding, shoving floor" (Morrison, *B* 18). Even though Paul D fights back until the ghost relents, Sethe and Paul D's encounter in the bedroom undermines the possibility of a fruitful union. Both Paul D and Sethe are disappointed in the union; afterward, Paul D "saw the float of her breasts and disliked it" (Morrison, *B* 21). Sethe "needed to get up from [the bed], go downstairs" (Morrison, *B* 22). The bedroom is not the possible space for healing.

Perhaps the strongest symbolic statement of the importance of the kitchen over the bedroom is in *Sula*. When Sula returns to Medallion, she meets Nel in her kitchen to talk, and Nel remembers "It had been the longest time since she had had a rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep and down it could be" (Morrison, *S* 98). Nel's life has been incomplete without these talks with Sula, and she finds comfort in them, more comfort than she finds "from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years" (Morrison, *S* 98). Sula and Nel have different views, however, about sex: Sula does not understand Nel's belief in the sanctity of marriage because "having no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available [ . . . Sula] was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the

one person [Nel] she felt close to" (Morrison, *S* 119). Their friendship is threatened not only because Sula has sex with Nel's husband, but because neither understands the other's view. As Sula destroys the friendship in the bedroom, the kitchen talk (or memory of it) restores the relationship at the end of the novel, after Sula's death, when Nel finally realizes that what she is missing is not her husband, but Sula. After Sula's death, Nel finally realizes that the comfort is with the woman not with the man: "'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat" (Morrison, *S* 174).<sup>4</sup>

The space of the kitchen is not unproblematic itself, however. Lefebvre, for instance, questions whether a language that describes space "precede[s], accompan[ies] or follow[s] social space" (16). He indicates a complex relationship between language and space that problematizes an origin in space or language: "perhaps the 'logicalness' intrinsic to articulated language operated from the start as a spatiality capable of bringing order to the qualitative chaos (the practico-sensory realm) presented by the perception of things" (Lefebvre 16-17). In other words, it is impossible to discern whether language described space or whether space circumscribes language. But regardless of originary status, "an already produced space can be decoded, can be *read*" (Lefebvre 17). Lefebvre describes the

metalanguage of theory as inadequate to the task of defining space as such because a language code cannot stand by itself; it must be interrogated with respect to "social (spatial) practices" (Lefebvre 18). The language of the kitchen is abstracted to the level of metalanguage in Morrison's novels so that it becomes necessary to question a connection between that language and a space of the kitchen--in the manner that Lefebvre describes--thereby making a clear connection between the kitchen and the African-American woman. In short, a connection between the African-American woman and the space of the kitchen is present in Morrison's novels. It becomes necessary then to analyze what that connection is with respect to the characters in the novel and with respect to societal forces outside the kitchen space.

The reading of Morrison's novels in such a manner has been set forth by others.<sup>5</sup> Leslie Naa Norle Lokko, for example, utilizes Morrison's words to set up a connection between architecture and ethnicity in spatial constructions; the comingling of architecture and ethnicity opens up the possibilities of literature in space. Lokko takes a passage from Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (bracketed information is Lokko's additions to the text): "Reading [making] and writing [using] are not all that distinct for the writer [architect]" (26).<sup>6</sup> Lokko establishes a creative connection between architects and writers that

transcends the literary or the architectural as the making of architectural space can be defined over and against ethnicity. In other words, space can be defined outside the bounds of place itself and can be associated with other non spatial entities including writing--or gender or ethnicity.

While Lokko's project is much different from mine here, the commingling of architecture and ethnicity suggests a need for an investigation of ethnicity and gender with relationship to space. The kitchen as a space holds meaning in much the same way that the attic and cellar described by Bachelard do. The kitchen defines both ethnicity and gender as it defines the space of housewife and the space of the domestic, and the African-American woman takes these two definitions and creates a space in which to work and live. No image defines this function more than when Baby Suggs "turned [the outside kitchen] into a woodshed and toolroom when she moved in. And she boarded up the back door that led to it" (Morrison, B 207). Two important actions are described here: turning the slave kitchen into a room of creation and boarding up the back door, "because she said she didn't want to make that journey [to the back of the house as a slave] no more" (Morrison, *B* 207). Though Baby Suggs turns the kitchen into a woodshed and toolroom--what would seem to be a revisioning of the slave kitchen in that it indicates work in the kitchen

still--the use of this room as a space of creation subverts the association to work. Baby Suggs uses the tools to build "around [that space] to make a storeroom" so that anyone visiting has to "come by her" (Morrison, *B* 207). She uses her tools to create authority over her space by dictating how people will enter that space. Baby Suggs' action subverts the slave association because she asserts authority over that which is clearly associated with slavery: she creates a space of respect for herself by boarding up the back door, and she takes a space of forced labor and turns it into a creative space filled with tools and wood.

African-American women's creative purpose takes a number of forms similar to Baby Suggs' action. Alice Walker in "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," talks about the lost and found possibilities of African-American women's creativity, finding it in her mother's creativity in the garden. Her garden is not the usual kitchen garden full of vegetables for the table, but a flower garden that garners acclaim and visits from strangers as well as neighbors. For Walker and her mother, a subversion of the garden takes place in the changing of its slave purpose as work, to the free woman's purpose as creativity-- a pleasure, and freedom, denied African-American women over the centuries. This is the pleasure and the freedom that Baby Suggs takes for herself.

But the ultimate freedom in Morrison's novels can be found in the kitchen. In her own kitchen, the African-American woman defines herself more clearly. The kitchen is associated with the woman as housewife or homemaker who is responsible for the family's welfare through food and comfort. Ellen Plante describes the kitchen as a focal point for the changes occurring in the world outside the home over the centuries.<sup>7</sup> In the 1700s, for example, during the time of the Revolutionary War, the housewife added patriotism to her list of duties as she "[sent] good citizens out into the world" in order to fight the war (Plante 28). I do not wish to detail all of the changes to the kitchen that Plante sets forth in her work but to indicate that her discussion suggests the transformative power of the kitchen. Through all the changes, including a change in concept--"what a kitchen is, what a kitchen does and who works there"--the kitchen is "the focus--the heart--of the home" (Plante 291-92). Plante's discussion of kitchens, while not directly applicable to my work here because she has only brief mention of African-Americans, does present the kitchen's possibilities as she details the numerous conversions of the kitchen. Conversion becomes transformation in Morrison's novels--transformations of the self. Perhaps the reason the kitchen emerges as Morrison's space for African-American women is that, as Plante notes, the Victorian kitchen "was viewed as the domain of the

'domestics' while family life centered around the parlor and the dining room" (xii).<sup>8</sup> Thus what was a space of confinement is transformed into a space of liberation.

### Cleansing Kitchen

One way that kitchens function as a space of liberation is in the symbolic rite of baptism that renews the characters. A type of solace in the kitchen can be found in cleansing. In each case, the character associated with the cleansing has a realization either about herself or about some aspect of her life; consequently, the realization is followed by an act of self assessment or a physical act of renewal. Each character's baptism by water accompanies an experience or ordeal that is an initiation or purification for the character.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the attempted cleansing foreshadows Claudia's realization and assessment of Pecola's condition at the end of the novel and Claudia's dawning knowledge about growing up. Pecola starts menstruating, and Claudia and Frieda try to help her. Frieda, "with authority and zest," sends Claudia into the kitchen to get water to scrub the blood from the steps, and Frieda pins a napkin to Pecola (Morrison, *BE* 28). Pecola's ascent to womanhood is confusing for her because she does not understand why she is bleeding: she asks "Am I going to die?" (Morrison, *BE* 28). Frieda and Claudia

attempt to cleanse Pecola, to make her a child again, but they are unable to do so; instead, Pecola is baptized into the world of adults by Mama who is able to cleanse Pecola as "the water gushed" from inside the bathroom from which Frieda and Claudia have been told "to stay out" (Morrison, *BE* 31-32). The bathroom suggests privacy for Pecola and exclusion for Frieda and Claudia. Their attempt to help using the kitchen water is not successful: just as their inability to cleanse Pecola suggests their inability to help Pecola, both from the violation by her father and from the insanity that later will grip her. Additionally, Claudia learns for the first time about menstruation and having babies. Claudia's baptism into adulthood as she washes her hands and cleanses Pecola suggests Claudia's maturity at the end of the novel when she describes Pecola's predicament in terms of the society as a whole, not Pecola in particular.<sup>9</sup> The girls' discussion that night suggests fecundity as they ascertain that Pecola is now "grown-up-like" and somehow "sacred," but both Claudia and Pecola do not understand sex or love: "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" Pecola queries, a question Claudia can not answer because she does not know, and Frieda can not answer because she is asleep (Morrison, *BE* 32). The girls' uncertainty foreshadows the perverse love of Cholly for his daughter Pecola as Pecola searches for someone to love her. Their uncertainty also

foreshadows Claudia's assessment of her town, that the lack of fecundity has "nurtured" only the victim Pecola where "on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (Morrison, *BE* 206). The juxtaposition of the sunflowers next to the garbage suggests again a garden where the "soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (Morrison, *BE* 206).

In *The Bluest Eye*, the cleansing of Pecola brings forth a dawning knowledge for Claudia, but in *Sula*, cleansing in the kitchen suggests specific ties to family. For Nel, her baptism indicates a part of her ancestry that her mother is washing from her life. As Nel is being soaped in the kitchen, her mother is not only cleaning her literally, but also attempting to purify Nel of her grandmother's way of life that she finds unacceptable. Nel asks of something her grandmother has said:

"What does 'vwah' mean?"

"I don't know," her mother said. "I don't talk Creole."

She gazed at her daughter's wet buttocks. "And neither do you." (Morrison, *S* 27)

Helene goes back to see her mother only because of a funeral; otherwise, she has ostracized herself from her family. Helene keeps an immaculate, pristine home that belies her Creole roots of which she is ashamed. She has purged herself already of the stain of the

woman whose "skin was so soft" because "much handled things are always soft," and now she attempts to cleanse the stain from her daughter (Morrison, *S* 27). This cleansing that takes place early in the novel serves to underscore one of the most important thematic concerns in *Sula*, the importance of relationships--both familial and communal. As Nel works out her relationships in the rest of the novel, we see her defining what is most important--and that will be the relationship with Sula, a dawning realization only after Sula's death.

Another realization in *Sula* occurs as Eva Peace recognizes that her son is slowly killing himself with drugs, a dark realization. Eva swoops out of her room through the kitchen and to her son's bedroom in which Plum is under the influence of his drugs again when she arrives. Plum's addiction is a corruption of the kitchen, his body, and the instrument (spoon). His addiction perverts the kitchen because he has utilized an instrument of the kitchen--"the bent spoon black from steady cooking"--not for sustenance, but for corruption of his body (Morrison, *S* 45). Plum's use of the spoon functions much the same as Violet's misplacing of the kitchen knife.<sup>10</sup> Not only does he degrade the kitchen instrument, but he threatens to violate Eva as well because "he wanted to crawl back in [Eva's] womb" (Morrison, *S* 71). In order to preserve the sanctity of the kitchen, Eva purges the corruption of the body, the womb, and the spoon through a ritual

burning. Bringing the kerosene back from the kitchen, Eva "rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight" (Morrison, *S* 48). The cleansing begins with Eva bringing the liquid from the kitchen to the bedroom and ends in "the *whoosh* of flames" (Morrison, *S* 48). Eva's realization of the corruption operates on more than one level; by purifying Plum with kerosene, Eva believes she saves both herself and her son. The body, the kitchen, and the spoon become aligned as corruption that must be eradicated by Eva. Plum's baptism is a literal baptism by fire that is a symbolic purification of corruption.

In *Paradise*, cleansing suggests not a character's awakening as in *The Bluest Eye* or familial ties in *Sula*; instead, in *Paradise* the cleansing suggests community deterioration. Patricia first realizes the ancestral changes in Ruby families. She moves from the garden to the kitchen as the realization of how the town of Ruby has attempted to keep its bloodlines pure for generations comes into focus for her. If the lines are adulterated (dirtied by the introduction of unworthy spouses) or adulteried, then that family's line is no longer symbolically represented at the yearly Christmas play. The town's attempt to keep the purity of the original eight families "held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby" (Morrison, *P* 217). This revelation of the

deterioration of the town grows as we come closer to the attack on the Convent, an attack meant to purge the town of "sin." Patricia realizes the maliciousness of the men as she is burning all the school papers. After this ritual burning of the next generation's work, Patricia goes to "the kitchen sink [where] she washed her hands and dashed water on her face. She felt clean" (Morrison, *P* 217). Anything, or anyone, outside of the town sullies the lines. Patricia realizes this fact because she will marry someone outside of the Ruby bloodlines; she is no longer represented in the Christmas play, and, more importantly, she realizes that "everything that worries [the men of the town] must come from women" (Morrison, *P* 217). As she realizes everything about the town that has previously eluded her, she concurrently burns the vestiges of the past--the papers--and later cleanses herself of the wickedness of the town in the kitchen sink.

Perhaps the most intimately personal baptism in all of Morrison's novels occurs in *Paradise* for Gigi who is bathing in water brought up from the first floor in "several pails of steamy water" (Morrison, *P* 256). The water comes "from the kitchen stove to the bathroom" (Morrison, *P* 256). Gigi is assessing her life and comes to the conclusion that "she had not approved of herself in a long, long time" (Morrison, *P* 257). It is ironic that at the time when the men of the town are preparing to attack the Convent, Gigi, who has had a

liaison with K.D. from town, is assessing that relationship along with her previous one. She baptizes herself in the water of the kitchen as she secludes herself in the privacy of the bathroom and the privacy of her thoughts. Gigi is beginning to mature, to understand herself and other people. She is maturing in a way at the Convent that she has not been able to mature before. She initiates herself into a knowledge of self that comes through introspection.

Each baptism in the kitchen suggests a self assessment by the character, a purification or initiation. Sometimes a physical act will follow the self assessment--when Eva kills Plum, for example. Most frequently, however, the character experiences a moment or the event foreshadows a moment of self realization that will define that character. Claudia realizes Pecola's and, by extension, every little black girl's predicament. Nel has a realization of the friendship with Sula. Eva realizes the danger of Plum's obsession with drugs. Patricia realizes the townsmen's obsession with their "purity," and Gigi has a dawning realization of her self worth.

### Kitchen as Escape

While many characters retreat back to their kitchens as Claudia does, some characters use the kitchen as an escape. Morrison's characters cannot escape to the garden, for it is associated with

death; instead, they must flee to the kitchen, a place of sanctuary. Escapes are most prominent in *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*. In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth flees to the kitchen for protection from the harm that her husband, Macon, attempts to inflict. When Ruth escapes Macon's attempts to kill her baby in its womb, for example, she goes to the sanctuary of Pilate's kitchen for help: "Pilate comforted Ruth, gave her a peach" (Morrison, SS 132). Even when Ruth returns years later to discuss Milkman, Ruth's son, with Pilate, she identifies the house and, by extension, the kitchen as "a haven" that "still looked like an inn, a safe harbor" (Morrison, SS 135).

When Macon and Pilate finally confront each other, she escapes his barren kitchen--barren because no woman of his family is able to grow there--for her own fruitful one--in which even Macon's own son can grow: "Pilate stood up, wrapped her quilt around her, and with a last fond look at the baby, left through the kitchen door. She never came back" (Morrison, SS 20-21). Morrison demonstrates here that it is only women's kitchens that heal.

In *Song of Solomon*, for example, Pilate asserts her independence as she leaves through Macon's kitchen door. A fundamental difference exists between Pilate and her brother Macon and the way they choose to live their lives. Pilate continues to live her life free of the constraints that Macon would impose upon her,

constraints that he imposes upon the rest of his family. He sees Pilate as "odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt. A regular source of embarrassment, if he would allow it" (Morrison, SS 20), yet Macon sneaks by Pilate's home at night and "surrender[s] to the sound" of the three women singing (Morrison, SS 29). Though they represent everything that he resents--unkemptness and liquor making--he is, nonetheless, drawn to their genuineness, their freedom to be who they are. Pilate claims that freedom when she walks out the door away from the influence of her brother.

The escapes in *Paradise* are much like the retreat of Pilate from Macon's kitchen. Each character leaves a place that cannot and does not offer her any hope for living. Each woman enters, usually by chance, the kitchen of the Convent, and finds solace and protection there. Each does not leave the protection of that womb until, quite literally, forced out by intruders. The escapes differ from those in *Song of Solomon* because in that novel the characters seeking solace are merely visiting Pilate's kitchen; the main characters in *Paradise* escape to the Convent kitchen where they will remain until forced to leave.

Each of the Convent's women escapes bad situations in her life and finds her way to the Convent where she will find herself and a reason to live. Mavis leaves her family behind: "She did not look

toward the kitchen and never saw it again" (Morrison, *P* 27). Mavis only feels "safe [in the Convent kitchen]; the thought of leaving it disturbed her" (Morrison, *P* 41). Only in this kitchen can she change from "one who couldn't figure out or manage a simple meal, who relied on delis and drive-throughs" to one who "created crepe-like delicacies without shopping every day" (Morrison, *P* 171).

That the Convent is associated with healing qualities is even well-known in the nearby town. When Billie Delia takes Pallas to the Convent, she says: "Anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone--whichever way you want it" (Morrison, *P* 176). Pallas has not planned this exodus; nonetheless, this kitchen is where she will begin to heal.

The relationships that develop in the kitchen at the Convent allow the women to heal from the wounds inflicted upon them by the outside world. When the Convent is attacked, the strength each has gained in her time at the Convent enables her to go back to her family for reconciliation. Each makes the sacrifice of her life for the life of Connie (the Convent's matriarch), and each puts aside the flights of fancy and her disabling history that so often is associated with Morrison's female characters--dreams of money making

ventures, found treasures that are useless, harming oneself physically--in order to act in the world.

The kitchen provides Morrison's characters with an important space to heal and to grow, but while the kitchen is a womb, a safe haven for the women of Morrison's novels, a womb can also be violated. The opposition to the kitchen's security--its violation--is part and parcel of the African-American woman's life. Morrison speaks to the kitchen's possible violations as well, violations that her women must overcome in order to claim or reclaim the space of the kitchen.

## Chapter 4

### Kitchen Conversations

Much of [the special kind of knowledge that black women have always had] is also discredited, and I think it is because people say it is no more than what women say to each other. It is called old wives' tales, or gossip, or anything but information. [. . .] But I have made women the focal point of books in order to find out what women's friendships are really about.

Toni Morrison

One specific aspect of the space of the kitchen is conversations associated with the kitchen. Conversations in kitchens can be empowering for African-American women. Minrose C. Gwin notes the transformative power of kitchen conversations in her article "Sweeping the Kitchen" when she analyzes Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*. In this text, Ursa's mother tells a story at the kitchen table of her choice of Ursa's father, a choice that shows her mother's "control in the arenas of sexuality and reproduction" (57). This revelation gives

Ursa the ability to "develop a sense of her own interior space as valuable in itself, as a locale out of which her desire, her art and her own lived life may emerge" (Gwin 57). Morrison's characters develop similarly as a result of kitchen conversations. Information that is heard or overheard in kitchens has a way of transforming the listener.

### Healing Conversations

The first transformative aspect is women's conversations in the kitchen; these conversations are among the most healing passages in all of Morrison's texts as the characters find themselves or begin to define who they are as they converse in the kitchen. In *Jazz*, for example, the conversations between Violet and Felice will heal both of them--though Violet needs much more help than Felice. Felice is a minor character in most of the novel--Dorcas' best friend who watches her die--and though Felice's character does not emerge until nearly the end of the novel, at that point it becomes clear that she is one of the most important characters. In the kitchen, Felice and Violet are attempting to deal with the events of Dorcas' death: in doing so, they help each other solidify the self. Violet, much older of the two, is only beginning to figure out much of what Felice has already ascertained about life and self. Violet, for example, wanted to be "White. Light. Young again," and has realized only recently that she

wanted to be "the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see" (Morrison, *J* 208). Felice is arguably the character with the most accurate and healthy view of herself, ready to take on the world, not willing to succumb to some antiquated notion of how she should live; she is, instead, waiting to claim a life of fulfillment. Ultimately, Felice is the character to whom Morrison gives the self assurance to tackle the world: "Whether raised fists freeze in her company or open for a handshake, she's nobody's alibi or hammer or toy" (Morrison, *J* 222). The healing that occurs in that kitchen heals all three--Felice, Violet and Joe, Violet's husband. Felice is able to articulate her anger at Dorcas for dying and to show her maturity by helping Violet and Joe as Violet heals from the betrayal by her husband. Indeed, Joe attributes the faster healing to Felice's visits: "We working on it. Faster now, since you stopped by and told us what you did" (Morrison, *J* 212).

Conversations need not be friendly to be fruitful. Conversations in the kitchen sometimes show conflict or violence as in the climactic scene of *Tar Baby* where we learn that Margaret has abused her son, and Ondine, her servant, is the only other person who has known this all these years. The healing in this kitchen, though, occurs when Ondine is finally able to assert aloud her personhood, a superiority over Margaret stemming from her knowledge of the child abuse: "I

should have more respect. I am the one who cleans up her shit" (Morrison, *TB* 207). While the conflict is produced from the knowledge of Margaret's abuse, Valerian reacts as the white owner and fires his servants in a show of power. Ondine, however, in an unprecedented reaction, fires back "I may be a cook, Mr. Street, but I'm a person too" (Morrison, *TB* 207). Ondine continues to assert not only ownership of herself but ownership of the kitchen as well: "Yes my kitchen and yes my help. If not mine, whose" (Morrison, *TB* 207). Valerian has no recourse over Ondine and Sydney even as he attempts to dismiss them: "If you don't leave this room I'll . . ." It was the second time he ordered a dismissal and the second time it held no force" (Morrison, *TB* 207). Indeed, Sydney and Ondine are the ones who take care of Valerian as his health fails in the closing pages of the novel. After the heated exchange, Ondine and Sydney retreat to the safety of their own kitchen, and that safety includes keeping their jobs because nothing is ever repeated about the outburst-- Valerian and Margaret are too mired in a state of "mutual sorrow" over Margaret's abuse of their son, and when the two begin to live life "normally" again, "Ondine was there as she always was" (Morrison, *TB* 239). Ondine finally voices her strength within these relationships, and though Valerian attempts control, Ondine and Sydney are stronger than any of his attempts.

Conversations do not necessarily need to be between people. Self conversation in the kitchen shows the development of characters. When Claudia MacTeer reminisces about Christmas, for example, she laments that she never has been asked the right question. She did not want "to have anything to own, or to possess any object" (Morrison, *BE* 21). She wanted instead "to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone" (Morrison, *BE* 21-22). Even though Claudia is disappointed with the doll she gets, she has the security and warmth of the kitchen as a remembrance of the security of the family that is underscored in the beginning of the novel when Claudia is presenting the differing ideas of "being put *out* and being put *outdoors*" (Morrison, *BE* 17). Cholly Breedlove has put his family outdoors, far worse than being put out because: "if you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go" (Morrison, *BE* 17). The security of the kitchen is later supported when the girls adjourn to the kitchen for solace as they eat graham crackers after Maureen calls them "Black and ugly" and asserts that she instead is cute (Morrison, *BE* 73).

The security that Claudia associates with the kitchen is most important as it contrasts with Pecola Breedlove's situation. Though both girls' families have little money, the outcome of the two girls is

related to their feelings of security in the family. Ultimately, Claudia becomes philosophical as she copes with Pecola's insanity, and the lesson she presents to us comes from the security in the kitchen. It is not her failure to help Pecola but the community's failure, suggested by Claudia's reference to the garden: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers," she says as she tries to make sense of the tragedy of Pecola's insanity (Morrison *BE* 206).

#### Overheard Conversations

Overheard conversations are different from conversations in which each is a willing participant. Characters who overhear conversations about themselves frequently hear hurtful comments. This act leads to alienation and exclusion that leaves the African-American woman evaluating her self and/or self worth. Many of these characters, ultimately, grow from the experience of hearing the "truth" about themselves.

The most personal is in *Sula* when Sula walks by the kitchen and overhears her mother speak of her: "You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (Morrison, *S* 57). The fact that Sula's mother does not like her stings her: "She only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge,

aware of a sting in her eye" (Morrison, *S* 57). The pain that Sula feels is interrupted by Nel's call to her to come out. It is Nel and Sula's relationship that is strengthened as a result because Sula's exclusion from her mother's kitchen sends her to a more fulfilling friendship with Nel. While Sula is too young to articulate the alienation from her mother and the strengthening of her friendship with Nel, this friendship becomes the most important one for the two.

Lone in *Paradise* also overhears a conversation, but hers is not a personal realization but a realization that involves community and a person's obligation to protect. She hears the nine men, who are gathered around the community kitchen, plotting to attack the Convent. Lone's movement after she overhears the conversation is telling because she goes to the Misner's and is invited into the kitchen. The suggestion is that this is an invitation to conversation; they will talk about the issue at hand, but Lone refuses this offer with "No time. Listen" (Morrison, *P* 280). The night's activities have been decided already, and the violation of women entails leaving the healing kitchen, as Lone does then. Ironically, the suggestion of conversation in the Misner's kitchen foreshadows the end of the novel where Misner is the one who grows from the experience, and who delivers this message to the congregation when he speaks at Save-Marie's funeral: "It is our own misfortune if we do not know in our

long life what she knew every day of her short one: that although life in life is terminal and life after life everlasting, He is with us always" (Morrison, *P* 307). Misner exhorts the townspeople to look inward to a greater good that they seem to have forgotten.

In *Beloved*, Sethe overhears a conversation, and her realization goes beyond the personal or the communal to basic issues of ethnicity. As she is on her way to the kitchen to see if she is needed, Sethe comes to a full realization of the perverse view that Schoolteacher has of her, and white culture has in general, as an animal. She comes to the porch and hears Schoolteacher talking to his sons: "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (Morrison, *B* 193). Sethe is hurt by these words, by the implication of her animal nature, and she cannot appeal to Mrs. Garner, who is humanitarian and might intercede but who is sick in bed, so Sethe must acquiesce to the assessment. The lesson that Schoolteacher presents affects Sethe for years as she tries to reconcile the discrimination, just as the boys try to reconcile the two columns of her animal characteristics and her human characteristics.

Each of the characters who overhears a conversation shows growth. Sula learns to develop her friendship with Nel; Lone learns the true nature of her community, and Sethe comes to realize the white man's view of her place in the world. Each of these realizations

is important for the growth of the characters. Sula has no other lasting relationship of note except with Nel. The information that Lone receives helps a community to become more aware of itself--its negatives and its positives. Sethe learns a valuable lesson that Sweet Home had not yet taught her to that point.

Events that happen in the kitchen help the reader to identify the strength in Morrison's characters. Kitchen conversations are a less static kitchen than in chapter three where we see events that are metaphorically associated with the character at that time.

Conversations are for teaching and learning. These characters are in the process of realization and growth when their conversations occur.

## Chapter 5

### Without a Sanctuary<sup>1</sup>

Gathering women, gathering, I think of flowers and of trees, women who know medicine and roots, root-workers who are not hunting perhaps--maybe they are--but they have to know a poison-leaf from a non-poison leaf.

Toni Morrison

The recent cultural interest in "sciences" such as Feng Shui, shows a postmodern preoccupation with space as disunity, a lingering anxiety that has permeated our culture. As practiced today in the West, Feng Shui is based on an idea that we can create environments that are harmonious and peaceful in which to live. While Feng Shui takes in a great deal from simple placement of objects to living harmoniously with our environment, from Chi to Yin and Yang, one idea is that if a space is not harmonious, then the person's life may not be harmonious either: "Some houses instinctively 'feel' right and a luopan reading<sup>2</sup> will usually confirm this. Other homes may not 'feel' right, and sometimes external influences can adversely affect

beneficial energy," sapping one's strength (Hale 31). A kitchen is one of the most important rooms in Feng Shui as "it is the health centre of our lives and it is important that it functions well and supports us" (Hale 96). The fortunes of a person can be predicted, according to Feng Shui advocates, by seeing the placement of the rooms in a home, the interior decoration of them, and the placement of the person in these rooms. Things out of place--misplacements and displacements--cause adverse reactions in a person's life.

Morrison's novels suggest the type of anxiety of space as is demonstrated in Feng Shui. Two types of misplacements or displacements occur in Morrison's novels: literal mis/displacement of the kitchen and figurative misplacement of the African-American woman's sexuality represented by the Jezebel myth. Literal mis/displacements can be seen in kitchens that are inconveniently located or kitchen objects, such as Violet's knife, that are misplaced. Figurative misplacement occurs when a woman's sexuality hinders her growth as an individual.

## Displaced Kitchen

A kitchen uprooted suggests there is something amiss in a family or in someone's thinking. If the kitchen is not "in order," then it is a clear indication that the person or persons involved with this kitchen are not in order, so literal dislocation of the kitchen is an important key to violations. Literal displacement of the kitchen can be readily seen in *The Bluest Eye* where the lost kitchen, "in the back of this apartment, a separate room," indicates the perversion of the Breedlove family relationships (Morrison, *BE* 35). The separateness of the kitchen suggests the family life of the Breedloves, who fight frequently in the kitchen, whose father abuses his daughter in the kitchen and whose mother prefers white children in her kitchen rather than her own children.

The relationships in the family are damaged and damaging. Cholly Breedlove is one of the most heinous offenders because Cholly's perversion is the damaging--physically and psychically--of his daughter, Pecola. Cholly rapes Pecola as she is washing dishes; then he leaves her on the floor of the kitchen. This act of violence is juxtaposed with Cholly's first interrupted sexual experience where he is discovered in the woods by white men who force him to continue intercourse. Cholly can only mimic the act, however, and he later "cultivated his hatred" of the girl, Darlene, because "his subconscious

knew what his conscious mind did not guess--that hating [white men] would have consumed him" (Morrison, *BE* 150-51). Unfortunately, displacement of anger onto the black woman dooms the relationship between black man and black woman to something base and barren. The African-American female has no escape from the abuse she must endure. While rape at the hands of their white masters was a fact of life for African-American women slaves, Cholly's rape of his own daughter is a perversion even beyond the atrocities of the white masters. That Cholly sees his act as one of "tenderness [that] welled up in him," rather than violence, further vilifies him for the reader (Morrison, *BE* 162).

Not only is the relationship between Cholly and Pecola perverted, so is the relationship between Pauline, Pecola's mother, and Pecola. Pauline's perversion of the family is preferring the white family over her own. She takes a job with a wealthy family and becomes the ideal servant who "reign[s] over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months" (Morrison, *BE* 127). Pauline ultimately betrays her family and her daughter, Pecola, in the kitchen of the Fisher House. When Claudia and Frieda (the MacTeer girls) visit Pecola in the house, Pecola accidentally tips a blueberry pie over onto the floor. Crying from the pain of the hot blueberries on her legs, Pecola is verbally and physically punished for

her clumsiness as her mother knocks her to the floor and "spit[s] out words [. . .] like rotten pieces of apple" to the girl (Morrison, *BE* 109). Juxtaposed with Pauline's "words [that] were hotter and darker than the smoking berries" are the soft words she whispers to the little white girl who is upset from all the commotion: "the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake" (Morrison, *BE* 109). Pauline's treatment of her daughter in *The Bluest Eye* underscores the narrative of African-American women who are subject to a world where "everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders" (Morrison, *BE* 138).

Not only do Pauline's actions in her employer's kitchen suggest her lack of a familial tie to Pecola and the family, her actions in her own kitchen support her betrayal of the family. The African-American woman who neglects her own kitchen neglects her own self, her family, and her cultural values. Because Pecola's home is marred by strife in the kitchen and defined by misery, she has no safe place: "There was direction and purpose in Mrs. Breedlove's movements that had nothing to do with the preparation of breakfast" (Morrison, *BE* 40). For Cholly and Pauline, the kitchen is a place to fight, the battlefield for Pauline who "made noises with doors, faucets, and pans" in response to Cholly's having come home drunk (Morrison, *BE*

40). Each of the relationships in the displaced Breedlove kitchen is unhealthy and perverse.

### Misplaced Kitchen Objects

The kitchen need not itself be uprooted, however, in order to suggest relationship troubles. We may, instead, find mislayings within the kitchen. In *Jazz*, for example, it is the kitchen knife that is mislaid: Violet "knew the knife was in the parrot's cage and not in the kitchen drawer" where it belonged (Morrison, *J* 90). This misplacement foreshadows the desecration about to occur. Violet desecrates Dorcas' dead body in revenge for her husband's infidelity when she takes the knife to cut the offending woman (Dorcas). Though the kitchen itself is not misplaced, its condition reflects the state of Violet and Joe's marriage. When Joe and Violet are trying to come to terms with Joe's infidelity, the description of the house, including the kitchen, reflects their inability to cope. All of the "dark rooms grow darker," and the kitchen, as well as the other rooms, has "no access to the moon or the light of the street lamp" (Morrison, *J* 12). The damage that is part of this relationship is suggested by the missing knife and the light that cannot penetrate either the relationship or the kitchen.

The Oven in *Paradise* offers a different type of dislocation, different from other kitchens because the dislocated Oven is a *symbolic* manifestation of a kitchen and a displaced, "hysterical" womb, the representation of all the hope for the town, an integral part of a kitchen that has been alienated from the kitchen. The townspeople rally around the tales of ancestors who have made a long and arduous journey to this location in order to begin again--tales that take on biblical proportions, and the purpose of the society is much like the Puritans' purpose when they first came to the Americas envisioning a paradise here on earth. The attack on the Convent is an attempt at purification: "To make sure [defilement] never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (Morrison, *P* 5). The townspeople transgress the original "holy" purpose of the Oven by reducing it to a hangout, and by using it as the reason to attack the Convent. The dislocated Oven outside the kitchen suggests the hatred of the men as outside the bounds of normalcy. Just as the Oven takes on significance beyond its proportions, the men's hatred takes on a vituperativeness beyond the true circumstances related to the Convent women.

## Misplaced People

Not only is there misplacement of things, but there is also misplacement of people. This type of misplacement is demonstrated in *Song of Solomon*, where Morrison juxtaposes characters by their placement in the home. Pilate and her family (Hagar and Reba) live in the kitchen; their loving relationship is bound by activities in the kitchen. Macon and his family (Ruth, Milkman, Cora, and Lena) live in the dining room. Their dysfunctional relationships are declared by activities in the dining room. We are meant to see the familial harmony of Pilate's family and the familial disharmony of Macon's.

Macon is a good provider for the family as far as money is concerned, but he "kept each member of his family awkward with fear" (Morrison, *SS* 10). The family unit is in disharmony because Macon's "hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her," and he "mangled [the] grace, wit, and self-esteem" of his children (Morrison, *SS* 10). This disharmony is signaled in the dining room where the family frequently meets. The dining room table carries a water mark, present because of all the years that Ruth has placed fresh flowers in a centerpiece that symbolizes for Ruth "the summation of the affectionate elegance with which she believed her childhood had been surrounded" but now symbolizes the family's disharmony, especially between Macon and Ruth (Morrison, *SS* 12).

The water mark is now visible because Ruth has attempted to continue the tradition with Macon when they move into the house. Macon does not acknowledge the arrangement in the centerpiece, but instead criticizes the meal that Ruth has prepared. After Ruth lets "the seaweed disintegrate" and does not remove the seaweed until "its veins dropped and curled into brown scabs on the table," the water mark becomes forever visible in the center of the barren table (Morrison, *SS* 12). The mark comes to represent a growing disharmony in the family that ultimately leads to each family members' alienation from Macon.

Macon's sister, Pilate, however, has a harmonious life with her family and even with two from Macon's, Ruth and Milkman. The family's link to the kitchen indicates this harmony: Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter are closely linked to the kitchen because one enters the kitchen immediately upon entering their home and because nearly all the activity of the women occurs there. Pilate's kitchen is a sanctuary for Ruth,<sup>3</sup> but it is also a space of sanctuary for Milkman, indirectly because Ruth goes there to save the baby in her womb, and directly when Milkman enters the kitchen years later, and it is "the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy" (Morrison, *SS* 47). Pilate is a strong-willed, self actualized

woman, and her link to the kitchen demonstrates this strength, but other characters' links to the kitchen show their weaknesses.

### Misplaced Sexuality

Not only does Morrison indicate disunity by literal displacement and misplacement within the kitchen, she indicates a second type of violation represented by the mythic and biblical Jezebel, a misplacement of African-American women's sexuality.<sup>4</sup> I see the women in Morrison's novels who are consciously or unconsciously enacting the Jezebel myth as weaker characters than others of Morrison's. But Morrison utilizes the myth in order for other characters to learn more about themselves. Claudia and Frieda learn by watching the other women in the community; unfortunately, we do not see their growth, though the indications at the end of the novel show Claudia's possibility for growth. Both Felice and the narrator of *Jazz* see a different life not dependent upon the behavior associated with the Jezebel myth.

The Jezebel myth came about after slavery when white society was attempting to sustain the sexual exploitation of African-American women. The myth of sexually potent African-American women who were "eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily 'loose' in their morals" created a woman who was always defined as slut and upon whom

sexual exploitation became acceptable. Laws followed that reinscribed and reinforced this myth (Lerner 163).<sup>5</sup> In Morrison's novels, if an African-American woman's behavior suggests the Jezebel myth, i.e. she exhibits sexual freedom, she suffers punishment, bad luck, or violence, no different from those women who suffer the same from unwanted sexual advances. The woman supplants her identity by attempting to find it in relationships with men rather than an identity based on self. Her role as Jezebel, wanton temptress, has interfered with her self concept, causing more reaction against the stereotype than a unique development of self. According to Lynne Olson, "the image of sexual wantonness has haunted black women, shaping the way they've been treated by American society since slavery" (26). Not only has this visioning of the black female shaped society's view of her, but this visioning has undeniably shaped the way the black woman thinks of herself. African-American women were subject to white men's visioning of them as "'temptresses' for interracial sex" because white men needed to reconcile their vision of a "chaste and soulless ideal of white womanhood" and the white man's lust for black women slaves (Olson 26).

Sex by itself will never offer a Morrison character solace because the space of African-American women with respect to sex has been fraught with stereotypes. Morrison's texts suggest that finding

self through sex results in sterility. The African-American woman's loss of identity is related to the kitchen because Morrison's women find identity in the kitchen not in the bedroom. By trying to find self in the bedroom, the African-American woman misplaces the better part of herself. She sublimates herself to a man or to sexual pleasure or to the stereotype of the Jezebel myth; in any case, she loses her search for identity in the bedroom rather than finding it in the flourishing kitchen.

Occasionally, a character like Jadine in *Tar Baby* will be aware of the possible loss of self related to sex. Jadine likens sex to the episode of the bitch who gets "cracked over the head and spine with the mop handle" because she's in heat, "which she couldn't help but which was her fault just the same" (Morrison, *TB* 124). Because at age twelve Jadine decides, then, "never to be broken in the hands of any man," when Son presses up against her and smells her, she perceives it as an unwanted primitive gesture "repulsive, so awful" (Morrison, *TB* 123-124). Jadine must find a way to reconcile this part of herself, however, in order to become fully self aware. Most characters, though, are unaware of the loss of self connected to their sexuality or have little or no choice regarding sexual activity, such as in the case of rape.<sup>6</sup>

Morrison develops a number of characters whose sexuality is a strong part of their womanhood. Each character who relies on her sexuality for identity has difficulty developing a strong sense of self. Three women lose their sense of self in their relationships: Dorcas in *Jazz*, Hagar in *Song of Solomon*, and Sula in *Sula*. In *Jazz*, for example, Dorcas is primarily interested in sex and money. As if to signal her demise, Morrison associates Dorcas with the Garden: Joe wants "To bite down hard, chew up the core and have the taste of red apple skin to carry around for the rest of [his] life" (Morrison, *J* 134). Dorcas is a temptation, an Eve who will betray Joe. Ultimately, she will die of the wound inflicted by Joe and by her choice not to go to the hospital. Dorcas dies as effectively as African-Americans were killed, whether physically or psychologically, by the white man. Morrison identifies Dorcas with the Garden up to the time of her death. When Dorcas dies, she says, "'There's only one apple.' [. . .] Just one. Tell Joe'" (Morrison, *J* 213). Because Dorcas uses people and allows them to use her, because she trades a loving relationship with Joe for a sycophantic relationship with Acton, because she does not realize what love really is, Dorcas suffers a dispossession of self. She is a symbolic Eve who never understands the import of her actions; thus, she is excluded from the Garden not because she now knows (as Eve does), but because she will never know the knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Violet's steadfast loyalty to Joe, even in the face of infidelity, leads them to an eventual reconciliation while Dorcas' sexual wantonness and her superficial interest in money lead to her death.

Hagar in *Song of Solomon* is different from Dorcas because Hagar is devoted to her love. Regardless of this difference, Hagar still loses her sense of self in the face of that love. Hagar offers sex in what appears to be a reenactment of her mother's and her grandmother's sexual freedom. Milkman asks her, "You don't have any weaknesses?" and she responds, "I haven't found any" (Morrison, SS 96). When Milkman ends the relationship years later, however, Hagar has lost her self assurance and become dependent upon Milkman to the point that she spins "into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time [ . . . ] and where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest that crackled away" (Morrison, SS 99). She resorts to trying to kill him, but she doesn't even have the will to complete the task. She is as Ruth describes her: "an impulse, a cell, a red corpuscle that neither knows nor understands why it is driven to spend its whole life in one pursuit" (Morrison, SS 137). Ultimately, Hagar is left lost and helpless without Milkman because she cannot hold her sexual power over him.

In a similar incident in *Sula*, Sula loses Ajax when he "looked around and saw the gleaming kitchen and the table set for two and detected the scent of the nest" (Morrison, *S* 133). Sula has changed who she is, and Ajax flees the new her. The myth is perpetuated by African-American men who find their women exciting and desirable so long as they do not become domestic. Both women lose their men and a part of themselves.

The Jezebel myth is so strong that it can invade the African-American culture and male/female relationships. The white man's assessment of the African-American female's sexuality becomes a barrier for African-American relationships. When this invasion happens, African-American men denigrate their own women for a perceived sexual wantonness. In each case, the men have misapprehended the nature of their women and doomed the relationship. Three women are accused of sexual offenses that are inaccurate or false: Gigi and Billie Delia in *Paradise* and Ruth in *Song of Solomon*. This displacement of the true sexual nature of the black woman by the black man actually weakens both genders, but, more importantly, it leads the black woman to question her own sexuality and her own self.

The townsmen attack the Convent in *Paradise* because they associate the women there with sexual wantonness and perversity. In

their minds, the women are responsible for all the ills that have afflicted the town. When K.D. has an affair with Gigi, for example, he finds out that the men of the community thought "it was time to give [K.D.] the news: every brothel don't hang a red light in the window" (Morrison, *P* 114). K.D. was the one who sought out Gigi and might have married her if "his uncles [had not] sat him down and [given] him the law and its consequences" (Morrison, *P* 148). The Convent women have liaisons with the men of the town, but the women are only perceived as being sexually wanton whereas they, in fact, have quite clear allegiances to the men they see, just as Sula and Hagar have. Gigi loves K.D. and Connie faithfully waits years for Deacon's return. When he finally returns the morning of the attack, she smiles and says, "You're back" (Morrison, *P* 289).

Just as the women of the Convent are punished, ostensibly, for their wanton behavior, Billie Delia of the town suffers the shame for her overt sexuality. She has a great deal of sexual energy from an early age, taking off her panties to ride a horse, and having red lips that some mistake for being painted (Morrison, *P* 151). Billie Delia is shamed for her sexuality, even though she is actually a virgin. She is being punished then for a sexual transgression that has never occurred.

Ruth Dead from *Song of Solomon* suffers in much the same way that the women of the Convent do in *Paradise*. Ruth is associated with the Jezebel myth when she is "caught" by Macon in bed with her father "[l]aying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him" (Morrison, *SS* 73). Macon believes her sexuality is perverse because he finds her with her dead father with "his fingers in her mouth" (Morrison, *SS* 73) and because she nurses Milkman long after an appropriate time for such (Morrison, *SS* 13). Ruth does not describe her own act as one of sexuality, and, again, the male misperception dooms another woman to suffer the punishment of the Jezebel myth.

But Morrison also subverts the connection of the Jezebel myth to African-American woman's sexuality. *Beloved* is different from her other novels in that it subverts misplaced and displaced kitchens. Instead of the freedom of Hagar's, Reba's, and Sula's sexuality, or the more traditional sexuality of Violet and Jadine, Morrison presents sex as necessity--not physical necessity but life's necessity. Sexuality in *Beloved* is different from the other novels because it deals with the slave woman's sexuality and returns to the origins of the Jezebel myth. Baby Suggs attempts to utilize the sexual desire of the boss in order to save her third child, but the reality of the situation is that she "coupl[es] with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child," and he sells the child anyway (Morrison, *B* 23). Baby

Suggs' womb has been literally and figuratively violated by the straw boss because she loses the "bargain." Though her choice to sleep with the boss is understandable given her circumstances, it brings her only sorrow--doubly so because she loses her son, and she is pregnant by the white man. Morrison suggests that the myth of sexual wantonness is inaccurate, as inaccurate as the hanging of African-American men for sexual crimes against white women. African-American women traded their sexuality for the things in life that white women take for granted--i.e. being able to see their children grow up. They were not wanton in their behavior.

Morrison addresses the depravity of slavery in this incident concerning Baby Suggs and replays that depravity again when her daughter-in-law bargains for the word "Beloved" on her own daughter's grave by having sex with the stone engraver. Sethe has to sacrifice the most intimate part of herself in order to buy letters on the gravestone of her daughter. She describes the act matter of factly and laments that she might have "for twenty minutes, a half hour" more had the preacher's entire words "dearly beloved" on the headstone (Morrison, *B* 5). She, also, indicates shamefully that "those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips" were more alive to her than the memory of her child's death (Morrison, *B* 5). This act then has been a damaging

one for Sethe even though she tries to rationalize it as an act "to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust" (Morrison, *B* 5). These incidents undermine the Jezebel myth of sexual wantonness by presenting a clearer picture of the reasons why African-American women engaged in sex, reasons that have nothing to do with sexuality.

An important issue for Morrison is subtly presented in each of the violations of the kitchen. Morrison said in an interview in 1976 speaking about *Sula* that community is important: "And there was this life-giving, very, very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood" (Morrison, "Intimate Things in Place" 11). Whether the misplaced or displaced kitchen is literal or figurative, each kitchen incident is representative of larger issues that must be corrected. Each member must be secure and whole in self before the rest of the community is secure and whole. Morrison says this through Claudia at the end of *The Bluest Eye*; she implies it when she presents a torn community in *Beloved*, and she shows us how women can respond in *Paradise*.

## Chapter 6

### Framing the World

I am sort of rooted in [place], so that writing about being in a room looking out, or being in a world looking out, or living in a small definite place, is probably very common among most women anyway.

Toni Morrison

What did a door mean? What a window?

Toni Morrison

Thus far, Morrison's women have been bound by the kitchen as they find solace and strength. Only a few instances of Morrison's characters indicate the ability to go beyond the scope of the kitchen taking that which they have learned there with them. It is in the framing of the outside world through the kitchen window and the kitchen door that Morrison indicates the possibility that some African-

American women have the ability to move beyond the space that they have carved out for themselves in the kitchen. The way Morrison's characters frame the world through the kitchen window and the kitchen door suggests that if African-American women do not attempt to enter the world, then they have, ultimately, wasted the life-giving space of the kitchen. Moreover, women who frame the outside world through the kitchen door are stronger characters than those who frame the outside world through the kitchen window. Gazing out the window suggests a longing for the outside world, and many of Morrison's women are not able or are not ready to traverse the outside space past the window. How women characters are looked at by others and at what the women characters themselves gaze reflects their inner life and suggests their fate.

Morrison herself indicates an interest in windows and doors in *Paradise* where her narrator says that there was "a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised" (Morrison, *P* 305). Later in *Paradise*, when the Reverend Misner and Anna go to the Convent, a philosophical discussion about windows and doors ensues. They each believe they feel, if not the actual presence of someone in the Convent, a presence of some sort. Anna's and the Reverend's reveries here suggest the mystery surrounding the aftermath of the attack on the Convent as they question the meaning of doors and

windows as seen in the epigraph to this chapter (Morrison, *P* 305). Even Connie's body is missing when townspeople go back later to assess the damage. No one knows where the women have gone, and there is an air of mysticism about their disappearance. Neither Misner nor Anna can enter the Convent to be reminded of what was lost there or to be reminded of what still remains there: "Who saw a closed door; who saw a raised window. Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering" (Morrison, *P* 305).

But the meaning here goes beyond the context of *Paradise* and what has happened to the women in the Convent. The importance of windows and doors to Morrison's characters is here indicated by the interrogation of what windows and doors mean. These references not only indicate the depth of a house itself but the depths of women.

### Men Framing Women

On two occasions in Morrison's novels, men frame women through the kitchen window. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman gazes out his kitchen window onto his mother, Ruth, who is working in the garden. In *Beloved*, Stamp Paid gazes onto Sethe and Beloved who are inside their home. Both men gaze on women who are in trouble: Ruth who is overcome by the vegetation in the garden and Sethe who

is overcome by the attentions of Beloved. Neither man is able to help the woman.<sup>1</sup>

Milkman gazes out the kitchen window in a dream sequence that has his mother overcome by weeds in the garden. In one of the most powerful dream episodes in Morrison's writing, Milkman has a waking dream about Ruth that indicates the hopelessness and helplessness of Ruth's predicament in her family. Ruth has a barren existence with her husband Macon, a barrenness characterized by loneliness and isolation. The helplessness she feels is described in the garden scene: "As [Milkman] stood there, mindlessly watching her, tulips began to grow out of the holes [Ruth] had dug" (Morrison, *SS* 105). Ruth is eventually overwhelmed by the tulips that Milkman knows "were dangerous, that they would soon suck up all the air around her and leave her limp on the ground" (Morrison, *SS* 105). Ruth is "kicking to the last" but "they covered her and all he could see was a mound of tangled tulips bent low over her body" (Morrison, *SS* 105). Ruth is subjugated by life, by nature, and by the garden. With no voice in the world, women like Ruth are doomed to be absorbed by the garden that has excluded them. Ruth is doomed to be smothered to death in a life that Milkman describes as unhappy, a life in which she plants bulbs in December hoping they will bloom (Morrison, *SS* 104). For this African-American woman, the possibilities of their

blooming are as bleak as the December day that Ruth plants them, and Milkman, in his gaze, is unable to help his mother recover from the power of the garden. Milkman's place in the kitchen is not the same as a woman's place. Whereas many of Morrison's women are able to act from the strength given them in the kitchen, Milkman is unable to harness this strength--not for himself nor for his mother.

In a reversal of the gaze in *Beloved*, Stamp Paid gazes into the kitchen, and then does not go in. He is the only one outside 124 Bluestone who has seen Beloved. He says he saw her "[s]leeping on the kitchen floor. I peeped in" (Morrison, *B* 234). Stamp Paid enters every house in the area without knocking, but 124 Bluestone he cannot enter because he "believed the indecipherable language clamoring around the house was the mumbling of the black and angry dead" (Morrison, *B* 198). Unable to transgress the kitchen that is peopled by women, where "the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds," Stamp Paid is forced to retreat from the kitchen that is clearly demarcated as a space for women (Morrison, *B* 199). As Stamp Paid gazes into the kitchen space of the women, he feels excluded from this feminine world and does not feel free to enter as he enters every other residence in the area. Everyone else--Denver, Paul D and Stamp Paid--are excluded in some way from Beloved and

Sethe's relationship, but Sethe is trapped in a symbiotic pairing with Beloved that, unless it is broken, will ultimately kill Sethe.

#### Women Gazing through a Window

A man's gaze may frame a woman's world in order to characterize the woman, but when a woman frames the outside world, that gaze becomes an indication of her ability to leave the kitchen, to find freedom. When women are looking out through the kitchen window, they frame the outside world in a number of ways. What the women see through the window suggests the depth of their knowledge of self or the community, either consciously or unconsciously. Again, the kitchen is the touchstone for their knowledge, and their relationship to the gazing out of the window will suggest their strength. The women who only gaze out the window, however, will be unable to move outside the kitchen.

One of the most complex gazing scenes is in *Sula* when Hannah burns to death. The episode suggests information about the characters of Eva, Hannah, and Sula. Each of these three characters gazes on some part of the event: 1. Eva, 2. Eva's daughter, Hannah, and 3. Hannah's daughter, Sula. Both Eva and Hannah gaze out the window of their home; Sula, instead, gazes directly on the death of her mother.

The first gaze is Hannah's looking outside through a kitchen window as she contemplates why her mother burned Plum and how her mother held him close before she lit him afire. As Hannah sees "the deweys still playing chain gang," the reader as party in the gaze is reminded of the chains of African-Americans in slavery, yet in this period of time ostensibly there is no slavery (Morrison, *S* 72). Instead, the chains that bind "their ankles [. . .] one to the other" are the chains of the relationship that Eva has to her family, a love that is so thick that she can justify burning her son because he is addicted to drugs (Morrison, *S* 72). The reference to looking out at the deweys playing chain gang suggests that even though African-Americans have escaped the chains of slavery to the extent that the deweys can play at bondage as a game, women are still not free of the chains of life, still suffering agonies in life that are the palpable remnants of slavery. Hannah, still gazing out the window, evaluates her relationship with her mother. Though she does not consciously realize the connection between the chain gang play and her relationship with her mother, the third party gaze of the reader understands the juxtaposition of the death of Plum and the chain gang play. Hannah is free of slavery but she must endure the tyranny of a mother whose love destroys her son. That love chains them in a relationship that is, ultimately, fatal.

Though there is no direct blame for Plum's death placed on Eva, the dream incidents following Hannah's ruminations suggest Eva's punishment for killing Plum is the retaliatory accidental death by fire of her other child, Hannah. Hannah's reveries in the kitchen are sandwiched between two dream sequences. When Eva dreams that Plum "wanted to crawl back in [Eva's] womb," she exhorts that she "had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb" (Morrison, S 71). In order to free Plum from his addiction and from her womb, Eva "just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (Morrison, S 72). The second dream is one Hannah has of "a wedding in a red bridal gown" (Morrison, S 73). Both dreams foreshadow Hannah's death, as the narrator tells us that these two dreams, along with a number of other events, are "strange things" that lead up to Hannah's death by fire (Morrison, S 75).

The second gaze is Eva's gaze from the bedroom window onto her daughter, Hannah, who is afire. Eva is unable to save Hannah as she launches herself out of the bedroom window toward her burning daughter. Hannah's earlier gazing out the kitchen window on the deweys' play suggests her knowledge of the family situation. Conversely, Eva's looking out of the bedroom window suggests that Eva's choice to kill Plum is in error. She is akin to Sethe in *Beloved*

who has murdered her daughter instead of allowing her to return to slavery. Just as Sethe is reminded that she walks on two not four legs, Eva is reminded that she is not God.

The third gaze is Eva's who sees Sula as she watches her mother burn to death. Eva is "convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (Morrison, *S* 78). This gaze foreshadows Sula's figurative death in the community. Each woman is unable to move successfully outside the kitchen. Eva and Hannah both die, and though Sula seems to do well outside her community in the white world, she does not function within her own community.

The gaze in *Paradise* is a reversal of the gaze that men (Milkman and Stamp Paid) have had of women. In *Paradise*, Soane gazes out as the townsmen are planning their attack. The women of the town are unaware of the depth of their men's anger and resentment directed at the Convent women and equally unaware that the men are planning an attack on the Convent, and Soane's gaze reflects this lack of awareness because she is standing in the kitchen "whispering to the darkness outside the window" (Morrison, *P* 100). Soane "could not see in to the darkness outside as she waited for the kettle to boil" just as she does not see that her husband, along with a number of other men from the community, is planning an attack on

defenseless women (Morrison, *P* 100). She does not see that her trip many years ago to the Convent for an abortion is one of the triggers for the events about to take place, though the reader is aware. Soane's searching the darkness suggests the early morning attack that will later take place--leading to Connie's death.

The gaze through the kitchen window marks characters at different stages of self knowledge. Those women who are gazed at by men through the window, such as Ruth and Sethe, have little hope for a fruitful life. Those women who gaze out the kitchen window have varying degrees of self knowledge, such as the characters of Eva, Hannah and Sula in which each generation seems more self aware than the last. Yet these women are not as successful as those who gaze through the kitchen door.

#### Women Framing through a Door

Though less frequent than framing the outside world through the window, framing through the kitchen door is met with joy and contentment. Most incidents where women look at the world through the door occur in *Paradise*, the novel in which the women, arguably, are the most self-sufficient and the most able to respond to the outside world.<sup>2</sup> Stepping into the doorway suggests their ability to defend themselves against the onslaught of the world, unlike the

women who peer out through the kitchen window. I see that Morrison's characters are becoming stronger and more sure of themselves so that by the novel *Paradise*, Morrison is able to foster a generation of strong women.

As Connie looks out the door, she sees someone familiar "framed by the door [where the] shadow obscured his face but not his clothes" (Morrison, *P* 251). He flirts with Connie, and she is dazzled by the man, whom the reader is uncertain if she knows or not. Connie's joy at the meeting is obvious as she begins to "slide toward his language like honey oozing from a comb," and indicative of her liaisons with men--she feels "light, weightless, as though she could move, if she wanted to, without standing up" (Morrison, *P* 252). Connie's self assurance is apparent in the episode.

Not only is looking out the door indicative of a self assurance already present; also, it indicates a self assurance that is growing. Mavis, one of the women who has escaped to the Convent, goes to the kitchen door and looks out more closely at the garden and realizes that "a part of the garden she originally thought gone to weed became, on closer inspection, a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond" (Morrison, *P* 40-41). Mavis finally realizes the extent of the world beyond the Convent that she had not recognized before--a world not full of weeds, but full of growing melons and corn. Her self

realization parallels this realization about the garden because as Mavis grows inside the Convent, she becomes more observant of the world outside. As she heals, she is able to look outward, and the scene she sees outside through the kitchen door suggests her budding ability to look beyond herself, to see things that she did not know existed before, to look beyond to a possible life suggested by the "empire of corn." Because Mavis is able to frame the garden, Morrison would seem to be suggesting that the African-American woman might indeed be able to participate fully and successfully in the world.

The last reference to looking out the door in *Paradise* is from the kitchen door of the Convent. This reference functions dually to suggest a baptism and to foreshadow the attack by the men. The women "[g]athered in the kitchen door" and looked at the falling rain (Morrison, *P* 283). To them, the rain is healing as they "let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces" (Morrison, *P* 283). This event is ironic because the men attack the women because they think the women are unclean. Instead, their shaved heads that are baptized in the rain and their sequestered lives from the town suggest a holiness about them. The women may step out through the kitchen door into a cruel world, but there is something beyond this life that aids them in their misery. Though the attack by the men is a heinous act of violence, the women are able to protect themselves by

escaping through the kitchen door. Ultimately, the attack brings positive circumstances for the women because each is able to reconcile, at least in part, with the families and the lives they left behind before they came to the Convent.

Morrison suggests that we all must divine the depths of our selves as many of her characters attempt to do. Characters who gaze out of the kitchen window and the kitchen door demonstrate their awareness of self by the things they see and think and do as a result of the gaze. Framing the world through the confines of the window and the door allows Morrison's characters to divine their own selves. Some of them are ready to move beyond the frame and challenge the world if they have learned the lessons of the kitchen. Others are not yet ready for this movement.

## Chapter 7

### Creating in the Kitchen

. . .I've just insisted--insisted!--upon being called a black woman novelist. And / decided what that meant--in terms of this big world that has become broader and deeper through the process of reclamation, because I have claimed it. I have claimed what I know. As a black and a woman, I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were unavailable to people who were neither.

Toni Morrison

I think what really happened was that I got interested in a woman producing a woman producing a woman in a kind of non-male environment, and each generation has a different problem. . . . I needed a reason for them to be self-invented.

Toni Morrison

The final relationship between the kitchen and Morrison's characters I would like to examine is that between women and wage earning in the kitchen. In certain kinds of wage labor, Morrison's women are able to subvert the roles that have been set out for them long before Emancipation. Characters who are able to subvert the stereotypical African-American woman's kitchen role have strong personalities. Work for the African-American woman is, as it functions for many, an indicator of self worth and of identity. Identifying oneself with work is an act of reclamation for African-American women who are in the process of claiming themselves in the world as Morrison indicates she does as a writer. These women's production of self is predicated on their connection to the work of the kitchen. The more the woman is in charge of her work experience the stronger is her personality. This chapter will focus on only those characters whose manner of earning a living wage is in the kitchen.<sup>1</sup> It will focus on those women who labor in the kitchen: Pauline, Pilate, Corinthians, Ondine, Denver, and Violet.

Working in the space of the kitchen brings up some troubling associations with slave labor, so for Morrison's characters to continue working in the kitchen brings up a conflict. When is working in the kitchen an act that fosters self for the African-American woman, and

when is working in the kitchen a reenactment of slave labor and, therefore, confining?

The kitchen is a place of work in which Morrison's characters attempt to reclaim identities, some more successfully than others. Some women are able to find a space of freedom through work, but they are not wholly apart from the world in this process as the chapter on framing suggests. The world frequently impinges upon their ability to find their identities, and we are not always sure whether the characters learn and apply valuable life lessons. Additionally, there is a struggle for the African-American woman to loose herself from the stereotypical Mammy in the kitchen, a slave role that renders her devoid of personality.

One theoretical construct that indicates the complexity of labor in space and the synchronic and diachronic outside influences of economic, political, and social forces is Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. The complex, infinite and overlapping construction of the production of space that he sets out helps to clarify the difficulties that Morrison's characters experience in their quest to find strength and identity in their kitchen work. The concept of social space, in which he explains the interaction of past history and present circumstances on the production of space, is useful in defining the kitchen as a place of labor and identity construction.

Lefebvre identifies and explains social space as "the outcome of past actions." (73). [S]ocial space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (Lefebvre 73). Actions in the present are intricately linked to past actions in a web that cannot be untangled, so that an African-American woman in the kitchen is subject to outside forces--historical, economic, societal, and so forth. Therefore, the space of the kitchen cannot be viewed as a space apart from the world and its influences.

Nicholas Bromell indicates the same type of complexity in his discussion of work, slavery and ante-bellum South: "the meaning of work [. . .] is neither fixed nor static" (6). For Bromell, work is influenced by and influences the world of economics in much the same way Lefebvre says except that Bromell's work specifically addresses the issue of slaves and their labor. Bromell looks at literature and the way writers represent work in their texts, especially in antebellum writers, because work was being redefined in those years. Work is "a complex and always contested social construction" that is influenced by outside forces (for Bromell that outside force is primarily economic) (6). For Morrison's characters, it is no small feat to find identity in a kitchen that has been associated with the slave act of service. For them to go beyond the act of defining themselves in a slave relationship through one's work, as Bromell indicates slaves

were able to do, is an act that must rise above the complex influences that might hinder their progress.

Pauline

Not every wage earner in the kitchen successfully counteracts these outside forces. Pauline Breedlove, for example, is a wage earner in the kitchen, but in seeking to find a self outside the failed relationship of her marriage, she reenacts the stereotypical role of Mammy. Pauline is the "best cook" that Bromell describes. She enacts the attempt at finding oneself through work that Bromell describes the slave laborers attempting to do--a definition of self as far as was possible within the institution of slavery: they were attempting to find "a part of themselves" by being the best at their particular labor (182). Pauline is reenacting the dynamic of slave and master by using work as a way to find refuge, from slavery itself, Brommel indicates, but this action is the "mirror image" of the white owner's insistence that slaves were "incapable of work" (182). Pecola's mother, then, is the stereotypical Mammy for the white household saving her best for them--her best work and her best temperament as seen in the episode where Pecola spills the pie on the floor, and where Pauline's best temperament is saved for the little white girl, not for her daughter Pecola.<sup>2</sup>

Pauline is connected early on to the kitchen in her family's desire for a better life when her family moves North for the promise of better jobs "with water piped right into the kitchens" (Morrison, *BE* 112). What appears to be a good move for Pauline, in reality, is anything but that because she marries Cholly--a questionable relationship at best--and, as if symbolically indicating the rottenness of the life, Pauline's tooth rots and falls out. The description of the tooth's rotting is a slow, gradual erosion, a wearing away that is subtle and unnoticeable until too late. Morrison suggests that the promise of the North was not fulfilled, an unfulfilled promise that J. Lee Greene notes was an early attempt by African-Americans to return to paradise. The African-American enthusiasm for the North slowly and gradually erodes as does Pauline's tooth. As Pauline herself describes, "we come up north; supposed to be more jobs and all" but life is not what she expects; instead, "[i]n her loneliness, she turned to her husband for reassurance, entertainment, for things to fill the vacant places" (Morrison, *BE* 117). Instead of helping her, Cholly leaves her for the company of his friends. Pauline is left with nothing, just as many African-Americans were who made the trip North.

The nature of Pauline's character is reflected in her interactions in the kitchen where we see that she does not support her family; instead, she denigrates it in favor of a family that is not hers. She has

found no true sense of self but has lost herself instead to the stereotypical role of Mammy. Her production of self is superseded by a role left over from slavery, and her production is limited to only pain and doubt, for herself and her family. Pauline cannot free herself from the intricately wound life of the past nor the present, and her production of herself in space and as the product of space has been limited by slavery of the past and her own lack of vision in the present. The narrator tells us that the Breedloves, as a whole, made "no sound in the labor force" (Morrison, *BE* 34). Pauline has made no impact on the world because her sense of self is thwarted by a slave stereotype that she assumes for herself.

#### Ondine

Ondine, on the other hand, owns her identity where Pauline does not because Ondine does not work hard in the kitchen to earn the respect and accolades of her employers. She works hard in the kitchen for herself, even though both accept wages for their work. Ondine does not respect her employer and says so: "You white freak! You baby killer! [. . .] You cut him up. You cut your baby up" (Morrison, *TB* 208). She feels free to chastise her employer, Margaret, for having abused her own son. And while her employer says she's fired, she will return to care for her. While Ondine serves as Pauline

does, her ownership is different from Pauline's. Ondine is a character with more of a sense of self than Pauline, able to extend herself beyond the stereotype. Her place in the kitchen is secure, and her character is strong.<sup>3</sup>

However, the relationship between Ondine and Margaret and between Sydney and Valerian resembles the relationship between Uncle Tom and Mr. St Clair in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a relationship that has frequently been criticized. Ondine, Sydney and Tom may speak to their employers (masters) as moral equals, but they are still their employees (slaves), subject to firing (hanging). They appear to be in control at the end of the novel as Sydney feeds Valerian, and Ondine talks to Margaret, but this is an uneasy and unsure position. Sydney and Ondine have produced selves that are separate from their employers and stronger than their employers, but they are still subject to their authority. Nonetheless, Ondine claims the entire kitchen and refuses to leave her work even when dismissed.

#### Cora and Pilate

Two strong characters emerge in *Song of Solomon*--Cora and Pilate. Different from Ondine who establishes herself in opposition to the authority over her in the kitchen, Cora and Pilate establish

themselves in kitchens separate from the authority that would hinder them. Their choices to work in the kitchen free them from that authority. The complexity of the production of self in *Song of Solomon* is complicated by the capitalistic Macon Dead who influences both his daughter Cora and his sister Pilate--though Pilate emancipates herself from Macon years before Cora does. As a representative of white capitalism, Macon's focus is on making money. Cora leaves her family home in order to work in a kitchen, a move that frees her from the confines of her father. Pilate forms a fulfilling self by working in her own kitchen doing business (making wine) that Macon hates.

Cora would seem to have opportunities because she has an education, but it is apparent that she cannot find a suitable job (according to her father); instead, in defiance of her father, she works as a maid "scrubbing the kitchen tile" (Morrison, SS 191). She becomes the subservient worker, self-effacing and ashamed who never admits that she has been to college, knows French, or has been to Europe. She does this not because of her employer directly, but because of the influence of her father who creates in his daughter the feeling that the job is a "humiliation" because she must wear a uniform (Morrison, SS 191). Her relationship with work functions as a means of identity because Cora feels a "genuine lift which came of having her own money rather than receiving an allowance like a child"

(Morrison, *SS* 191). Cora's work in the kitchen is not an attempt by Cora to find her identity by being the best in her job. Cora is looking for an independence that transcends her father's control over her, and that independence comes in maintaining a job and earning a wage.

Cora is introduced to her independent life on the bus to her workplace where she meets a man who drops "a white envelope on the seat" beside her. Though she has treated the man with disdain for weeks, she takes the envelope and opens it in the kitchen of her employer. Her upbringing tells her that the "ill-dressed" and apparently "elderly" man is not worthy of her, so she drops the letter "in the brown paper bag opened for the day's garbage" (Morrison, *SS* 193-94).<sup>4</sup> The juxtaposition of the kitchen and the kitchen garbage in this episode serves to underline the difficulty that Cora has in escaping her father. The kitchen has afforded her a position of security from which to live, but the obvious inappropriateness of the suitor (based on her father's standards) prompts her to throw away the possibility of a future with him--an act that she reenacts later in the relationship. It is Cora's growing acceptance of herself that is taking place in the kitchen that ultimately allows her to read the card and then begin a relationship with Henry Porter. She finds life with her mate because she has had the courage to leave the confines of Macon's world, though her emancipation is not an easy one for her.

Cora nearly loses Porter because she will not tell her father about their relationship, but being with Porter is her only possible choice to “protect [Cora] from a smothering death of dry roses,” reminiscent of the withered, dry flowers in the dining room centerpiece (Morrison, *SS* 200). Cora is able to form a new outlook for herself, and a new life. If she had stayed within the confines of her father's expectations of her life, she would be a useless, unhappy woman. By earning a wage and defying her father, she defines herself as a person who is worthy of a happy and fulfilled life.

Pilate is not bound by the constraints of making money in the traditional sense; therefore, she develops a full female world of her own. Her world is juxtaposed next to, and comes into conflict with, the traditional world of capitalistic money-making represented by her brother's handling of business and finance. Susan Willis describes Pilate's wage earning as a type of alternate economics in the “contrast Morrison develops between Macon Dead and his sister, Pilate” (12). Pilate's life “embodies [real history's] utopian transformation” (Willis 12). Pilate's life is characterized by pleasurable pursuits instead of the pursuit of money because what money Pilate, Reba, and Hagar do get “facilitate[s] giftgiving, wine making, and the balanced flow between economic and human needs” (Willis 13).

Pilate's wine-making is a "skill [that] allowed her more freedom hour by hour and day by day than any other work a woman of no means whatsoever and no inclination to make love for money could choose" (Morrison, *SS* 151). Pilate is not only able to foster a full sense of self, she also provides an environment in which others-- Hagar, Reba, and Milkman--can also develop a self. Pilate is, perhaps, the most evolved woman in Morrison's novels because not only does she develop a sense of self, but she is able to help other characters to develop themselves.

#### Denver

Pilate's freedom and independence are defined by the confines of her community, but another character who has similar freedom and independence takes that liberty farther. Denver in *Beloved* develops into the most independent of Morrison's characters in that she has the chance to further herself through schooling. Denver takes tentative steps from her home because she must in order to survive, taking a job with the Bodwins that is described as an act of sustenance in reference to the kitchen: "come right after supper, say, maybe get breakfast. [. . .] Case late guests need serving or cleaning up after" (Morrison, *B* 255-256). The Bodwins remember the work of Denver's grandmother, Baby Suggs, and on that reference are willing to take

her. The difference here from any other novel is that Denver's job has the possibility of leading her to greater freedom, independence, and a better life because Miss Bodwin sees Denver's potential and wants to educate her: "She says I might go to Oberlin. She's experimenting on me" (Morrison, *B* 266).

The independence that Denver realizes from the education of the Bodwins is mitigated, however, by the presence of the "experiment." The attitude that white people have the keys to education and that they hand them out to "worthy" African-Americans is present in this word, an attitude that has been described in many slave narratives and experiences.<sup>5</sup> Denver has exerted her identity, however, by working in the Bodwins' kitchen, and she will utilize the opportunities whites give, as many African-Americans have before her, in order to create an identity and to subvert and transcend them.

Violet

Finally, Violet in *Jazz* enacts a different type of work in the kitchen. Her work in the kitchen has nothing to do with food preparation or cleaning; she works out of her kitchen to cut hair. She gets less than most women doing this job because although she has "a knack" for cutting hair, she has no "supervised training," no license and can only charge twenty-five or fifty cents (Morrison, *J* 13). But

the important aspect of her job is that of all the women who work in the kitchen in Morrison's texts, she does something not associated with the stereotypical slave work of cooking and cleaning. While the job offers Violet a chance for independence, she herself does not see the possibilities. Though Violet is not conscious of her space in the kitchen, she does have a strength that other characters do not. Violet utilizes the kitchen as a place to carve out her own wage. She changes the dynamic of the slave kitchen because she makes the kitchen space a creative space--she sculpts hair.

Morrison's characters are subject to the intricate productions of space that take them back to a slave/master relationship. The forces that affected slave women as they labored in kitchens can be reenacted in non slave women even as they attempt to subvert or rebel against these traditions, so for Morrison's characters to find identity through work in the kitchen, they must be mindful of their places both in history and in the kitchen. Those characters who are able to move forward from that relationship, like Pilate, Cora, Denver, and Violet, develop an identity based on their ability to produce their wage in the kitchen, and the kitchen work enables them to create an identity that defines them in the world.

## Chapter 8

### Kitchen Limitations

Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children, and there was no problem.

Toni Morrison

The kitchen space functions in Morrison's novels symbolically so that we can see more clearly how Morrison's characters have become self actualized. But the kitchen as a space for an African-American woman is not without its limitations. That she has had to work in the limiting colonial and domestic space of the kitchen certainly draws into question this space as a space of empowerment for the African-American woman. The two fold kitchen space is not like Virginia Woolf's room of her own in which a woman is free to make and unmake herself. For African-American women, the space of the kitchen has been a white space where they toiled in the white woman's kitchen for the white woman's family. The space of the kitchen is associated with work--for someone else's benefit, but the

African-American woman can make that space one of empowerment, empowerment of the type detailed in Maria Claudia Andre's *Chicanas and Latin American Women Writers Exploring the Realm of the Kitchen as a Self-Empowering Site*. Andre brings together a number of articles that demonstrate the subversion of the kitchen space by minority writers. Viviana Rangil discusses poets who, in reconstituting the act of cooking, also reformulate the role of women in the kitchen. She identifies the space of the kitchen for Latinas as a "reclaiming of the private space as that which is not assigned but is used to create and produce new forms of knowing and believing" (Rangil 103). Even when there is no cooking in a Morrison kitchen, there is creation and production because the "new forms of knowing and believing" are demonstrated in the characters' thoughts, conversations, and actions.

What I see in Morrison's work is that her women demonstrate through their relationship to the kitchen that they are both bound and empowered by kitchen space. Some of her women are bound by the kitchen--like Pauline Breedlove--and Morrison is trying to grapple with the limits of kitchen space for African-American women. The African-American woman's kitchen became a haven from the white woman's kitchen. For Pauline Breedlove to prefer the white kitchen and family to her own kitchen and family, for instance, shows Pauline's lack of respect for herself, her family, and her culture. In more ways, though,

Morrison's characters are like those described by Minrose C. Gwin who are subverting kitchen space while they are working in it in order to define a productive self.<sup>1</sup> The characters do make and remake themselves over again in the space of the kitchen.

In her last novel to date, *Love*, Morrison develops the different types of women she has been working with in her texts in the characters of Heed, Christine and L. Heed's husband does not allow her to work in the kitchen; she is to function as hostess. Heed is the first character who is denied access to the kitchen. While Heed does not slave in the kitchen, she is very much a slave to Cosey's (her husband) wishes. Heed has been separated from that which has given her solace and that is her friendship to Cosey's daughter, Christine. When Heed and Cosey marry, that female bond is broken. Even as Heed remembers that she had not been allowed in the kitchen, she thinks of her relationship with Christine and how it became one of distance and curiosity. It is as if Heed spends the rest of her married life trying to get in touch with Christine and the conversations they once had, and once they both move back into the house after Cosey's death, Heed must make her way to the kitchen because Christine is in charge of the cooking. The space of the kitchen becomes a site of contestation for the two that focuses their relationship. Heed is ostracized from the kitchen that Christine owns, showing the tension

in their relationship. Where one would think that Heed has an advantage being denied the traditional role in the kitchen, we see, instead, that she feels ungrounded, confused, and lost. I do not see Heed as a representation of the African-American woman as lost in the world, rather I see a character who, without the strength of female bonds, has no ground from which to gather strength. Her relationship to the kitchen, though, reflects how subjugated she is by her husband.

The most startling character in *Love* is the narrator, L, who is the one who subverts the patriarchal, domestic kitchen, who says early in the novel that a "brazen woman can take a good man down" (Morrison, *L* 10). Though she works in the hotel kitchen, takes pride in her work there ("I have never failed in the kitchen [Morrison, *L* 8]), and ultimately dies at the stove, she is the one who is self-empowered. L witnesses the signing of the will that will give all Cosey's wealth to Celestial (and possibly a love child), so L decides that she "wasn't going to let him put his family out in the street" (Morrison, *L* 201). She uses the power of the kitchen against the patriarchal, damaging Cosey by poisoning him with foxglove rather than let him damage any further the women of his household: Heed, Christine, and May.

It is in the space of the kitchen that Morrison's characters operate, but this space, as I have described, does not function in the same way in other African-American or minority women writers' works. Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, does not have a strong connection to the space of the kitchen. Though I would argue that Janie is undergoing some of the same growing pains as Morrison's characters, she is infrequently associated with the kitchen in the way that Morrison's characters are. Janie's independence is not reflected in the space of the kitchen.

Other minority women writers utilize the space of the kitchen. Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is an obvious example of the importance of the kitchen to a character. But the relationship of the kitchen to Mikage is not the same type of relationship as in Morrison's novels. Yoshimoto's space of the kitchen—even though much more obvious in Yoshimoto's text—is used more as a metaphor for Mikage's feelings. Other women do not meet Mikage here for conversations: the two other major influences on Mikage are both male, though one dresses as a female. The space of the kitchen does function as a space where Mikage feels safe and at home, but this relationship to the kitchen space does not appear to have the same complexity as in Morrison's kitchen space.

Patrick Bryce Bjork suggests in *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* that Morrison's characters "waver within the contradictions and ambiguities of desire and repression, control and chaos, attraction and repulsion, connection and withdrawal" (163). This wavering should not be a castigation of her characters, but an affirmation of the difficulty of creating a space for themselves in the world. Where Bjork sees the "irresolutions" of these contradictions and ambiguities as a lingering "measure of despair that seems to negate all hope for renewal," I see these contradictions and ambiguities as a natural striving of a person to find a space that does not naturally exist (163). It is the attempt, of women who have no space, to create and demarcate that space as their own. This type of creation does not come without a certain degree of uncertainty, of ambiguity, and of contradiction. No creative process can. The "measure of affirmation" that Bjork does suggest as integral in the "potential for cultural regeneration" cannot happen unless it does begin at the level of the self, at a personal level that then is reflected at the communal level. Joyce Dyer says that Morrison "has led us where we have needed so badly to go" (138). Dyer is speaking of the impact of Morrison's text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* on Kate Chopin studies, but, as I indicated in chapter two, the implications of *Playing in the Dark*

have permeated her own novels. Morrison suggests that her characters are attempting to negotiate this betrayal, the exclusion from the American experience, by finding a space in the kitchen. Morrison's women may yet be uncertain, but they have found that space from which they can confidently approach the world.

Jacqueline Jones says about Morrison and other African-American women writers' work that they

echoed rhythms characteristic of the experiences of so many black working women: stark, episodic confrontations with prejudice, followed by a reconsecration of the spirit with the help of friends and kin, and a rededication to a cause, or to a life. (320)

This is the dynamic I see working itself out in the space of Morrison's kitchens. Though the reconsecration and rededication is reflected in a space that has traditionally been a constraining space for the African-American woman need not be seen as a detriment. Many women have subverted the kitchen space in a like manner.

I have presented a number of ideas that I could not develop in the space of this work, fruitful areas for investigation of Morrison's novels. The vertical that Bachelard presents as a part of the white European experience, I indicate as a more horizontal, more linear visioning for African-American lives. The horizontal, linear aspect

suggests a hindering of the African-American in the American experience, a loss of dimension that bears examination.

Certainly, the idea that the kitchen can be a fruitful space for the African-American woman needs to be investigated more closely in other writers even as it has been already in works like Maria Claudia Andre's collection and the collection in *The Southern Quarterly* with Minrose C. Gwin's article; these collections focus more on the consumption aspects of cooking in the kitchen rather than a more general vision of the space of the kitchen and activities in it.

Morrison presents a number of different types of African-American women's kitchen, kitchens that reflect the relative empowerment of her female characters. Some kitchens reflect a character's relative disempowerment; she has been damaged by her relationship to the Garden. Pauline is the most extreme example of this character because she has forsaken her own kitchen in favor of the white kitchen. Ruth Dead's relationship to the kitchen reflects her relationship to Macon Dead, who emulates in his business and his home life the white, male capitalistic vision. Ruth, who is unable to maintain her sense of self, has a stronger relationship to her dining room--a space associated with upper class white women--and has no relationship to her kitchen, but in her association with the bourgeois dining room is corruption and death. Sethe's kitchen reflects a similar

lack of empowerment. After she kills one and attempts to kill her other children, Sethe's kitchen is a troubled space indicating that Sethe's rebellious act has had dire consequences for Sethe and her family.

Other kitchens reflect a character's relative empowerment. Pilate's kitchen that has agrarian roots is one of freedom and healing because she is able to maintain her sense of self in the face of Macon's power; Ruth must come to Pilate's kitchen for relief. Ondine's relationship to the kitchen reflects her sense of self that, much like Pilate's, is strong and clear. Corinthians Dead's and Violet's relationships to their kitchens reflect women who are interrogating their own senses of self as we see Cora and Violet finding empowerment in the work that they do in the kitchen (unlike Pauline). Each character has a relationship to the kitchen that reflects her relative empowerment and her ability to maintain a sense of self. Her relationship to the Garden informs that relationship to the kitchen, and Morrison utilizes this relationship to show us the empowerment of her characters.

## End notes

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> I will utilize the term "African-American" as Toni Morrison does in her *Playing in the Dark*. Patrick O'Donnell in "Faulkner in Light of Morrison" analyzes this usage indicating that the hyphenated word shows the effort of African-Americans to "write a proper name in the margins of American culture" (220). Invoking Derridean theory, O'Donnell indicates that the hyphenated word "signifies, among other things, a rupture in the smooth linearity of language or cultural narrative" (220). I find the usage useful as it elicits a recovery of and a discontinuity in African-American life.

<sup>2</sup> A number of critical works recount some form of exclusion or marginalization of the African-American from the American experience. David Jacobson, for example, suggests "'spatializations,' distinct notions of place, space, and time" in association with slavery and democracy (62). In his book, Jacobson indicates that the northern involvement in slavery was marked by spatiality of the homestead and the plantation, but the North's "struggle [was] against slave states but not *necessarily* a struggle for inclusion of black

Americans," an indication of the pervasiveness of the African-American exclusion throughout the American culture (62).

<sup>3</sup> For a perspective on the Edenic myth throughout the history or literature of America, see Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol*, R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, or Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature*.

<sup>4</sup> A number of twentieth century works demonstrate a sense of disillusionment with an attendant sense of hope and renewal. Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* is one such text that shows in Newland Archer's anguish over choosing between May Welland and Countess Ellen Olenska, a confusing mixture of hope and disillusionment concerning the culture's traditions. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, the reader is struck by Billy Pilgrim's predicament of being "unstuck in time." The reader experiences both the disappointment and the hope felt by Pilgrim. These are only two among many works of the twentieth century by white writers who cling to the hope of the American dream and its possible fulfillment.

<sup>5</sup> J. Lee Greene notes that many black authors refer to Jefferson and his supposition that blacks were inferior, noting that either black authors referred to Jefferson explicitly or referred to him implicitly by

the "ten thousand recollections . . . of injuries [blacks have] sustained" (quoted in Greene 2). Jefferson indicates too that whites held "deep-rooted prejudices" so that the two viewpoints [that of African-Americans and that of whites], along with other factors, will divide the two and "will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race" (Jefferson 661). Jefferson goes on to say, "This unfortunate difference of color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people" (Jefferson 665).

<sup>6</sup> Not every critic has noted this absence; however, Kathryn B. McKee, in her article on Sherwood Bonner's fiction, indicates Bonner's attempt to integrate white and black in Gran-mammy's heaven sequence, a sequence that McKee says indicates the powerlessness of both the white woman and the slave in the face of the white patriarchy. She notes that Bonner's vision is in opposition to Ownby's historical record indicating the absence of the African-American from heaven. Even if we accept that some texts (as McKee shows here) describe the inclusion of the African-American in heaven, the inclusion is still limited. McKee suggests that the vision of Gran'mammy's black son standing next to Gran'mammy's white mistress in heaven clearly demonstrates an inferiority "as they stand on equal footing before the ultimate male figure of traditional theology" (McKee 38). The slave

woman is still powerless even if she is joined by the white woman in this sequence. And equally telling is the absence of the black male.

<sup>7</sup> Parenthetical references to the texts will be abbreviated as follows:

|                        |           |
|------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Beloved</i>         | <i>B</i>  |
| <i>The Bluest Eye</i>  | <i>BE</i> |
| <i>Jazz</i>            | <i>J</i>  |
| <i>Love</i>            | <i>L</i>  |
| <i>Paradise</i>        | <i>P</i>  |
| <i>Song of Solomon</i> | <i>SS</i> |
| <i>Sula</i>            | <i>S</i>  |
| <i>Tar Baby</i>        | <i>TB</i> |

<sup>8</sup> This notion of the black man as evil evolved primarily from the post Civil War era when white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were utilizing a chivalric code that worked to protect white women from violations by the black man. The Klan's code is part of what Jeffrey Miller identifies as "the Southern ideology of redemption through violence" that ensued after the Civil War as whites attempted to keep blacks in a subservient position (15). The African-American cannot be excised, however, from all accounts because s/he exists. While before the Civil War it was understood by white culture that there would be no intrusion from African-Americans in paradise, after

the Civil War, this assumption became problematic. Because the African-American was still not viewed as an equal after the war, the African-American came to be represented, consciously or unconsciously, in the Edenic myth as evil.

<sup>9</sup> The violence of the beatings, hangings, and mutilations of blacks after the Civil War has psychological underpinnings more complex than indicated here. Peter Schmidt in "Command Performances: Black Storytellers in Stuart's 'Blink' and Chestnut's 'The Dumb Witness'" discusses a nuance to the overt violence in the South. He notes that in Southern fiction the representation of whites' requests for blacks to perform for them "mask[s] a deep need [. . .] to control another character's words, actions, and meanings and have them appear to be voluntary" (71). Violence lurks in this situation because of white people's insecurity about their control over blacks and the possibility after the Civil War that black freemen might deny the request.

Additionally, the pressure after the Civil War for a unified vision of the South not only affected African-Americans; it affected white Southern women as well who had begun to separate themselves from the Southern belle type and instead chose "new activities--domestic, educational, and literary--and individually they could count many triumphs" (Censer 8). Jane Turner Censer in her study of elite

Southern women after the Civil War indicates that these women "would become increasingly polarized between a revived image of the 'southern belle' and that of the emancipated new woman" (9).

<sup>10</sup> In the late 1880s, Ida B. Wells became famous, or notorious, for attacking the long-held belief that black men were lynched for raping white women. While threatened upon the publication of her findings, she bravely continued, later publishing specific details of the reasons why black men were lynched: "Of the 1,115 Negro men, women and children [on record as being lynched between January 1, 1882 and January 1, 1894]. Nearly 700 . . . were lynched for any other reason [rather than rape] which could be manufactured by a mob wishing to indulge in a lynching bee" (Wells 120). What else she found was when rape was actually cited as the reason for a lynching, the sexual act was actually consensual between two adults--white woman and black man. In reality, "The South's rapists were not black men, but white. And it was the hallowed white belle, not the black female wanton, who sometimes found sexual pleasure with men of a different race" (Olson 39-40). Looking at the actual reasons cited by Wells for the hanging of an African-American man--the various questioning of white authority--an irony in his hanging becomes apparent.

J. Lee Greene agrees with Wells that the myth that black men were lynched for raping white women was contraindicative to the real reasons they were lynched. The notion, however, was a strong one, and eventually, was expanded to suggest that any black man who attempted equality was guilty of rape or murder, and that the punishment simply preceded the crime.

<sup>11</sup> According to Greene, the notion that black women were rarely hanged was inaccurate. He notes at least seventy-six hangings of women between 1882 and 1927 (116-117).

<sup>12</sup> Many secondary texts bear out the African-American hope for the promised land: J. Lee Greene's *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century*, Lauren Lepow's "Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," Gaile McGregor's *The Noble Savage in the New World Garden: Notes Toward a Syntactics of Place*, Dickson A. Mungazi's *The Journey to the Promised Land: The African American Struggle for Development Since the Civil War*, Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature*. Primary texts abound with hope for the promised land of America.

<sup>13</sup> David Noble's work includes such white, male authors as James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and Robert

Penn Warren. He does include one male African-American writer, James Baldwin, but no African-American women.

<sup>14</sup> The strange fruit image is strong in drama written by women. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens published a collection of plays written by women between 1916 and 1994 that deal with lynching (*Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*).

<sup>15</sup> Olson is not alone in noting this type of reclamation process. James and Lois E. Horton indicate in *Hard Road to Freedom* that female African-American writers like Morrison and Alice Walker "seemed willing to say in public what had been traditionally reserved for private conversations--that black men generally shared American male chauvinism and were unwilling to treat black women as equals despite their history of equally sharing the burdens of race" (328).

<sup>16</sup> Gerda Lerner briefly identifies this same exclusion of the African-American woman in her history *Black Women in White America*: "Black women have been doubly victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions. Belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society--Blacks and women--they have been doubly invisible" (xvii). References to exclusions of the African-American woman can be found in the following works: J. Lee Greene's *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century*, Susan Willis' *Specifying: Black*

*Women Writing the American Experience*, James and Lois E. Horton's *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America*, "I Want the Right to be Black and Me" by Margaret Wright. That the African-American woman has suffered exclusion has been documented enough to need no further explication here.

<sup>17</sup> That the African-American woman has had to fight the stereotype of both the Mammy and the Jezebel (discussed in chapter four) is historically documented. Fannie Barrier Williams in 1904, for example, writes a refutation of the Jezebel myth in her "The Accusations Are False." Elizabeth Hadley Freydborg discusses the same myth making in movies as late as the early 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> Other examples of the place of the kitchen in the African-American woman's novel have indicated a link here: Deborah Cadman's "When the Back Door Is Closed and the Front Yard Is Dangerous," Yvonne Gaudelius's "Kitchenless Houses and Homes," Minrose C. Gwin's "Sweeping the Kitchen," Emma Kafelnos's "Reading to Cook / Cooking to Read: Structure in the Kitchen," and Mary Titus's "The Dining Room Door Swings Both Ways: Food, Race, and Domestic Space in the Nineteenth-Century South."

<sup>19</sup> Morrison provides a number of examples of the insistence by some "arbiters of critical power" that "traditional, established works of literature worthy of their attention" do not have a presence of African-

Americans as “an informing, stabilizing, and disturbing element” (*Playing* 13). For example, Morrison makes explicit the African-American presence, a presence felt as an absence in the scholarly indifference of those arbiters of power, in the following works: Henry James’ *What Maisie Knew*, Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*, Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, “darkness, sexuality, and desire” in Ernest Hemingway’s works, the “connection between God’s grace and Africanist ‘othering’” in the works of Flannery O’Connor (*Playing* 14).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the following works for a thesis related to culture and community: Marilyn Sanders Mobley’s *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings*, Trudier Harris’ *Fiction and Folklore*, or Patrick Bryce Bjork’s *The Novels of Toni Morrison*.

<sup>21</sup> In the examples that Gwin notes, these women are able to find their identities, to subvert African-American male oppression, and to renegotiate white/black female relationships.

<sup>22</sup> There is another position between that of the Garden and the kitchen in the idea of a kitchen garden. Morrison does speak of a kitchen garden in *Tar Baby* and in *Paradise*. In *Tar Baby*, the reference to the kitchen garden is as part of Valerian’s house and holdings. In the novel, the only characters directly related to the kitchen garden are male characters--Valerian who owns it but apparently never enters it and Gideon who acknowledges it needs

tending but does not tend it. The only other specific reference to a kitchen garden is in *Paradise* in reference to Billie Delia, the young woman, still a virgin, whom people believe is too overtly sexual. Some sympathetic community members praise "her work in their kitchen gardens" (Morrison, *P* 151). Her association with the kitchen garden indicates the ambiguity of her position as discussed in chapter four-- she is accused of a sexual persona that does not reflect her behavior. She is mired in a position from which she cannot escape--between the garden and the kitchen.

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Not every African-American woman writer indicates a similar position of the garden in her work. One obvious example is Alice Walker who, in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, indicates a more fruitful place in the garden. Here, Walker talks about the garden as a space where women can carve out special places for themselves. The garden is a flower garden where great care is taken to grow and shape its contents. It is a garden that many come from the surrounding area to view because of its beauty.

<sup>2</sup> This reclaiming through her characters is a manifestation of what J. Lee Greene identifies as a working against the white Edenic myth. Morrison's novels show a similar reaction to a white Edenic

myth as many African-American writers before her. Greene notes five periods in which the Eden trope "permutations" each marginalize blacks: "America as an earthly paradise (prevalent during the period of discovery, exploration, and development, the 1490s to the 1770s), America as a civil utopia (the era of the American new man during the revolutionary and early national periods), the South as a plantation idyll (the early 1800s to the end of the Civil War), the South's age of modern chivalry (the period between Reconstruction and World War I), and the nation's age of the American Dream (World War I to the 1950s and beyond)" (Greene 6). Specific African-American works to which Greene refers in his book are Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* and "The Fall of Adam," George S. Schulyer's *Black No More*, Frederick Douglass's "What Am I to You," Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" and *Native Son*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Greene does mention *Beloved* as a post 1950s example utilizing the trope, but he does not explicate the connection.

<sup>3</sup> The feeling of infertility and waste in *The Bluest Eye* is described by Trudier Harris who compares the infertility in the novel to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Though Harris is investigating Morrison's use of myth and folktale in her novels, the discussion of *The Bluest Eye* indicates the extent to which African-Americans

believed in the Edenic myth, and how unsuccessful it was to be for them. By undercutting these myths, Morrison indicates their unsuccessful role in the African-American experience: an escape to the freer North and Horatio Alger type success stories. She is "depicting a world view antithetical to American notions of integration, 'the melting pot,' and the possibility for the pursuit of happiness" (Harris 11).

<sup>4</sup> See the book *Without Sanctuary* for a visual account of hangings. Most pictures are of African-American men being hanged; some show acts of torture as well. One disturbing note is the number of pictures that incidentally include onlookers--many whites smiling approvingly, some with the raptly smiling faces of children.

<sup>5</sup> Broadly speaking, the focus of Grewal's text is a postcolonial reading of Morrison's novels. Her metaphor of the "fire and the fire escape" refers to her dawning awareness of the power of narrative: "the profound work that narrative can do for the social collective, and the work that such a narrative in turn demands from [the informed reader]" (Grewal x).

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Matthews is speaking about Lidian Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife who frequently suffered physical ailments "even when

her husband was, like Emerson, genuinely interested in the domestic sphere" (39).

<sup>2</sup> Some African-American women took other jobs--in the fields in the South and in the factories in the North--but discrimination led to low pay, long hours, and uncertainty in retention of jobs.

<sup>3</sup> The theoretical aspects of space have been set forth in a number of disciplines. The aesthetics of place demarcates a geographical space that is important to literature, as seen in books and articles about many writers, especially Southern writers, including William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* looks at theoretical underpinnings of space as more than a "geometrical meaning." Among other books that have been helpful in setting out theoretical aspects of space are Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* in which he demarcates the difference between space and place and investigates the effects of both on human existence and *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook that relates space to the theater. An interesting associated work is the Winter-Spring 1992 issue of *The Southern Quarterly* that published a number of articles on the topic of "The Texts of Southern Food." In it is a section on "Food and Women's Spaces" that takes a look at space in African-American women's lives.

<sup>4</sup> One further mention that bears a note here. There is a relationship in the bedroom that is described in a positive manner.

Violet and Joe's relationship is described by the narrator at the end of *Jazz* as pleasant: "It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers" (Morrison, *J* 228). But this reference is subject to scrutiny because the comfortableness of their nights is presumed by the speaker, filtered through the eyes of a narrator who seems to be subject to a loss of identity when she says, "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (Morrison, *J* 229). We are unsure of the veracity of the narrator's account because she is not sure of her self.

<sup>5</sup> The following books and articles develop similar connections between ethnicity, gender, and architecture: Aaron Betsky's *Building Sex: Men, Women, Architecture, and the Construction of Sexuality*; Kim Dovey's *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*; Yvonne Gaudelius' "Kitchenless Houses and Homes: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Reform of Architectural Space" in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer*; Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton's *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*; Ross King's *Emancipating Space: Geography, Architecture, and Urban Design*; Christopher Reed's edited *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* and Marion Roberts' *Living*

*in a Man-Made World: Gender Assumptions in Modern Housing Design.*

<sup>6</sup> The rest of the text that Lokko integrates follows: "Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's [architect's] imagination, for the world that the imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where the imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Reading [making] and writing [using] mean being aware of the writer's [architect's] notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and responsibility" (26).

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Plante talks about the kitchen and its innovations over the years 1700 to the present. While her book deals with the utilitarian aspects of the kitchen rather than the theoretical aspects, the importance of the kitchen is evident as a space that defines woman and her place in the family and in society over the years.

<sup>8</sup> Plante generally avoids issues of ethnicity with respect to the "domestics" laboring in the kitchen. By implication, though, in certain time periods the domestic is the African-American slave. In her discussion of the years encompassing 1840-1869 Plante notes a particularly apt association that defines the African-American woman's quest to find her space in her exclusion:

As the century wore on and there were increasing class differences between mistress and maid--and eventually ethnic and racial differences as well--women who worked as domestics were increasingly likely to be excluded from the benefits of domesticity they provided for others.

(Plante 60)

<sup>9</sup> See chapter two, pages 37 for Claudia's assessment of the flowers not growing and the importance to her community.

<sup>10</sup> See chapter five, page 91 for a discussion of the misplacement of Violet's knife.

## Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed the title to this chapter from James Allen's edited work *Without Sanctuary* that depicts hangings in America--primarily, but not exclusively, the hanging of African-Americans. It is appropriate in the sense that as African-American men were attempting to gain power in America after the Civil War, one of the ways that this power was thwarted was through lynching. This chapter is, in part, about those things that have hindered African-American women from achieving a full sense of self.

<sup>2</sup> A luo pan reading involves a number of elements of Feng Shui including "astronomical and geomantic calculations and the place of

human beings within them" (Hale 24). The luopan is an ancient compass that has recorded on it information based on the *I Ching*, "a philosophical book which interprets the energies of the universe" (Hale 10). Interpreters of the luopan indicate that they can discern information such as what ailment afflicts people in certain locations "or the fortunes of a person living in a certain room in a house" (Hale 24).<sup>3</sup> See chapter three, page 73 for references to Pilate's kitchen as a sanctuary for Ruth.

<sup>4</sup> See Jacqueline de Weever's *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction* for a more in depth view of the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the Conjure woman in African-American women's writing. She focuses on how African-American women writers transform these myths "into metaphors for psychological growth" (de Weever 1).

<sup>5</sup> Gerda Lerner briefly identifies these laws and practices: "the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' to any black woman; the taboos against respectable social mixing of the races; the refusal to let black women customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of single toilet facilities to both sexes of Blacks; the different legal sanctions against rape, abuse of minors and other sex crimes when committed against white or black women" (163-64).

<sup>6</sup> I do not want to take on the entire realm of studies on women and sexual politics. What I want to focus on is how Morrison utilizes the Jezebel myth to indicate a vain approach to life. She suggests that the myth has damaged African-American women leaving them unable to foster any personal or public gains, unable to build confidence or identity in the world.

<sup>7</sup> Dorcas' words as she dies--"only one apple"--is a reference to the Fall and Eve's knowledge of good and evil. Eve chose the knowledge of good and evil when she chose to eat the apple. Eve's actions lead to the casting of humanity out of innocence and out of the Garden.

## Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup> The postmodern preoccupation with the "Other" identifies margins and, therefore, marginal peoples such as African-American women, but the gaze here is by African-Americans on African-Americans. Marginalization occurs because those on whom the gaze falls are generally at the margins of the family in some way.

<sup>2</sup> The other incident is Pilate leaving through her brother Macon's kitchen door as she declares independence from him. This incident has already been discussed in chapter three, page 73.

## Chapter 7

<sup>1</sup> This approach will exclude characters such as Sula whose money comes from "inheritance," Jadine who makes her money as a model in New York and Paris, the prostitutes of *The Bluest Eye*, and Dorcas who extorts money and gifts in *Jazz*. Those characters outside the kitchen--Sula, Jadine, Dorcas, and Felice--carve out an identity beyond the production of the kitchen, but these characters have identity issues of another kind. Sula is a social outcast. Jadine has to find a way to remain grounded in her culture. Dorcas loses her essential self as she believes she is finding it, and Morrison gives us no clear direction for Felice.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter five, page 89 for an explanation of the pie incident where Pauline comforts the little white girl and admonishes her own daughter.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter four, pages 78-79 for an explanation of Ondine and Sydney being fired from the Streets' employment.

<sup>4</sup> The card enclosed in the envelope speaks of friendship only, but the attention Porter gives Cora is unusual for her: "But no one, not anyone at all, had made any attempt (any serious attempt) to flirt with her in a long time" (Morrison, *SS* 194). The flirtation blossoms and grows slowly into a relationship.

<sup>5</sup> Examples abound in slave accounts and early twentieth century accounts of black experiences. Phillis Wheatley was taught to read and write by an enlightened white family. Frederick Douglass recounts the attempts of his mistress to teach him to read and write before the master forbids it. Zora Neale Hurston writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road* of the white benefactresses from Minnesota who come to her little school in Eatonville.

## Chapter 8

<sup>1</sup> Gwin talks about three separate works in her article "Sweeping the Kitchen: Revelation and Revolution in Contemporary Southern Women Writing" whose women authors subvert the space of the kitchen: Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, and Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*.

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