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A critical study of specific exploded violent hierarchies in five novels by
Toni Morrison

by

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ABSTRACT

In a study of Toni Morrison's fiction it is appropriate to consider some of the relevant philosophical insights of Jacques Derrida, particularly Derrida's theory of deconstruction and the way in which it facilitates the explosion of violent hierarchies.

Firstly, a general overview of relevant Derridean terminology is given. In his work, Derrida exposes many classical philosophical oppositions in which one pole of the opposition dominates the other. In fact, he questions the very nature of a Western reason which causes difference to be viewed as opposition. He uses the phrase 'violent hierarchy' to show that there is no peaceful co-existence of terms within oppositions but that one term traditionally has the upper hand. Derrida also demonstrates that these hierarchical structures of dominance and oppression not only manifest themselves in language but are also promoted by logocentric language. By insisting on the play of *différance* in language, Derrida offers a way in which these violent hierarchies can be exploded. The term 'explode' is similar (yet not identical to) the Derridean term deconstruction. However, instead of deconstructing Morrison's texts, the aim of this study is to lay bare Morrison's treatment of the tensions inherent in specific hierarchical structures of dominance. To explode the chosen violent hierarchies is to expose the contradictions and ironies in certain hierarchic structures which manifest themselves and are reflected in language, whereas deconstruction itself is a complex reading strategy that Derrida uses when revealing discrepancies within certain classical philosophical texts. The term 'explode' is thus a more accurate description of what is aimed at in this research.

Next, the study entails an assessment of exploded gender, class and racial hierarchies in five novels by Toni Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison's explosions of the male/female violent hierarchy are evaluated, while violent class hierarchies are addressed in *Song of Solomon*. Finally, the way in which Morrison explodes racial and colourist hierarchies in *Beloved* and *Paradise* is researched. By opening up language to the play of *différance* and consequently undermining traditional metaphysical binary reason Morrison, like Derrida, encourages the perpetual explosion of these violent hierarchies in both literature and society at large.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In a study of Toni Morrison's fiction it is appropriate to consider some of the relevant philosophical insights of Jacques Derrida, particularly Derrida's theory of deconstruction and the way in which it facilitates the explosion of violent hierarchies. In subsequent chapters, specific exploded violent hierarchies in five novels by Toni Morrison are addressed. In the presence of so many misrepresentations and distortions by his critics and disciples alike, the focus is on Derrida's own account of deconstruction¹. Attention is specifically given to Derrida's treatment of what he calls traditional Western, logocentric violent hierarchies and the destabilisation of these. The extent to which Derrida's appeal to a new, non-binary logic is applicable in an analysis of the way in which Toni Morrison dismantles or explodes specific hierarchies within her novels, is also investigated.

The aim of the research is not only to assess the explosion of violent hierarchies in the chosen novels by Toni Morrison, but also to gain understanding of the way in which these violent hierarchies are embedded in and fused with language. Through a reappropriation of language and literature, Morrison dismantles many of the structures of oppression that typically sustain Derridean 'violent hierarchies', yet she does not necessarily do this with

1 In an interview with Edward Said, for instance, Said admits that it is primarily a type of "theoretical" or "dogmatic" deconstruction that he rejects, but points out that this is a type of deconstruction only promoted by some of Derrida's disciples, and not by Derrida himself. He says that if "everything that is effectively demystifying and disenchanting – where certain kinds of ideological blinkers are removed, and certain involvements and complicities are revealed – is deconstruction, then I'm for it. But there is another kind of deconstruction, which I would call "dogmatic" or "theoretical" deconstruction, which urges a kind of purity. I don't think that Derrida has been very guilty of it, incidentally – he's too resourceful" (1987:138-9). Everything that is called deconstruction is thus not necessarily Derridean.

Derrida in mind. In his work, Derrida exposes many of the classical philosophical oppositions in which one pole of the opposition dominates the other. In fact, he questions the very nature of a Western reason which causes difference to be viewed as opposition. He uses the phrase 'violent hierarchy' to show that there is no peaceful co-existence of terms within oppositions but that one term traditionally has the upper hand. This is just a brief explanation of complex issues thoroughly dealt with in the study itself.

The main objective of this thesis is reflected in its title, namely, "A critical study of specific exploded violent hierarchies in five novels by Toni Morrison". The term 'explode' is similar (yet not identical to) the Derridean term deconstruction. However, instead of deconstructing Morrison's texts, the aim of this study is to lay bare Morrison's treatment of the tensions inherent in specific hierarchical structures of dominance. To explode the chosen violent hierarchies is to expose the contradictions and ironies in certain hierarchic structures which manifest themselves and are reflected in language, whereas deconstruction itself is a complex reading strategy that Derrida uses when revealing discrepancies within certain classical philosophical texts. The term 'explode' is thus a more accurate description of what is aimed at in this study.

In the second chapter of this dissertation a general overview of Derridean terminology such as *différance*, the sign, phonocentrism, logocentrism, the supplement, the 'text', 'arche-writing', deconstruction, *trace* and the gift is given. These terms, in turn, facilitate a better understanding of the Derridean violent hierarchy. Some violent hierarchies dealt with in this chapter which promote a better grasp of Derrida's usage of the phrase are the presence/absence, speech/writing, philosophical language/literary language, truth/fiction

and political/intellectual binaries. In addition, deconstruction's status as 'ivory tower', 'text'-centred, intellectual theory is challenged. A thorough understanding of these Derridean terms and theoretical insights requires at least a partial familiarity with the 'linguistic turn' in 20th Century thought. As a result, this movement is reviewed as a prelude to an analysis of Derrida's work.

In the next chapter, the focus is firstly on the relationship between deconstruction and feminism in order to establish a dialogue between the two and to promote the possibility of an explosion of the male/female violent hierarchy. A brief overview of some limitations of Western feminism which has traditionally equated the category 'woman' with white, middle-class and/or heterosexual women will assist in demonstrating deconstruction's contribution to dislodging and exposing patriarchal complicity in both Western feminism and the construction of female identity. Insight into this complicity, in turn, is a prerequisite for an understanding of the distinction between reactive feminism on the one hand and maverick feminism, on the other. These two phases in Derridean feminism are then utilised in an analysis of the way in which Toni Morrison explodes the male/female violent hierarchy in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*¹.

My reading of Morrison's texts unveils both reactive and maverick feminism as tools unintentionally employed by her in an attempt to destabilise hierarchical structures of oppression. Firstly, the impact of patriarchy and oppressive gender role stereotypes upon both the advantaged and disadvantaged poles in the traditional, logocentric, male/female

1 Even though the emphasis is on one or two specific novels in the three chapters dedicated to Morrison's work, the other novels are also addressed intermittently where applicable.

binary opposition is examined. Once reactive feminism's contribution to exposing the damaging effects of these stereotypes has been demonstrated, the way in which Morrison utilises maverick feminism is assessed. This will entail an analysis of Morrison's use of the pariah, whose role as outcast is needed by the community for self-definition. A study of the pariah in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* facilitates an analysis of both female difference within male identity and male difference within female identity, which undermine the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of dominance and oppression. Only by admitting the play of *différance* in language can a recognition of difference within identity be ensured and both women and men take part in the Maverick dance.

The fourth chapter presents a critical evaluation of the way in which Morrison dismantles violent class hierarchies in *Song of Solomon*. A brief overview of the relationship between deconstruction and Marxism is given so as to identify the similarities between the Marxist class struggle and Derridean deconstruction. Both Marxism and deconstruction try, for instance, to rupture the intellectual/political binarism by actively resisting structures of class oppression. Deconstruction's contribution towards an ongoing class struggle is also assessed in light of the way in which Morrison resists final, fixed answers and the possibility of violent hierarchies re-instating themselves. By means of both a reversal and displacement, Morrison explodes, for instance, the manual labour/mental labour, or the bourgeoisie/proletariat violent hierarchies. Gayatri Spivak's phrase 'repetition-in-rupture' is applied in a study of the need for a perpetual explosion of these violent class hierarchies in *Song of Solomon*.

The fifth chapter comprises firstly an analysis of some Derridean insights regarding racial exploitation. This will be done by means of an overview of Derrida's treatment of difference and identity, as well as his rejection of racist systems such as *apartheid* and the language that gives rise to and sustain these oppressive structures. Additionally, colourism as an example of racial hierarchisation is outlined.

Next, a critical analysis of the impact of violent racial and colourist hierarchies on individuals in Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise* is considered. This is done by firstly investigating the way in which Morrison (re)presents American history from the point of view of the historically marginalised and silenced black Other. In both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, the history of racial oppression permeates and threatens to destroy the present lives of African Americans. By (re)presenting white supremacy through the eyes of the black American Other, Morrison not only disrupts the racist illusion of the morally superior white American race, but also shows the effects of a history of American racism on Americans of African descent. A study of some of racism's corollaries enhances an understanding of the way in which Morrison tries to exorcise the ghost of racial oppression in both *Beloved* and *Paradise*. By highlighting the insidious nature of dual logic, Morrison warns against the recurrence of oppressive hierarchical structures within the ranks of the oppressed and urges that the language of the oppressor be continually questioned and one's ideological foothold perpetually challenged so as to undermine 'fixed' logocentric language that encourages the reinstatement of these violent hierarchies and to resist the temptation of closure.

The last chapter contains a broad outline of the conclusions drawn in each chapter of the dissertation. Finally, some possibilities for future research are identified.

CHAPTER II Beyond Hierarchy

Derrida's theory of deconstruction is essentially¹ an attack on traditional Western metaphysics² and the structures of dominance accompanying it. In *Ideals and Illusions*, Thomas McCarthy notes that,

deconstruction constantly reminds us that rationalism's constitutive assumption of the fundamental intelligibility of experience and reality has underwritten a history of repression of the other in nature, in ourselves, in other persons and other peoples. As the bad conscience of an imperialistic logocentrism, deconstruction speaks on behalf of what doesn't fit into our schemes and patiently advocates letting the other be in its otherness (1991:107).

In her fiction, Toni Morrison primarily portrays societies in which the Other is oppressed, excluded and silenced. Within these restrictive circumstances, Morrison's oppressed characters usually try to come to terms with their own identities and in their individual ways (whether consciously or unconsciously) deal with or try to change the unfair status quo. Throughout her fictional texts, the violent hierarchies underlying oppression are dismantled. In this respect her texts are what Roland Barthes would call "texts of bliss", because they "[unsettle] the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his [sic] tastes, values, memories [and] brings a crisis to his relation with language" (1976:14).

1 The terms 'is' and 'essentially' of course have rigid metaphysical undertones and convey a message that is in conflict with the deconstructionist activity. Like Derrida, I am, unfortunately a victim of my metaphysical heritage, so bear with me as I try to explain the theory of deconstruction in terms that seem to undermine it. Later on in the chapter, Derrida's method of putting terms under erasure is explained in order to clarify how metaphysical terms can be used in accordance with deconstruction.

2 The term metaphysics is used here in the Derridean sense as the shorthand for any science of presence.

This crisis in the human relation with language, particularly language as writing, is of particular interest to Jacques Derrida. More specifically, the preoccupation with language as the only means by which human beings can understand their world, lies at the root of the 'linguistic turn' in 20th Century philosophy. Any understanding of deconstruction requires at least a partial familiarity with this movement, for, as Christopher Norris points out, "Derrida's texts represent [...] the most rigorous following-through of the 'linguistic turn' in modern philosophy generally" (1983:150).

The Linguistic Turn

The idea that reality as human beings experience it is only a social construct, be that through language or through thought, is not new. In the Enlightenment of the 18th Century, for instance, (with its rationalist emphasis on reason and universal knowledge), Imanuel Kant already elevates human understanding to the formal law-giver of nature. In his *Prolegomena*, he writes that "the mind does not derive its laws (*a priori*) from nature, but prescribes them to nature"¹ (1969:79). Johann Herder, one of Kant's contemporaries, in addition, recognises the centrality of language in our perceptions of reality and points out that Kant neglects the nature of language in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Herder argues that human thought and culture can only be accessed through language; that the human being is a 'creation of language'². Even though Herder's philosophy seems to be ahead of its time,

1 My translation. The original reads: "... der Verstand schöpft seine Gesetze (*a priori*) nicht aus der Natur, sondern schreibt sie dieser vor".

2 The original reads: "Der Mensch ist ein freidenkendes, thätiges Wesen, dessen Kräfte in Progression fortwürgen; darum sei er ein Geschöpf der Sprache!" (Herder, 1978:73).

it clearly foreshadows the transition in emphasis toward language in 19th Century, and of course primarily, in 20th Century thought.

Before the notion of language as the window to (or producer of) reality can become popular in Western thought, however, a shift away from rationalism and its emphasis on fixed universals is necessary. Johann Visagie writes that the tension between rationalism and irrationalism,

can roughly be understood as the divergence between a reason that is too exclusively focussed on order and lawfulness, and a reason too exclusively focussed on the eventual subjectivity and irreducible individuality of things. Transformations of this basic divergence (the tension between universality and individuality) are to be found in the interpretative conflict between unity and diversity, constancy and dynamics, necessity and contingency, cognoscibility and incognisance (1994:115).

In the case of contemporary, post-structuralist¹, language oriented philosophy and literary criticism, the emphasis falls on the second of the two terms with its focus on the individual (as opposed to fixed universals), establishing post-structuralist thought as an extension of 19th Century irrationalistic historicism (yet as shall become apparent in my discussion of Derrida, this is not quite the case in his thought). The history of Western thought can easily be categorized in terms of the ever-present conflict between universal and individual/particular. In medieval philosophy and theology, for instance, every aspect of reality occupied a position within a fixed hierarchical order, culminating in God, the highest, most universal being. When, in the 19th Century, Nietzsche says that 'God is dead', he is promoting a mode of thought in which fixed universal truths such as the ones clung to, for instance, in

1 Though the term 'post-structuralism' is often applied to Derrida's work, he maintains that he himself has never used the term (See Derrida, 1986:167).

the Middle Ages, no longer hold any value for human beings. He does not merely indicate that people are less religious than they used to be:

Instead, it means that the traditional conceptions of an absolute in the Western world – ideas about a transcendent basis of meaning and value in life, including the *cosmos* of the Greeks, the God of Christianity, the Humanism and Reason of the Enlightenment – all of these old absolutes have been found to be only transient human constructs with no binding force in telling us how we ought to act or what we ought to strive for (Guignon, 1995:xvi).

Yet the shift in focus from universal to individual merely brings about a new hierarchy in which the individual becomes the superior term¹. In the 19th Century, one of the problems arising out of this tension between the universal and the individual, is the age-old question as to how it would be possible to obtain concrete knowledge of uniquely individual historical processes. The ancient Greek philosopher Herakleitos already argued that everything is subject to change. Yet in his dialogue with Kratylos, the student of Herakleitos, Plato argues that if everything were subject to change, then having knowledge of something would be impossible, for at the moment when a person thinks he or she knows something, that thing would already have changed, hence rendering the knowledge inaccurate. Plato tries to resolve this issue by arguing that all things have a constant essence (*eidos*)² that can never change, otherwise knowledge as we 'know' it would be impossible.

1 Derrida tries to unsettle all violent hierarchies that are entrenched in metaphysical history and our everyday language. The opposition universal/individual is one of these hierarchies which Derrida destabilises in order to ensure that neither term has claim to fundamentality or priority, and therefore some sort of superiority over the Other. In addition, Derrida's critique of the transcendental signified does not result in the erasure of all universals in favour of the individual, for then he would subscribe precisely to the binary logic he has worked so hard to destabilise. More about this shortly.

2 In Derrida's analysis of the sign, Plato's *eidos* is one of the transcendental signifieds that he criticises. Derrida shows that the sign is empty or deferrable, hence rendering the idea of a fixed essence that is never subject to interpretation insignificant and impossible.

It is a similar dilemma that 19th Century historicists are faced with. Even though the flow of history clearly subjects everything to change, causing every single event in history to be completely unique and individual, one does need universal categories or concepts to be able to identify or 'know' things. So, for instance, one needs the universal category 'human being' to be able to distinguish between individual human beings. We see the development of universal categories from an early age in the human mind. A child, for instance, only familiar with a pigeon and unfamiliar with the universal category 'bird', will, when seeing a swallow, mistakenly identify it as a pigeon. The child has lifted out the shared properties between different kinds of birds (for instance that they have wings and two claws) in order to describe an individual bird. (cf. Strauss 1989:15).

One can, as shown above, only know individual things on the basis of concepts formed in universal terms. In an attempt to overcome the dilemma of universal concepts that seem unable to specify individual meaning, the 19th Century philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey stresses the importance of language and interpretation and consequently develops hermeneutics – the 'art of interpretation'. Habermas explains that through a "totality that is structured by both history and language, [Dilthey] is confronted with the relationship between universal and individual [... and] hermeneutic understanding has to grasp an inalienable individual meaning in unavoidable universal categories" (1970:201). Language, it seems, can mediate between the universal and individual and also restores a lost balance between the two. Within language, concepts can have both universal and individual meaning. The concept chair, for instance, can on the one hand refer to all chairs that have ever existed, and is valid for all subjects that will use the term and who will accordingly

understand the same thing by 'chair'. On the other hand, the term chair can be used as a name which can bestow an *individual* meaning within a specific context. A clear shift from thought to language, and concept to meaning, has already taken place in the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey, laying the foundation for 'the linguistic turn'.

What most disparate trends in 20th Century philosophy and literary theory have in common, especially since the rise of structuralism in the sixties, is an appeal to language as the only channel through which human beings can access their world. In *Of Grammatology*¹, Derrida asserts that "never as much as at present has [language] invaded, as such, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method and ideology" (1976:6). Language is no longer a mere collection of names that appoint specific meaning to phenomena in our world. The notion that language merely mirrors reality without interfering with our perception of it is something of the past. In "Sign and subject: subjectivity after poststructuralism" Andrea Hurst writes:

The 'linguistic turn', may be understood as an overall shift from the epistemological to the semantic. It may be viewed, that is, as part of a shift in thinking from a position of what is called 'naive realism' (where it is assumed that we can know the world as it 'is', and ideally, our task is to ensure that our descriptions coincide with our knowledge), to a view of the world as doubly interpreted (1998:115).

Language – words, sentences, paragraphs, texts – is not merely denotatively reflecting or mirroring a supposed world 'out there'. The web of meaning never escapes its embeddedness in connotative interlinkages co-determining the context of denotation. The dynamics

1 First published in 1967 in France as "*De la Grammatologie*".

of language-use and change of meaning therefore imply that there is no connotation-‘free’ denotation of reality. Ferdinand de Saussure, for instance, rejects the view that words are merely symbols which correspond to referents. Christopher Norris writes:

Meanings are bound up, according to Saussure, in a system of relationship and *différance* that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception. Far from providing a ‘window’ on reality or (to vary the metaphor) a faithfully reflecting mirror, language brings along with it a whole intricate network of established significations. [...] There is simply no access to knowledge except by way of language and other, related orders of signification. (1982:4-5 – emphasis mine).

Saussure claims that words are signs made up of two parts: the signifier and the signified. A written or spoken word is called the ‘signifier’, whereas the concept or thought giving meaning to the ‘signifier’, is called the ‘signified’. The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. Yet despite the arbitrariness of the signifier/signified relationship, structuralists nonetheless believe that a signifier has a natural tendency to seek its own signified in order to form a positive unit. In post-structuralism, however, our understanding of the sign is further evolved: the sign is no longer a positive unit with two sides. Instead, post-structuralists (and deconstructionists) want to separate the two halves of the sign and show the nature of signification to be unstable. At this point an assessment of Derrida’s analysis of the sign is needed if any understanding of the deconstruction of violent hierarchies is to be attained.

Difference, *différance* and the sign

Derrida formulates the term *différance*¹ to break free from the structuralist idea that every signifier has a natural tendency to seek its own signified in order to form a positive unit.

1 The term *différance* is used differently by different writers. In her translation of Derrida’s *Of*

He questions Saussure's structuralist conception of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The sign itself is, according to Derrida, empty (deferrable) – unlike Plato's *eidos* that is constant and never subject to further interpretation, it has no centre of meaning which indelibly limits the free-play of the sign. He wants to escape from the notion of the *transcendental signified*, something similar to the great metaphysical points of certainty which Nietzsche rejects when saying that 'God is dead'. Derrida criticizes the traditional metaphysical tendency, dating from Plato to the present, to find solace in one specific transcendental signified that is the ultimate guarantor of presence. He refers, for instance, to the following of these transcendental signifieds in his essay entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences": "*eidos, arché, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man and so forth" (1972:232), arguing that all these fundamentals or principles have always designated the constant of a presence. By emptying the sign, Derrida wants to escape from the notion of the transcendental signified, yet, as he points out, this is hard to do in terms of the structuralist distinction between signifier and signified: "[I]t is difficult to see how one could evacuate the *sign* when one has begun by proposing the opposition signified/signifier" (Derrida, 1981b:19). If one takes seriously that 'everyday language' is, in Derrida's words, neither "innocent or neutral" and "carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics" (1981b:19), then it does indeed become necessary to free oneself from

Grammatology, Gayatri Spivak translates it into English as 'différance', without the inflection. Some scholars in turn equate *différance* with difference, and merely stick to the latter term. Unless quoted in a different form, however, the French form of the word, namely '*différance*' is used in this study, because it best displays the temporal and spatial difference implied by the term.

the notion of a 'transcendental signified' in order to avoid the pitfalls of dangerous ideologies that have sanctioned discrimination and intolerance throughout human history. This is why Derrida rejects Saussure's understanding of the distinction between the signifier and the signified:

The maintenance of the rigorous distinction – an essential and juridical distinction – between the *signans* and the *signatum*, the equation of the *signatum* and the concept [...] inherently leaves open the possibility of thinking a *concept signified in and of itself*, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers. By leaving open this possibility – and it is inherent even in the opposition signifier/signified, that is in the sign – [... Saussure] accedes to the classical exigency of what I have proposed to call a "transcendental signified," which in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier (1981b:19-20).

Derrida explains that the signifier-signified relationship has a tendency to self-deconstruct. If a sign has a meaning at all, it has to be contained in the sign rather than *point* to it via the signified. In other words, if the signifier had its own inherent meaning, it would not need a signified. To determine this meaning is, however, only possible through looking at other signs. The character of the sign becomes relational¹. Put differently, Derrida questions the idea that a signified has a natural tendency to seek its own signifier, together

1 It is important to note that, even though Derrida tries to show that all signifieds do in turn also become signifiers with their own signifieds, the distinction between the two should not be entirely blurred. The fact, Derrida writes, that the opposition or difference between the signifier and the signified "cannot be radical or absolute does not prevent it from functioning and even from being indispensable within certain limits – very wide limits" (1981b:20). This statement in itself already indicates the non-binary logic according to which Derrida's theory of deconstruction functions and the fact that it is not, as so many of his critics so mistakenly argue, an 'anything goes' philosophy in which all meaning is dissolved.

forming a *positive unit*. Post-structuralism (similar to deconstruction), claims that "the sign is not so much a unit with two sides, as a momentary 'fix' between two moving layers" (Selden, 1985:83). Derrida explains the intrinsically divided nature of the sign in terms of what he calls *différance*.

In a way, the term *différance* is an extension of Saussure's analysis of language as being a system of differences. In her introduction to *Dissemination*¹, Barbara Johnson writes:

The very fact that the word is divided into a phonic *signifier* and a mental *signified*, and that, as Saussure pointed out, language is a system of differences rather than a collection of independently meaningful units, indicates that language as such is already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome. (1981:ix).

Différance, Derrida explains, is "an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring" (1976:23). In French the 'a' in *différance* is not heard, only *différence* is heard: "this graphic difference (*a* instead of *e*), this marked difference between two apparently vocal notations, between two vowels, remains purely graphic: it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard" (Derrida, 1982:3). The French verb *différer* has become two separate words in English: "to defer and to differ" (1982:7). The term 'defer' is temporal: "putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time [...] a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation" (1982:8) – signifiers can postpone 'presence' indefinitely. The other meaning of *différer*, 'to differ' is spatial: "to be not identical, to be other, discernible" (1982:8). Through *différance*, Derrida can let the present differ from the absent, while at the same time deferring to the absent, which in turn defers

1 The English translation of Derrida's '*La Dissemination*' published in 1972.

the present. The term *différance* describes the arbitrary nature of the sign better than the structuralist signifier/signified-relation, because it is "neither a concept nor a word" (1982:11). Derrida speaks about

a movement of *différance* (with an *a*) between two differences or two letters, a *différance* which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space [...] *between* speech and writing (1982:5).

Différance, in other words, points neither to speech nor to writing. The term negates itself and other terms and is thus neither present nor significant. The phonocentric¹ tradition of putting speech before writing is broken with in Derrida's use of *différance*. The self-presence of the spoken word is insisted upon only by phonocentric thought that ignores 'différance'. History has always tried to freeze the play of 'différance' in order to determine conclusive meaning. At this point it becomes important to briefly examine Derrida's analysis of the traditional Western system of oppression called phonocentrism, upon which a history of repression of the Other within specific 'violent hierarchies' was based. In order to do this I focus on Derrida's reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his consequent development of the term *supplement*.

Phonocentrism and the supplement

In his analysis of the Western history of oppression, Derrida coins the term logocentrism – "the metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example of the alphabet) which was funda-

1 Phonocentrism is the word Derrida uses for the traditional metaphysical practice of privileging speech over writing. Throughout metaphysical history it was assumed that with the spoken word ambiguity is minimised and 'true' meaning is most present. In *Positions*, Derrida writes: "*Phoné*, in effect, is the signifying substance *given to consciousness* as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept" (1981:22). A more detailed explanation follows shortly.

mentally [...] nothing but the most powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself on the world" (1976:3). Derrida's attack on logocentrism is directly linked to his critique of the transcendental signified. He argues that there is no 'higher' signified that escapes the chain of signification. The 'centre' regulates the structure of a concept but does not have a definable structure itself. This centre of meaning, in other words, is to be found in a 'higher' signified which gives meaning to the signifier. If the structure of a centre were to be found, it would have to be in terms of another centre or higher signified. Yet this signified can only be accessed through an infinite chain of signifiers, rendering this so-called centre centre-less. Derrida is in conflict with the idea that people should desire a centre or 'logos' of meaning that 'guarantees *being as presence*' (Selden, 1985:84). This 'logocentrism' has, Derrida argues, always controlled "the concept of writing" and "the history of metaphysics" (1976:3). 'Logos' is the Greek term for word. Derrida objects to the metaphysical world view that upholds the idea that the 'word' has an unequivocal relationship to reality and truth:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

John 1:1

This 'Word' is the origin of all things. God has *spoken* in the beginning, creating everything through His 'Word'. Derrida criticizes the Western understanding of the sign that originated with the Platonic dialogues and that governed the complete tradition of European philosophy. This tradition favours spoken language above written language because of the *presence* of the spoken word. Derrida uses the word phonocentrism to demonstrate the way in which the *phoné* (sound) – that which has always been believed to have direct access to the speaker's intended meaning – has been accorded privilege in traditional Western

thought. Phonocentrism led to the inevitable prioritization of speech over writing. In other words, writing only exists as an imitation of speech, or, as Saussure claims, "writing 'exists for the sole purpose of representing' speech" (Anderson, 1989:138).

This preoccupation with privileging speech over writing stems from the need to determine absolute and ultimate truth, and the spoken word has always been regarded as being ultimately closer to the origin of truth – the speaker. When an attack is launched against the privileging of speech over writing, an entire history of oppression and social abuse (reflected in the violent hierarchies embedded in our language) is threatened. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes:

The system of 'hearing (understanding) – oneself – speak' through the phonic substance – which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier – has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc. (1976:7-8).

In *On Deconstruction*, Johnathan Culler explains that the moment of 'hearing oneself speak' not only "serves as a point of reference to which all these essential differences can be posited", but, more importantly,

enables one to treat the resulting distinctions as hierarchical oppositions, in which one term belongs to presence and the logos and the other denotes a fall from presence. To tamper with the privilege of speech would be to threaten the entire edifice (1982:107).

For this reason it is important to look, firstly, at how the speech/writing hierarchy is destabilised. A very good example of how this is done is Derrida's reading of the way in which Rousseau treats writing in his *Confessions*. Rousseau, Derrida writes, regards

writing as "the simple 'supplement to the spoken word'" (1976:7). Writing merely supplements speech, for speech in its metaphysical essence, is 'natural' and immediate, and writing is a representation of direct speech. This view of speech as being more 'natural' than writing, reinforces a number of hierarchies in Rousseau's texts, all emanating from the central opposition he posits between Nature and its Others (art, artifice, culture, education, language, technique, etc.) (cf. Attridge, 1992:76). The hierarchy speech/writing also neatly fits in with the grid of binary oppositions such as reality/image and presence/representation, where, in each case, the first element is privileged in the Western tradition. Yet Rousseau's recourse to writing as 'necessary' supplement is the direct result of his desire for a presence which eludes him in speech, for even though he privileges speech, in actual experience he is, as a result of his shy temperament, unable to convey his 'true' value through speech. In his *Confessions*, for instance, Rousseau writes:

I would love society like others if I were not sure of showing myself not only at a disadvantage, but as completely different from what I am. The part that I have taken of *writing and hiding myself* is precisely the one that suits me. If I were present, I would never know what I was worth (Quoted by Derrida, 1976:142 - emphasis in original).

In other words, what should be at the heart of speech, namely an immediacy or presence of meaning – that which has always safeguarded speech its position hierarchically superior to writing in Western thought – is in fact a lack of presence, an absence. At the root of a *desire* for presence lies the given that presence is *not* fully present, or, put differently, is absent, for, as Barbara Johnson writes, "[it] is not possible to desire that with which one coincides" (1981:xi). It is thus only through writing, a mode of communication which by definition, like the movement of *différance*, removes the author both temporally and

spatially from his/her words, that Rousseau achieves the eloquence he dreams of in speech. Only once he admits (whether intentionally or not) that there is a lack of presence in speech, does Rousseau manage to recover some of this lost presence. Yet he nonetheless sees his own recourse to writing as a sacrifice or perversion, a fall from what is 'natural'. Derrida writes that the "act of writing would be essentially – and here in an exemplary fashion – the greatest sacrifice aiming at the greatest reappropriation of presence" (1976:143). What Rousseau does not realise, however, is that it is only through the movement of *différance* that the very desire for presence is made possible, for without *différance*, the need for the supplement in Rousseau's world view would be superfluous. Derrida explains that,

différance makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of différance, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Différance produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible (1976:143).

When Rousseau formulates the demand for the 'supplement' (writing) with which he wishes to recapture a lost presence in speech, he already subscribes to the play of *différance*. Derrida dedicates the chapter in *Of Grammatology* entitled "... That Dangerous Supplement...", to an examination of Rousseau's shifting use of the word *supplément* "a word which can signal both the addition to an already complete entity and the making good of an insufficiency" (Attridge, 1992:77). Derrida explores the contradictoriness of this term also in relation to Rousseau's discussions of sexuality, in which, just as in the case of the speech/writing opposition, Rousseau only manages to recapture sexual presence or immediacy through masturbation, an act which he nonetheless condemns for being unnatural. Just as writing cheats nature by being a mere representation, so masturbation poses a threat

to nature because it makes possible union or presence – that which eludes Rousseau in ‘natural’ sexual union – only through the imagination. Rousseau writes, for instance, that masturbation allows lively male imaginations

to dispose of the whole [female] sex as they desire, and to make the beauty which tempts them minister to their pleasures, without being obliged to obtain its consent (Quoted by Derrida, 1976:151).

Yet, just as in the case of writing, masturbation becomes a ‘dangerous’ supplement because it threatens to produce presence within something which is really, according to Rousseau, an unnatural perversion.

In other words, writing and masturbation are supplements in both senses of the word. They add to something that is believed to be already present, and/or they ‘make good an insufficiency’ by filling the gap. Barbara Johnson explains the logic of the supplement as follows:

The logic of the supplement wrenches apart the neatness of the metaphysical binary oppositions. Instead of "A is opposed to B" we have "B is both added to A and replaces A". A and B are no longer opposed, nor are they equivalent. Indeed, they are no longer even equivalent to themselves. They are their own difference from themselves. (1981:xiii).

The very nature of identity is challenged by the logic of the supplement, for, in the absence of the one, the other becomes utterly meaningless. The two terms in the opposition are thus co-constitutive. Whenever something is identified we have to acknowledge that it is co-determined by whatever is *different* from it. For instance, in his dialogue Parmenides, Plato already emphasised that one cannot think *being* without simultaneously thinking *non-being*. What is more, to identify not only entails distinguishing (and vice versa), since

both identification and distinguishing can only take place on the basis of *similarities* and *differences*.

Derrida's reading of Rousseau's texts exposes the dual working of the supplement, yet unlike Rousseau, Derrida perceives of the supplement in the positive sense, because it opens up a previously suppressed field of meaning and signification. Through the chain of supplementation it becomes clear that every sign is just the supplement of another sign¹, and that meaning only exists within the confines of a larger text, that great corpus of meaning within language and culture that has 'always already' been written and what Derrida terms *arche-writing*. The destabilisation of the hierarchy speech/writing through the logic of the supplement makes it possible to recognise not only writing within speech, but also this *arche-writing*, which in itself presupposes that one recognise *différance* and the Other. Derrida writes that there "is no ethics without the presence of the other but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, *différance*, *writing*" (1976:139-140 – emphasis mine). Christopher Norris writes that the term 'writing', as Derrida uses it with reference to Rousseau's texts, is:

not just synonymous with written or printed marks on a page. Nor is it opposed to a real world existing outside or beyond the text, at least in the sense that one might draw a clear demarcation between the two realms. This is what Derrida terms *arche-writing*, that which exceeds the traditional (restricted) sense of the word in order to release all those hitherto repressed significations which have always haunted the discourse of logocentric reason (1987:122).

1 Derrida also notes that "[t]he sign is always the supplement of the thing itself" (1976:145).

This so-called *arche-writing* displays a distinct complicity with Derrida's conception of the *text*, and the two terms often function as substitutes for one another. Derrida's famous statement – "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" (1976:158), is born out of his reading of Rousseau, for, as Johnson puts it:

what Rousseau's text tells us is that our very relation to 'reality' already functions like a text. Rousseau's account of his life is not only itself a text, but it is a text that speaks only about the textuality of life. Rousseau's life does not *become* a text through his writing: it always already *was* one. Nothing, indeed, can be said to be *not* text¹ (1981:xiv).

Through the working of the supplement and the consequent destabilisation of the hierarchy speech/writing, Derrida exposes the fact that human beings have no access to the world that is unfiltered through the greater '*text*', a term which "suggests any set, field or complex of signs, forces or practices that can be interpreted and acted upon" (Olivier, 1994:154). Rather than *limit* the play of meaning and interpretation (or *différance*), this '*text*' opens up a whole field of previously unexplored signifying possibilities. In his reply to the response of Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon to his essay on Apartheid, Derrida, for instance, explains:

It is in the interest of one side and the other to represent deconstruction as a turning inward and an enclosure by the limits of language, whereas in fact deconstruction begins by deconstructing logocentrism, the linguistics of the word, and this very enclosure itself. On one side and the other, people get impatient when they see that

1 Here one might criticise Derrida by arguing that his '*text*' functions as a transcendental signified. Yet such criticism becomes redundant if one realises that this '*text*' is always subject to the play of *différance*, which effectively denies the '*text*' any claim to ultimate presence.

the deconstructive practices are also first of all *political and institutional practices* (1986:168 – emphasis mine).

An acceptance of this 'arche-text' and its consequent possibilities of meaning through the working of the supplement allows Derrida to do away with the hierarchical dominance of the one term in a binary opposition over another, and thus also to intervene constructively in the socio-political realm, as shall become apparent shortly.

In dealing with Rousseau's texts, Derrida shows clearly that the logic of the supplement is not something which he has to introduce into the texts. Rousseau's texts function against their own logic, for, even though he wishes to elevate speech and 'normal' sexual intercourse to the platform of 'normality' and ultimate presence, his inevitable recourse to both writing and masturbation thoroughly undermines these efforts. Christopher Norris explains that Rousseau is finally "constrained to imply – without at any point expressly acknowledging – the perverse unnaturalness of nature itself" (1987:121). Thus, Derrida's reading of the Rousseauian texts peels away at the layers of meaning to expose a meaning that seems to be in conflict with Rousseau's wishes, yet is nonetheless present within his texts.

Deconstruction

It is important to note that Derrida's reading of Rousseau's texts is by no means an attempt, as many of his critics believe, to dissolve meaning as such. Paul Cilliers notes: "Derrida has always argued that while meaning or context is never saturated, *there is always meaning and context*" (1998:82 – emphasis mine). What he does with Rousseau's autobiographical confessions and his text on the origin of language is merely to expose specific forces of

signification already latent within these texts. Deconstruction is not a means of breaking down meaning¹, but rather an attempt at exposing multiple meanings and analysing tensions within a certain text. The term deconstruction can on the one hand be seen as a deliberate derivative of Heidegger's term 'destruction' in the sense that Heidegger wanted to 'destruct' the history of ontology and the traditional metaphysical "determination of being as presence" (1972:232)². In another sense, however, deconstruction is less of a destruction than a dismantling or reappropriation by means of careful reading. Derrida makes very clear that he thoroughly respects the texts of the 'great' metaphysical thinkers (such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Rousseau) that he is studying (cf. Caputo, 1997:9). In an interview published in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, Derrida nonetheless points out that the way in which he reads these thinkers does not try to conserve or repeat the metaphysical heritage. Instead,

[i]t is an analysis which tries to find out how their thinking works or does not work, to find the tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneity within their own corpus. What is this law of self-deconstruction, this "auto-deconstruction"? Deconstruction is not a method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside. Deconstruction is something which happens and which happens inside. (1997:9).

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- 1 Derrida is often accused of claiming that words have no determinate meaning and that there is "complete freeplay or undecidability" (Derrida, 1988:115) of meaning in language, yet if this were the case, the very claim becomes meaningless. Derrida defends himself thoroughly against such claims in the Afterword to *Limited Inc.*, an argument which does not need to be repeated here.
 - 2 For Heidegger this lies in the traditional Western response to the nature of 'Being', the term by means of which he attempts to transcend all signification. Yet as Gayatri Spivak points out in her introduction to *Of Grammatology*, "when Heidegger sets Being before all concepts, he is attempting to free language from the fallacy of a fixed origin, [...] but, in a certain way, he also sets up 'Being' as what Derrida calls the 'transcendental signified'" (1976:xiv).

In other words, a deconstructive reading (such as Derrida's reading of Rousseau) merely exposes the discrepancies between what a text sets out to express and what it is nonetheless 'constrained to imply'. Derrida has dedicated most of his academic career to unmasking these discrepancies within the 'traditional' metaphysical texts, in order to show that a disregard for the play of *différance* inevitably leads to the repression of some (necessary) Other. I have already shown how the hierarchies speech/writing and presence/absence are ruptured in Rousseau's text and how the repression of the Other, in this case writing and presence, is consequently critiqued. This is merely the beginning. Because of the play of *différance* and of the logic of the supplement, the whole Western system of metaphysics and semantics that is built upon a foundation of unfair hierarchies can be disrupted. Derrida describes the act of deconstructing as follows:

we must traverse a phase of *overturning*. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other [...] or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment (1981b:141)

Derrida begins his reading of any text by identifying oppositions such as speech/writing, present/absent, stability/flux, body/soul, intelligible/sensible, literal/metaphorical, masculine/feminine, civilised/uncivilised, truth/fiction, reality/image, presence/representation, natural/cultural, cause/effect, universal/particular, Self/Other, and transcendental/empirical, to name but a few. These oppositions are then subjected to an internal critique that destabilises them. In Morrison's fiction, violent hierarchies such as master/slave, white/black, male/female and capital/labour are exploded, for instance, by dismantling the Self/Other violent hierarchy. In her reading of *Beloved*, Devi Sarinjeive discusses the

"dynamism, complexity and relativity of self-formation"(1998:294), and demonstrates that,

the stable categories "self/other" are used to mediate the text in a more fluid, dialectical way – "self = other", more in keeping with the postmodern shifting self [...] Freed from the inflexible either/or of the "self/other" paradigm the slaves are released from a permanent state of being the "other"; the masters, too, do not remain forever the "self" (1998:294).

Once these oppositions have been destabilised, one has to actively and repeatedly implement a reversal of oppositions and a displacement of the system, for as Derrida explains, "the hierarchy of dual oppositions always reestablishes itself" (1981:42). This act of destabilisation has a twofold function (namely to undermine and destabilise the system that is deconstructed, while at the same time making use of the terminology of this very system), and thus Derrida tries to implement what he calls "a kind of general strategy of deconstruction", which avoids "both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it" (1981:41). Derrida readily admits that the deconstructionist cannot escape from the terminology of Western metaphysics and has to work within the terms of the system in order to disrupt it. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", for instance, he writes:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of the metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest (1972:232).

One of the examples Derrida uses to explain this necessity is his analysis of the birth of ethnology. From the moment the traditional West started formulating ethnology as a science, it has also had to stop regarding itself as the culture of reference. Ethnology critiques some of the fundamental, ethnocentric values of the traditional West. Yet, as Derrida points out, this can only be done from within the system it tries to denounce, because ethnology is forced to employ the traditional concepts of the ethnocentric culture it tries to condemn. The ethnologist consequently "accepts into his [sic] discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them" (1972:234).

Similarly, the metaphysics of presence is attacked with the help of the concept of the sign. Yet as soon as one tries to show, as Derrida himself does, that "the domain of the interplay of signification has [...] no limit" (1972:232), one should extend this notion to the sign itself, something which cannot be done, for, as already disclosed in the footnote on (page 14), to erase the difference between signifier and signified, is to dissolve meaning as such, which is precisely what Derrida does not want to do. In other words, once one tries to do away with the concept 'sign', one loses the foothold necessary for any valid critique against it. In order to overcome this dilemma, Derrida often uses Heidegger's technique of placing a word "under erasure", that is, of crossing it out but still keeping it legible, when dealing with the sign. Derrida writes, for instance: "[T]he sign is that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: 'what is ...?'" (1976:19).

Derrida thus both accepts his indebtedness to the traditional language of Western metaphysics, and commits himself to undermining its underlying structures of oppression.

Implicit within this form of reasoning lies Derrida's commitment to changing metaphysical, binary reason which gives the oppositional structures of oppression their breathing space. In an attempt to do away with logocentric reason, Derrida makes use, as shown with respect to the supplement, of a nonbinary logic, what he calls "a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided" (1981:41). Paul Cilliers writes that Derrida's notion of 'double writing' "implies that our attempts to intervene contain the contradiction that our intervention can only be structured according to the terms used by that which should be dismantled" (1998:82). Derrida warns against simply trying to neutralize oppositions, for that would leave one with:

... no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of intervening in the field effectively. We know what always have been the practical (particularly political) effects of immediately jumping beyond oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of neither this nor that (1981:41).

Derrida's destabilisation of traditional hierarchical oppositions via a sort of double logic¹ lays the foundation for consequent destabilisation of structures of dominance in every society in the world, for social abuse is after all reflected in language. Derrida realises that a thorough attempt at destabilising unfair power structures in society requires more than mere criticism of these structures. The very nature of traditional Western reason should be studied closely and consequently revised, even if this is to occur within the terms of the same reason it tries to change. In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida explains:

1 Derrida's double logic is different from the binary, oppositional or dual logic used throughout metaphysical history. This binary, oppositional or dual logic ensures that one pole in a binary pair be regarded as superior to the other, something which Derrida sets out to undermine.

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces (1982:329).

Derrida thus admits that there are non-discursive forces at work in the field of oppositions; that these forces can only be accessed and understood through the greater *text* or *arché-writing*. Only once this is accepted and understood can we start intervening in the Western reason that sustains violent hierarchies.

The violent hierarchy

Deconstruction, or rather certain aspects of its American embodiment, is often criticized for being a 'text'-centered, ivory tower¹, philosophical and intellectual theory which pays little attention to political struggles². Yet it should be clear by now that Derrida himself has rigorously tried to let his so-called intellectual theory also intervene in the political³ arena, or rather, to show that the political/intellectual binary is not a clear-cut, mutually exclusive opposition. This intervention is done at the grass-root level of idea and discourse

1 See for instance Bert Olivier's "Derrida: Philosophy or Literature?", 1994, *JLS* 10(1):153-154.

2 See for instance Diane Elam's, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme*. London: Routledge, 1994:67.

3 The term 'political' should be treated with care, for people have often relegated important issues re unfair structures of dominance in society to the 'political' realm, hence banishing it from their thought. In South Africa, the apartheid practice of not being allowed to address issues of race in the classroom is often still being implemented in educational institutions by teachers and lecturers, for fear of being 'political'. Yet issues of race, class and gender are pivotal to our whole experience of the world and cannot merely be dismissed as being 'political'. Toni Morrison writes that "[w]hen matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum – or a dismissal mandated by the label "political". Excising the political from the life of the mind has proven costly" (1993:12).

formation. Theoretical and ethico-political dimensions are clearly interwoven in Derrida's work. Derrida was even once imprisoned in Czechoslovakia "for giving seminars prohibited by the authorities" (Derrida, 1986:168). His articles on issues of patriarchal and racial oppressions are persuasive examples of his commitment to overthrowing unfair structures of dominance (cf. for instance Derrida, 1978 or 1985:290-299). In reaction to those who believe that his statement that "*there is nothing outside of the text*" effectively prevents deconstruction from contributing to the dismantling of unfair power structures within the 'real' world, Derrida writes:

... *text*, as I use the word, is not the book. [...] It is precisely for strategic reasons (set forth at length elsewhere) that I found it necessary to recast the concept of text by generalizing it almost without limit, in any case without present or perceptible limit, without any limit that *is*. That's why there is nothing "*beyond the text*". [...] That's why the text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open and so on. That's why deconstructive readings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. [...] They are also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances (1986:167-168).

Hence Derrida is not in conflict with Edward Said's famous statement that "texts are worldly" (1986:607). Derrida merely uses the word 'text' in a much broader sense than Said, who, in this context, refers primarily to literary and theoretical texts. Toni Morrison's texts are also worldly and 'political' in the sense that they address everyday realities of oppression and grapple with how to reconcile ascribed African-American identities with achieved ones. She says, "all good art has always been political" (1974:3). Her texts deal with the divisions and the displacements that govern the formation of these identities.

African-Americans struggle with a split or double consciousness that has been the result of centuries of silencing and marginalisation of Americans of African descent by Americans of European descent. In an attempt to accommodate these complexities, Morrison often posits an inverted world, for, as Philip Page puts it,

in a racialized society the split, the inversion, and the double consciousness are always already present. Exposing the gaps between the dominant standards and the hegemony they impose on the disprivileged members of society is therefore a first step toward understanding the hierarchy and its implications. Such an examination suggests that recognizing the split has creative potential, that it dislodges individuals from worn-out, restrictive and distorting absolutes, allowing for release into the play of *différance* (1995:38).

Yet even when Morrison does not posit an inverted world, the presentation of her characters and their environment inevitably involves a dismantling of traditional violent hierarchies, something which is made possible through the play of *différance*.

In *Beyond hierarchy? The prospects of a different form of reason*, Bert Olivier examines the development of the trend to move 'beyond hierarchy' and asserts:

It appears that while the traditional structural principle of social spheres across the board from religion to politics, education, commerce and industry has been hierarchical, there are signs that this principle is being widely questioned today (1996:41).

In *Foucault and Derrida: the other side of reason*, Roy Boyne dedicates a whole chapter to "Post-Hierarchical Politics" (1990:123-160), and demonstrates how the thought of Derrida and Foucault has contributed to the debate on difference and the Other. Olivier notes that "Boyne's reading of Foucault and Derrida demonstrates that their work, regardless of the different paths that they chose to travel, is predicated on the shared

conviction that Western reason [...] should somehow accommodate difference without relinquishing ethics" (1996:43).

To be sure, Foucault did develop significant perspectives in this regard, but pursuing them will divert our attention from the main focus of this study. It should suffice for now to make a note of Foucault's desire "for the return of the Other, not as fury, suffering or a vengeful power out of control, but as the right to be different" (Boyne, 1990:33). Let us instead stand still once more on Derrida's treatment of difference (or *différance*) and its role in both identity formation and the way in which hierarchical opposites are to be dealt with. The best explanation of how issues of identity should be treated is Derrida's own:

We often insist nowadays on cultural identity – for instance, national identity, linguistic identity, and so on. Sometimes the struggles under the banner of cultural identity, national identity, linguistic identity, are noble fights. But at the same time the people who fight for their identity must pay attention to the fact that identity is not the self-identity of a thing, this glass, for instance, this microphone, but implies a difference within identity. That is, the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself. Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on (1997:13-14).

Derrida shifts the focus from an assessment of difference *between* to an appreciation of difference *within*. The term *différance* merely designates the temporal and spatial difference within difference itself. Through the play of *différance* and the consequent acceptance of difference, in turn, the previously suppressed absences and undecideabilities that form an integral part of the process of signification, are released. One of the most important implications of Derrida's critique of presence, Roy Boyne writes, is "that it leads to an

appreciation of hierarchy as illusion sustained by power" (1990:124). Once the binary logic of identity is problematised, the primary term in a hierarchical opposition loses its position of dominance, for the difference between the primary term and its Other is not, in fact, a difference *between* but a difference *within*. As Teresa Ebert puts it in "The "Difference" of Postmodern Feminism", "any identity is always *divided within* by its other, which is not opposed to it but rather supplementary." (1991:893). If this non-binary logic of identity is ignored, Ebert writes,

phallogocentric logic is able to assert its primary (male) terms as seemingly coherent "identities without differences," as self-evident "presences" and to exclude and suppress the "dangerous supplement", the (female) "others" on which these illusory identities depend (1991:893).

Even though Ebert is dealing here primarily with the hierarchy male/female, the same principle applies for all binaries. Boyne notes for instance that "[b]inary pairs such as [...] capital and labour, man and woman, white and Black, are, if seen through the lens of Derrida's critique of presence, not simple alternatives" (1990:124). In *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, Audre Lorde explains what happens if binaries are treated as simple oppositions:

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women (1990:281).

It should be noted that, while identity formation cannot be achieved in terms of the binary logic that merely tries to establish the difference between the Self and the Other, there nonetheless still exists a difference between the two – they do not coincide. The hierarchical dominance of the one term over the other is merely avoided since an understanding of the marginal term becomes a prerequisite for understanding the supposedly superior term. In other words, there is no clear "either/or" choice between the two terms in a binary pair – one always has to subscribe to the "both/and" logic of deconstruction¹. Derrida uses the non-hierarchical term *trace*² to indicate that a sign "always already" implies the possibility of other uses, a possibility which exists even in the absence of the other signs. Spivak notes that the French word for *trace* "carries strong implications of track, footprint, imprint" and is a word that "cannot be a master-word, that presents itself as the mark of an anterior presence, origin, master" (1976:xv). Derrida himself notes that *trace* implies "the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears *as such*" (1976:46 – emphasis in original). Derrida uses the term *trace* in a similar fashion as he does, for instance, *différance* (indeed, Spivak notes that "[f]or trace one can substitute "arche-writing" ("archi-écriture"), or "différance", or in fact quite a few other words that Derrida uses in the same way" (1976:xv)), but the term *trace* conveys the difference *within* the respective poles of binary oppositions more accurately. In other words, what seems outside a given sign is also always inside in some way, which gives us a hint as to why the Other has so

1 In deconstructionist circles, the "both/and" logic refers firstly to the fact that there is no clear "either/or" choice between the two opposites in a binary pair. Secondly, it refers to the fact that one cannot undermine the logocentric system without simultaneously accepting this system on certain levels.

2 Derrida originally uses the word *trace* as substitute for Heidegger's term Being (cf. Spivak, 1976:xv).

rigorously been silenced and the distinction between this Other and the so-called superior term policed at all cost, for the traditionally "prior" term is always at the point of being transgressed by the *trace* that inhabits it, and is much less absolute in its superiority than it appears.

This insight is important if literature is to have any impact on oppressive institutional and political practices that exist as the result of a binary logic that privileges one mode of signification over another. Deconstruction has given a new standing to literary language by demanding that hierarchical oppositions such as serious/non-serious, literal/metaphorical and truth/fiction be dismantled. In "Secular Criticism", Edward Said criticises the way in which literary and theoretical texts have, until recently, been unable to make any positive contributions in the restructuring and dismantling of the institutional realities of power and authority that make these texts possible. He relates how a friend of his who worked at the Department of Defense during the Vietnam war once tried to explain to him that the Secretary who had ordered countless B-52 strikes over a distant Asian country could not possibly have been the cold-blooded killer Said took him for. His argument in support of this was that he once noticed a copy of Laurence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* on this Secretary's desk. In other words, what his friend expected Said to believe was that no one who could read and appreciate a novel such as the *Alexandria Quartet* could be a ruthless killer. Said explains the assumptions underlying his friend's opinion as follows:

[H]umanists and intellectuals accept the idea that you can read classy fiction as well as kill and maim because the cultural world is available for that particular sort of camouflaging, and because cultural types are not supposed to interfere in matters for which the social system has not certified them (1986:606).

When Derrida destabilises hierarchies such as serious/nonserious, literal/metaphorical, political/intellectual, theory/practice and truth/fiction that keep the cultural world and the social system apart, he is in fact suggesting a new way in which literature and literary theory can have an impact in the 'political' realm. Even though Said criticises American literary theory for retreating "into the labyrinth of 'textuality'¹, dragging along with it the most recent apostles of European revolutionary textuality – Derrida and Foucault" (1986:606), the value of Derrida's work regarding the status of literary language cannot be denied.

Jonathan Culler discusses the new standing of literary language in his book *On Deconstruction*. He explains that, in the past, we have seen how philosophy has tended to set apart for itself a 'serious', purified language as opposed to the nonserious, fictional, "free, playful and irresponsible" (1982:181) language of literature. Literature has been crucial for the establishment of a serious, referential and verifiable language (as the ideal of scientific objectivity). Deconstruction rightfully questions these metaphysical notions. Culler explains: "If serious language is a special case of the nonserious, if truths are fictions whose fictionality has been forgotten, then literature is not a deviant, parasitical instance of language" (1982:181). Culler demonstrates how the notion of the superiority of philosophical language over literary language can be disrupted by showing that philosophy can indeed be treated as a literary genre and that literature can encompass whatever might be situated outside it. Thus:

The effect of deconstruction is to disrupt the hierarchical relation that previously determined the concept of literature by reinscribing the distinction between literary

1 Something from which, in my opinion, Derrida has successfully exonerated himself.

and nonliterary works within a general literarity or textuality, and thus to encourage projects, such as the literary reading of philosophical texts and the philosophical reading of literary texts, that allow these discourses to communicate with one another (Culler, 1982:184-185).

Literature and literary theory consequently lose their inferior status and earn the right to address structures of power and dominance in society, put differently, to be 'political'. Morrison's writing plays an important role in how the oppressed and silenced are perceived within society, and whoever reads her work cannot separate themselves from the issues addressed in it. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", Morrison explains:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted (1984:344-345).

The most important repercussion of these insights is the fact that the very nature of Western reason is questioned once one starts with a dismantling of violent hierarchies within our language (and consequently our world). Both Roy Boyne's book *Foucault and Derrida: the other side of reason* and Bert Olivier's article "Beyond hierarchy? The prospects of a different form of reason", examine the possibility of implementing a new, non-hierarchical form of reason to replace the old metaphysical one, for, in Boyne's words regarding Foucault's writings on madness (quoted also by Olivier):

Philosophically there is no foundation for the claim that our system of reasonable behaviour is the definitive expression of sanity and reason in human affairs. Politically, the system of 'reason' which rules us produces such appalling consequences –

military conflict, sexual and racial discrimination, starvation and exploitation, rape, murder and child molestation – that the enormous self-confidence of our reason and its representatives is conceivably nothing less than cataclysmic disaster and damnation of the human race (1990:32).

Both Boyne and Olivier consider some sort of counter-hierarchical restructuring within the "traditional" fields of oppression, and both ultimately draw the conclusion that the "age of hierarchy is drawing to a close" (1990:4). Even though neither thinker is sure exactly "what a non-hierarchically structured discourse, institution, relationship, company – in broad terms, society – would be like" (Olivier, 1996:49), both argue that there is the need for implementing a non-binary reason that precludes the possibility of maintaining hierarchical structures of dominance and oppression¹. This trend will shortly also become apparent in my reading of Morrison's novels.

Derrida clearly dreams of a system beyond the confines of binary reason. Only in this 'beyond' would the 'gift' be possible, even if just momentarily, for "[a]ll that you can call 'gift' – love, *jouissance*² – is absolutely forbidden, is forbidden in the dual opposition" (Derrida, 1984:198). Like justice and deconstruction, which are not deconstructible, so the gift is not deconstructible – it exists (if indeed it does exist) beyond deconstruction, as a momentary embodiment of a perfect world. A gift is something which neither the person

1 It should be noted that hierarchical structures are not oppressive by definition. Conflicts are not generated by relations of super- and subordination, that is by authority differences themselves, but by oppression, exploitation, abuse of authority, and other substantive uses. This explains the usage of the phrase *violent hierarchies* – which implicitly alludes to non-violent hierarchies.

2 *Jouissance* is the term Jacques Lacan uses for "a state of blissful, ecstatic union which would complete us, would heal the 'split' that occurred when we entered language. This desire is unrealizable. Its impossibility does not, however, keep us from continually seeking its fulfillment" (Warhol & Herndl, 1991:399).

who gives, nor the person who receives should be aware of, otherwise the gift is cancelled.

Derrida explains:

A gift is something that you cannot be thankful for. As soon as I say "thank you" for a gift, I start canceling the gift [...] So, a gift is something which is beyond the circle of reappropriation, beyond the circle of gratitude. A gift should not even be acknowledged as such. As soon as I know that I give something, if I say "I am giving you something," I just cancelled the gift. [...] If the gift is given, then it should not even appear to the one who gives it or to the one who receives it, not appear as such (1997:18-19).

In other words, as John Caputo explains, when A gives B to C, C is in debt of gratitude, whereas A is in the position to congratulate him/herself for his/her generosity, "[t]hus, the aporetic result of A's giving B to C is that A, instead of giving something, has received and C, instead of receiving something, is now in debt" (1997:141). For the gift not to cancel itself, both generosity and gratitude are out of the question. By means of the gift, Derrida dreams of

an anonymous, pre-subjective substratum layered beneath the surface of things, to a play of differences beneath benevolence and malevolence, 'within' which the various unities of meaning, the various subjects and objects, presences and absences, are constituted, beyond or beneath the life of the conscious subject (Caputo, 1997:143).

This gift, the movement beyond the circle of generosity and gratitude, is more or less impossible, and if it takes place, does so only "in a moment" (1997:146), yet this does not make it less desirable. In fact, instead of giving up on the dream of a beyond in which the joy of the uncontaminated gift can be experienced, we should be driven by this impossibility: "... let us be driven by, impelled by, set into motion by, impassioned by this impossible desire, this desire for the impossible gift, for *the* impossible" (1997:144).

In his book on Toni Morrison's novels, Philip Page makes the following assertion about the way in which postmodern¹ theory (which he successfully applies to her texts) deals with binary oppositions:

... postmodern perceptions of the relationships between traditional entities shift from clearly defined (and inevitably hierarchical) bipolar oppositions to more complex fluctuations involving non-unitary entities and the undefinable but crucial differences and similarities between them (1995:6).

My subsequent reading(s) of Morrison's work entails an analysis of the way in which her writing implicitly and explicitly explodes selected violent social hierarchies by means of a reason that is informed by the dream of the 'gift' and is both non-binary and allows for the play of *différance* in language.

1 In this context, Page uses the word postmodern as a synonym for deconstruction, for he proceeds immediately after using the term postmodern to explain the "both/and" logic of deconstruction.

CHAPTER III

Reactive Feminism and the Maverick Dance

A great deal has been written on the relationship between feminism and deconstruction. In many respects deconstruction and feminism are in the same political boat, for both have as their main aim a disruption of a system that oppresses a certain Other. Derrida recognises the complicity between deconstruction and feminism. In "Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida"¹ he explains why many feminist scholars are interested in deconstruction:

Because deconstruction has developed itself as the deconstruction of a system which is called phallogocentrism² which is a whole structure, which is a system so to speak. And it's not only a matter of concepts, of philosophical battle, but it's also a problem of how to write, how to behave in front of texts, in the institution, and of the relationship to literature and philosophy and so on (1984:196).

Yet much of what has been written about deconstruction from a feminist perspective has been critical of it for wanting to disrupt the female subject or female identity even though women have never really been allowed to have or define their own identity. It is also claimed that the deconstructionist project leaves feminism powerless to intervene in the field of politics because political activity is only believed possible if a group of people fight together under the same banner. Such attitudes have fostered the entirely misplaced

- 1 It should be noted that this interview with Derrida is arranged in the form of questions and responses, of which the questions consist of "edited versions of queries posed by members of the seminar and visitors" whereas "[t]he speaker referred to as "Response", is not the writer Jacques Derrida, but is rather [an] account of his responses" (1984:189). This should be kept in mind even though, for practical purposes, Derrida is referred to directly when quoting from this interview.
- 2 Phallogocentrism is the term which Derrida uses to describe the traditional Western system of metaphysics that is both phallogocentric and logocentric. Phallogocentrism is the system in which male experienced is prioritised, whereas logocentrism is the insistence upon the self-presence of the word, particularly the spoken word, and its supposed ability to designate ultimate and undeferrable meaning and presence (or to elicit a transcendental signified).

assumption that Derrida is anti-feminist. Indeed, some of the worst misreadings of Derrida have come from within the feminist movement, for, as Holm and Cilliers point out, these interpretations "are often based upon hasty over-simplifications [...] and quotations are made out of context to support prejudiced suppositions" (1998:381)¹. Before moving on to a study of the exploded male/female hierarchy within selected novels by Toni Morrison, a very brief explanation of the above-mentioned issues and the relationship between deconstruction and feminism is necessary.

In the previous chapter it has been demonstrated that Derrida emphasises that one has to accept and work from within the basic system one tries to dislodge. There cannot be a clean and easy break from the concepts of metaphysics (in which patriarchy is deeply entrenched) and one has to accept this premise if one is to disrupt the patriarchal system. In this lies the basic both/and logic so predominant in deconstructive theory. 'Traditional' feminist thought is faced with the same dilemma. It has to utilise the very ideas it tries to destabilise in order to disrupt the system. No system is beyond that which it tries to overcome, for then it would not be trying to overcome it. Women are after all also partly responsible for the existence and survival of patriarchy, for it is often easier to accept the status quo than to challenge it. Elizabeth Grosz writes that

the inherited nature of feminist discourse, a discourse that is not, or not yet, a discipline, and its location within 'patriarchal' institutions, knowledges and languages; the ways in which feminist self-help projects and equal opportunity commitments must negotiate with patriarchal institutions of the capitalist state for funding, the implication of Western feminism in neocolonialism, indeed the very investment

1 For a thorough discussion and subsequent dismissal of some of the major feminist objections to the Derridean approach to 'woman' see, for instance Holm and Cilliers, "Beyond the politics of positionality: deconstruction and feminism" *South African Journal of Philosophy* 1998, 17(4):377-394.

of all of us in the West to a kind of cannibalization of the imperialized other – all illustrate our necessary, indeed constitutive immersion in the very systems from which we seek to distance, and against which we seek to position, ourselves (1997:76).

Grosz clearly states that both moments (namely the inevitable acceptance of patriarchy on certain levels and the simultaneous disruption of this very system), are necessary if feminist practices are to escape the danger of "repeating and being unable to recognize the very implications it believes it has repudiated" (1997:76). Feminists who believe that they have completely freed themselves from the system which they are trying to change and oppose, would indeed be reluctant to recognise similar oppressive practices as the ones they try to disrupt within their own thought. Grosz believes that feminism should have matured enough by now to be able to sustain critique, for only if it can recognise its own inconsistencies can it guard against unwittingly endorsing insidious violent hierarchies within its own ranks. 'Traditional' Western feminism has already had to deal with criticism from Third World feminists for being racist, even though such allegations have been largely ignored by white feminists. By equating the category 'woman' with white, middle-class and/or heterosexual women, white feminism has, for instance, often reconstructed within the feminist movement structures of oppression equal to those they reject within patriarchy, something which Alice Walker terms "white female chauvinism" (cf. Smith, 1977:197). In "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", Barbara Smith stresses that "[t]he mishandling of Black women writers by whites is paralleled more often by their not being handled at all" (1977:172). She subsequently criticises Elaine Showalter, in her review essay on literary criticism for *Signs*, for stating that the best work produced in the field of feminist literary criticism is "exacting and cosmopolitan" (1977:172), despite the fact that Showalter's essay, according to Smith, is neither, for she fails to mention "a single Black or Third World

woman writer [...] to cite her questionable categories" (1977:172). In her essay entitled "Racism – A White Issue", Ellen Pence also criticises fellow white, American feminists for their treatment of women of colour and their refusal to accept racism as part of their own heritage:

As white women, we continually expect women of color to bring us to an understanding of our racism. White women rarely meet to examine collectively our attitudes, our actions, and, most importantly, our resistance to change. The oppression of men toward women is in so many ways parallel to the oppression of white women toward women of color. Asking a Black, Indian, or Chicana woman to define racism for us or to lay bare the historical background of Third World people's experience in this country is what allows us to continue our resistance to change. The history of racism in this country is white history, we know it, it is the story of our parents, grandparents and ourselves. Why do we call upon those who have suffered the injustice of that history to explain it to us? (1982:46).

The fixed category 'woman' within white feminist ranks, clearly does not necessarily include all women and to a great extent already problematises the idea of a 'fixed' female identity. Many feminists have criticised Derrida for wanting to destabilise the female subject and female identity, claiming that women have never really been allowed to have their own identity. In "Envy: or With Your Brains and My Looks", Rosi Braidotti, for instance, writes that "one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted" (1987:237). Yet who decides upon this new identity of the female subject? Derrida does not shy away from the fact that identity is valid and indeed necessary within certain circumstances and with specific goals in mind (cf. Chapter 2). Yet in wanting to fix or conclusively define female identity one imposes upon different females exactly what has been imposed upon them during ages of patriarchal oppression. In other words, Derrida

has no problem with females uniting in order to fight some political battle, but one cannot and should not indelibly fix female identity within certain brackets, for that would pave the way for further oppression and the erasure of difference within female ranks. Diane Elam, while thoroughly supporting the feminist struggle against oppression, nonetheless specifies that "identity politics", the phrase she uses for "[t]he politics that proceed from th[e] emphasis on women as subjects, united in a common struggle" (1994:72), can have a negative impact on the way in which difference is treated within feminist circles, for "such politics demand of women that they all join together solely on the basis of what they have in common, so that the difference among women is not just ignored but erased" (1994:72). John Caputo writes, for instance, that "[t]he question of woman, of sexual difference, is many questions about many women, about many differences" (1997:142). Elizabeth Grosz also exhaustively deals with the fact that a subject's position is not something which can be defined with any degree of finality. With regard to the difference between talking as a man and talking as a woman, for instance, she writes that "[w]e may be able to presume (possibly without clear-cut justification) a ready distinction between men and women; but even if we do, it is not clear how any one can contain men and women to speak only in their own voice or as their own sex. This is to ignore or to misunderstand that language itself is the endless possibility of speaking otherwise" (1997:83). If this were not the case, Toni Morrison would, for instance, not have been able to give such a precise and sensitive account of the experiences of Milkman Dead, a man, in *Song of Solomon*.

Post-structuralist, Derridean feminists who subscribe to plurality and difference within identity are often criticised for arguing against 'totality' (cf. for instance Ebert 1991:898). Derridean thought, however, is not as such against totality with respect to political progress.

Deconstruction is a process which moves through certain phases. These should be understood as structural rather than chronological phases and every stage in the process is equally important. In the first phase of deconstruction, the hierarchies within oppositions are inverted. Yet fundamental change to the phallogocentric system is only possible once the second phase is reached. In this phase the emphasis falls on the non-binary logic exemplified by terms such as *différance*, trace and the supplement – and in the case of the feminist, womanist¹ or gender representative discourse, terms such as ‘woman’, invagination and hymen – used by Derrida to disrupt the phallogocentric system and resexualise discourse. The meaning of the term ‘woman’ within these two phases is described by Derrida as follows:

There is one meaning to the word ‘woman’ which is caught in the opposition, in the couple, and to this extent you can use the force of woman to reverse, to undermine this first stage of opposition. Once you have succeeded, the word ‘woman’ does not have the same meaning. Perhaps we could not even speak of ‘woman’ anymore. Of course, these two stages are not chronologically altered. Sometimes you can make the two gestures at the same time, and sometimes you cannot go from one to the other (1984:195).

With respect to the different phases of deconstruction, it is necessary to distinguish between Derrida’s understanding of ‘reactive’ feminism on the one hand, and ‘maverick’ feminism on the other. In an interview with Christie McDonald, Derrida talks about

the inevitable or rather essential presupposition [...] of what one might call the ideological consensus of feminists [...] It is the image of a continuously accelerated

1 In the epigraphs to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker describes a womanist as "a black feminist or a feminist of colour"; a woman who, among other things, is "committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (1983:xi).

'liberation' at once punctuated by an ultimately thinkable telos, a truth of sexual difference and femininity, etc. (1982a:25).

What Derrida means when he talks about sexual difference in this context, is that women tend to accept the 'truth' of their sexual difference as women in the oppositional, binary sense; and within traditional oppositional logic, this opposition is bound to erase sexual difference in the plural sense (which is explained shortly). Derrida is not referring to the fact that difference and equality are supplementary, in other words that the one is inscribed in the other – even though that is automatically implied on another level. What is at stake in this context is the fact that the type of feminism described, also called 'reactive' feminism by Derrida, fights on the same battlefield and with the same weapons as patriarchy and the phallogocentric system. He says that such feminism inevitably leads to a mere reversal of hierarchies and

to entrust everything to it would be to surrender to a sinister mystification: everything would collapse, flow, founder in this same homogenized, sterilized river of the history of mankind [man's kind in the locution, l'histoire des hommes]. (1982a:25).

In other words, only the first step in the deconstructionist process is completed by 'reactive' feminism. Derrida states clearly that he is not against this phase as such, for it is a necessary part of the process of disrupting the phallogocentric system: "Certainly, it is not timely politically, nor in any case possible, to neglect or renounce such a view of 'liberation'" (1982a:25). Yet in this phase of the process of deconstruction, 'reactive' feminism is still clearly making use of the binary logic of the phallogocentric system it is trying to disrupt. Even though Derrida explicitly states that a clean break from the system that one is trying to dislodge is difficult and indeed impossible at this stage, it does not mean that one should stop envisioning a world beyond that system, for such a vision is after all the driving force

behind the whole deconstructionist project. In a certain sense, deconstruction is extremely idealistic – almost utopian – about a future world in which oppositional, binary logic is merely a bad memory. In this world, ‘reactive’ feminism is merely a matrix for feminism in a less phallogocentric guise – maverick feminism.

At the beginning of "Choreographies", Christie McDonald quotes Emma Goldman, a maverick feminist from the late nineteenth century, who once said about the feminist movement of her time: "If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution" (1982a:23). This ‘dance’ is subsequently used by Derrida as a metaphor for what the feminist in the second phase of deconstruction does. It is important to note that Derrida:

spoke of two distinct phases for the sake of clarity, but the relationship of one phase to another is marked less by conceptual determinations (that is, when a new concept follows an archaic one) than by a transformation or a general deformation of logic; such transformations or deformations mark the logical element or environment itself by moving, for example, beyond the ‘positional’ (difference determined as opposition, whether or not dialectically). [...] One could, I think, demonstrate this: when sexual difference is determined by opposition in the dialectical sense [...] one appears to set off ‘the war between the sexes’; but one precipitates the end with victory going to the masculine sex. The determination of sexual difference in opposition is destined, designed, in truth, for truth; it is so in order to erase sexual difference (1982a:33).

In other words, within the confines of phallogocentric, oppositional logic, any attempt at the neutralization of sexual difference inevitably ensures the mastery of phallogocentrism. This is why Heidegger's term *Dasein* cannot be sexually neutral even though he tries to keep silent about issues of sexuality and gender, for silence within the phallogocentric system unavoidably ensures male mastery, just as silence about the existence of women not white, middle-class or heterosexual, ensures the mastery of this type of feminism and

the marginalisation of the Other. Maverick feminism is important, for these women are "ready to break with the most authorized, the most dogmatic forms of consensus, one that claims [...] to speak out in the name of revolution and history" (1982a:27). This woman dreams of a space beyond the current phallogocentric system,

a history of paradoxical laws and nondialectical discontinuities, a history of absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard of and incalculable sexual differences; a history of women who have – centuries ago – "gone further" by stepping back with their lone dance, or who are today inventing sexual idioms at a distance from the main forum of feminist activity with a kind of reserve that does not necessarily prevent them from subscribing to the movement and even, occasionally, from becoming a militant for it (1982a:27).

Holm and Cilliers rightfully claim that "this kind of feminism questions the very notion of sexual identity" (1998:381). In the previous chapter the self-identity of terms within binary oppositions has been problematised. Derrida emphasises the importance of recognising difference within identity. In the male/female hierarchy, for instance, both the male and female should realise that they are supplementary to each other and their own identities depend on the identity of their binary opposite. Within the male term there is always a trace of the female term, and vice versa. Only once this is understood, is it possible to realise "that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity" (Derrida, 1997:14). Reactive feminism tries to demonstrate to the phallogocentric world that an understanding of the marginal term woman is a prerequisite for understanding the male term man. Yet only once it is also understood that the male term can also be traced within the female term can reactive feminism guard against a mere reversal of hierarchies and start engaging in the dance of the maverick feminist.

In his reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs: Nietzsche's styles*, Derrida recognises three sets of propositions or positions in which Nietzsche situates women in relation to truth. A brief look at these three 'propositions' of women will clarify the maverick dance and the dream of a system beyond violent hierarchies. In the first set of propositions, woman is presented "as a figure or potentate of falsehood" (Derrida, 1978:97). Woman is "censured, debased and despised", for unlike man, who has truth within his grasp, who "offers truth and his phallus as his own proper credentials" (1978:97), she stands in direct opposition to truth. Traditional metaphysical logocentrism and phallogocentrism collaborate in their attempt at removing female credibility from their system. In this position, Holm and Cilliers point out, "[f]ull presence is thought of as without the presence of the other; the other is as far as possible, marginalised" (1998:385). In the second set of propositions, woman is also "censured, debased and despised, only in this case it is as the figure or potentate of truth" (Derrida, 1978:97). She is seen as simultaneously guileful and naive and she "either identifies with truth, or else she continues to play with it at a distance as if it were a fetish, manipulating it, even as she refuses to believe in it, to her own advantage" (1978:97). Holm and Cilliers write that 'woman' in this position "is associated with a negative energy – she is the castrating woman. She becomes the searching subject, like the male philosopher, for the truth of woman" (1998:385). This position is similar to the position of the reactive feminist, for she is still trapped within the phallogocentric system despite the fact that she tries to defy it.

It is only in the third position that Nietzsche sees woman as a positive or affirmative force¹, because she functions as:

a dissimulatress, an artist, a dionysiac. And no longer is it man who affirms her. She affirms herself, in and of herself, in man. Castration, here again, does not take place. And anti-feminism, which condemned women only so long as she answered to man from the two reactive positions, is in its turn overthrown (Derrida, 1978:97).

Here Derrida's maverick feminism appears as a disruptive force that is no longer determined by the phallogocentric system. Already in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida identifies 'woman', like writing, as a disruptive force that has been oppressed and treated as a 'dangerous supplement'², but has the ability to explode the system and ultimately reach beyond it in the maverick dance. In this proposition, 'woman' becomes the force that can ultimately successfully thwart the phallogocentric, metaphysical system and the violent hierarchies entrenched in this system. Just like writing, by means of which Derrida disrupts phono- and logocentrism because of the way in which it defers presence, so 'woman' undermines the decidability within the phallogocentric system in which 'man' supposedly warrants full presence. Women in this sense move beyond the binary, oppositional system in which 'difference is denied'. Derrida often uses the term 'woman'³ as a synonym for

1 It must be clarified that these propositions are identified within Nietzsche's work by Derrida and do not necessarily coincide with Derrida's thoughts. Whereas Nietzsche condemns women of the first two propositions, Derrida realises that women in these propositions function in a violent hierarchy as the silenced and marginalised and need to counter this marginalisation.

2 A detailed explanation of this is given as part of Derrida's reading of Rousseau and his belief in what is 'natural' in Part II of *Of Grammatology*.

3 Even though this term is used metaphorically in this sense, it also refers to real woman.

différance because of the way in which it always defers full presence¹ and resists closure.

Holm and Cilliers explain that Derrida's

explicit use of sexual terms such as 'woman' must be seen in the broader perspective of resexualizing philosophical discourse [...] by placing concepts like 'invagination', 'hymen' and 'woman' on par with other notions central to deconstruction, like trace and *différance* (1998:382).

Here, once again, many feminists resist deconstruction because of this undecidable status of the term 'woman' (see for instance Grosz 1997:73-101). Yet contrary to such objections, this/these position(s) of 'woman' do(es) not constitute a loss of identity or a fracturing of what a woman is or can be. John Caputo explains that:

establishing an identity and a place for women, can be made to work for or against women, depending on how it is used. 'Making a place' for women can easily be turned into identifying 'a woman's place.' For the signifier 'woman,' like every signifier, functions contextually, in a fluctuating, shifting environment, bent by the winds of undecidability (1997a:144).

Instead of limiting the possibilities of what women can be, deconstruction opens up a whole new vista of possibilities for women who want to 'dance', for, as Caputo points out, "'Woman' is the name not of a lack but of a 'more' (mère/mehr), always already more than any categorization can identify or more than any gender-role assigned to her" (1997a:144). Drucilla Cornell shares this view and calls deconstruction "a philosophy of the limit", by which she means "a philosophy of de-limitation, of delimiting wholes which tend to close

¹ To be sure, 'man' does not ever attain full presence either, but due to the metaphysical history of male mastery, the female term is needed to reinforce this fact to a male audience that prefers to remain oblivious to this reality.

over, of showing relentlessly that systems [...] do not reach closure without violence" (Caputo, 1997a:145).

The maverick feminist or Dionysiac woman no longer functions as the complete opposite of man, but is free to explore many voices and aspects of her gender and sexuality. If one takes seriously the fact that difference is always implied within identity, clear-cut binary oppositions no longer have breathing space. Elizabeth Grosz points out that Derrida carefully distinguishes

between sexual opposition and sexual difference, between a binary structuring of the relations between the sexes into a model of presence and absence, positive and negative, and a nonbinarized differential understanding of the relations between the sexes, in which no single model can dictate or provide the terms for the representation, whether negative or positive, of all the sexes (1997:88).

In *Women in a Beehive*, Derrida makes clear that the 'gift' is "impossible" and "forbidden by the dual opposition" (1984:198). He advocates difference, which "can be an indefinite number of sexes" (1984:198). Whereas "opposition is man/woman"(1984:198) and has always been determined by society, sexual difference is heterogeneous and indetermined. With respect to sexual difference and the gift, "[w]e are in the order of the incalculable, of undecidability which is a strategic undecidability where one says 'it is undecidable because it is not this term of the opposition or the other'" (1984:199). By this, Derrida does not mean that the gift is only possible "beyond sexuality" (1984:199). He merely suggests that "the gift is beyond sexual duality" (1984: 199). In *Choreographies*, Derrida speaks of a relationship between the sexes that is no longer governed by sexual opposition in the metaphysical, phallogocentric sense:

The relationship would not be asexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of nonidentified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual,' whether he [sic] be classified as 'man' or as 'woman' according to the criteria of usage (1982a:39-40).

Derrida's dream of a gift beyond dual sexuality, where there is a multiplicity of sexually marked voices, has clear utopic undertones, and "[t]he risk is always present that the displacement will not have the desired effect of pointing to a beyond of the current system, but it is a risk which must be taken by deconstruction and, [Drucilla Cornell argues], by feminism" (Holm & Cilliers, 1998:391). In other words, whereas this dream does not put us beyond our current political struggles – it is after all still just a dream – our actions can be guided by it. Our political agenda must constantly be reevaluated if this dream is taken seriously. Literary writing, as a form of social criticism, is responsible both for letting the previously silenced female voice be heard, and for giving a multiplicity of sexually marked voices their breathing space freedom. In conclusion to their article on deconstruction and feminism, Holm and Cilliers point out that Derrida is

committed to the exploration of the possibility of an other kind of writing which is feminine, but only when the very limits of the system can be questioned in the process. This includes the notion of a specifically women's movement and the questioning of the status of the beyond which is invoked in the ideals to which feminism aspire. This endeavour will indeed 'seem paralysing to those who only recognise politics by the most familiar road signs', and it does not provide a formula for any political programme. The complexities of social contingency demand that we re-invent our

quasi-utopian vision as we go along. For such decisions, as well as their successes and failures, we have to bear the responsibility. This is not an easy undertaking, but it constitutes a challenge we can hardly avoid (1998:392).

In her fiction, Toni Morrison takes up this challenge in her portrayal of racialised, capitalist, phallogocentric societies. She depicts complex characters and offers no easy answers as to how these characters should be read, yet her fiction makes clear that she wants all voices to be heard and that she accords no voice ultimate presence or allows it to dictate final meaning or closure. Her novels are 'dialogic' or 'polyphonic' in the Bakhtinian sense, because she presents a multiplicity of distinct voices who are all entirely valid on their own¹. By giving all her characters a voice, Morrison maintains her struggle, as Paul Gray puts it, "against the use of racial categories, or any categories, as a means of keeping groups of people powerless and excluded" (1998:2). Her critique of specifically patriarchal gender categories allows her to give both the excluder and the excluded within the traditional male/female violent hierarchy a voice in showing that the one needs the other for his or her self-definition and identity. In her novels, she rejects the male/female violent hierarchy in numerous ways. In this study, the focus is on how patriarchal oppression affects both the male and the female within the respective restrictive gender roles prescribed by patriarchy. Morrison illustrates these effects of patriarchy by depicting many instances of male domination. In the novels chosen for the study, the effects of these unfair structures of dominance are seen, for instance through Morrison's depiction of the pariah – a person shunned by the community, but simultaneously used by them in establishing their own

1 For a definition of the difference between the monologic and dialogic novel, see Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929, expanded ed. 1963). Many critics have demonstrated how dialogic meaning is produced in Morrison's novels. See for instance Deborah Sitter's "The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*", *African American Review*, 1992, 26(1):17-29.

identities. Morrison investigates the difference between Self and Other and shows that the outer difference, the 'Look'¹ from the outside and one's own views of the Other, inevitably play an important role in one's own identity formation.

Patriarchy and oppressive gender role stereotypes exploded

In the 'both/and' tradition of deconstruction, Toni Morrison employs both reactive and maverick feminism in her attempt to destabilise violent hierarchies. It should be emphasised that the word 'employ' is used here, for Morrison has made it clear on numerous occasions that she finds the category 'feminist' limiting. When asked whether *Paradise* could be called a 'feminist' work, for instance, Morrison says:

Not at all. I would never write any 'ist' [...] In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it [...] I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things. (1998a:3-4).

In this respect her opinion resembles that of Derrida, and she is clearly a dionysiac woman who wants to take part in the maverick dance. But in order to be able to do this, she firstly has to side with reactive feminists in denouncing restrictive gender role categories in order to ensure that violent gender hierarchies do not continue entrenching themselves. She is fierce in her rejection of oppressive gender role stereotypes and all her novels explore the

1 In "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's fiction", Cynthia Davis discusses the effect of the Sartrean 'Look' on identity formation in Morrison's first three novels. Davis explains that, according to Sartre, "human relations revolve around the experience of 'the Look,' for being 'seen' by another both confirms one's reality and threatens one's sense of freedom" (1982:324). For a detailed explanation of "The Look", see Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956:252-302.

effects of patriarchy upon both the disadvantaged and advantaged parties in the traditional logocentric male/female binary opposition. Both men and women define themselves and are defined in terms of their so-called opposite. In *Paradise*, for instance, the attempted mass murder of the Convent women is to a great extent the result of male unwillingness to accommodate the female voice and opinion, both from within and without. Female warnings are not taken seriously, because, as Morrison writes, "they were just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise" (1998:201-202). 'Paradise', however, like Derrida's 'gift', is an impossible dream within the dual opposition. It is imperative that subjects recognise difference within identity, for if people cannot accept that they have an inner and other difference within themselves, they inevitably oppress and stand in a violent hierarchy towards the Other. In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Morrison talks about young people who appeal to an old, wise woman to "[t]ell [them] what it is to be a woman so that [they] may know what it is to be a man" (1993c:273). Knowing and understanding the one side of the male/female binary opposition is clearly a prerequisite for knowing the other.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove embodies the ultimate excluded, black, female, proletarian Other. When she is born, the first thing her mother, Pauline Breedlove – who is obsessed with images of white beauty – recognises about her, is her ugliness: "But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (1993a:126). Throughout her life, Pecola is made aware of her ugliness and difference. The traditional female gender role stereotype dictates that a woman should first and foremost be beautiful before any of her other characteristics are recognised. Black women are even more

encumbered by this dictum, for they not only have to live up to patriarchal standards of beauty, they are also bombarded by images of 'white beauty'.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is deeply affected by these distorted images of beauty. The belief in her innate ugliness is instilled in her from an early age by her mother. Susan Willis's assessment of Pauline underscores the predicament of the black woman who is constantly confronted with white bourgeois society:

As housemaid in a prosperous lakeshore home, Polly Breedlove lives a form of schizophrenia, in which her marginality is constantly confronted with a world of Hollywood movies, white sheets, and tender blond children. When at work or at the movies, she separates herself from her own kinky hair and decayed tooth. The tragedy of a woman's alienation is its effect on her role as mother. Her emotions split, Polly showers tenderness and love on her employer's child, and rains violence and disdain on her own (1987:86-87).

Pauline's preoccupation with physical beauty, Morrison writes, "originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (1970:123). Every member of the Breedlove family has an unswerving belief in his or her ugliness, and "although it did not belong to them" (1993a:38), "[n]o one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (1993a:38). As Pecola grows up, she hides behind her ugliness, "[c]oncealed, veiled, eclipsed – peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask" (1970:39). At school, she is "ignored or despised [...] by teachers and classmates alike" (1993a:45). Pecola's 'ugliness' is underscored by her foil, Maureen Peal, a beautiful, rich, "high-yellow dream child" (1993a:62), who, unlike Pecola, enchants everyone she meets. Pecola convinces herself

that if she had blue eyes, she would stop being ugly: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that [...] if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (1993a:46).

It is significant that Pecola's idea of ultimate beauty resides in the Aryan dream of blue eyes. Throughout Morrison's novels, female characters struggle with such images of white beauty imposed upon them from the outside world. In *Sula*, for example, Nel's mother Helene Wright tries to 'improve' Nel's broad, flat nose. On their return from Nel's great-grandmother's funeral, Helene, for instance, instructs Nel: "Don't just sit there, honey. You could be pulling your nose" (1993a:28). In *Paradise*, Anna Flood, the daughter of Ace Flood, one of the patriarchs who founded Ruby, is harassed about the fact that she refuses to straighten her hair. She is convinced that the women of Ruby disapprove of her "mostly because of her unstraightened hair" (1998:119) and "[s]he felt as though they were discussing her pubic hair, her underarm hair. That if she had walked completely naked down the street they would have commented only on the hair on her head" (1998:119). In "Black Hair/Style Politics", Kobena Mercer traces the connection between beauty, racism and black hairstyles:

Distinctions of aesthetic value, 'beautiful/ugly,' have always been central to the way racism divides the world into binary oppositions in its adjudication of human worth.

Although dominant ideologies of race (and the way they dominate) have changed, the legacy of this biologizing and totalizing racism is traced as a presence in everyday comments about our hair. 'Good hair,' used to describe hair on a black person's head, means hair that looks 'European,' straight, not too curly, not that kinky (1990:249).

Similarly, Helene Wright's wish to change her daughter's nose, and Pecola's dream of having blue eyes, result from this 'biologizing racism'. Morrison writes that "racial self-loathing" (1993b:211) is implicit in Pecola's desire for blue eyes. Even though manifestations of racial hierarchies are dealt with in chapter 5 of this thesis, it is important to note the impact that these ideals of white beauty has on the black woman. Pecola's desire for blue eyes is after all an indirect manifestation of her mother's obsession with white, *female* beauty. Pecola believes that if she looked like the "little pink-and-yellow girl" (1993a:109) – the daughter of the white people Pauline works for – who has blue eyes, her mother would also comfort her the way she comforts the little white girl. As a female, she cannot deal with her dismal family circumstances by running away like her brother Sammy. Instead, "[r]estricted by youth and sex, [she] experimented with methods of endurance" (1993a:43).

One of these methods of endurance is her attempts to make herself disappear. Yet unfortunately, in her own mind, she succeeds in doing this with every single body part except her eyes: "Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear" (1993a:45). Pecola fails to make her eyes disappear because she believes that her ugliness is the result of her eyes. After all, the God in *The Bluest Eye*, (described by Pecola's father Cholly), is "a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes" (1993a:134). This white, male God symbolically negates the beauty of the black race, and stands in a violent hierarchy towards woman. By his very appearance, it is clear that this God, like Soaphead Church (the paedophile, pseudo psychic and spiritualist whom Pecola asks for blue eyes) and his ancestors, approves of a world in which white beauty is

privileged and consequently endorses Pecola's wish for blue eyes. This wish, and her "binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her" (1993a:46), gradually remove her from reality.

She is eventually pushed over the brink of sanity by her father. He rapes her in what is partly an attempt to overcome his feelings of inferiority as a poor black man (though this should not in any way be seen or used as a justification of rape). Like Pecola, Cholly is unable to live up to the gender role stereotypes prescribed by patriarchy. This is seen, for instance, when what should be Cholly's first, innocent, sexual experience turns into a humiliating nightmare. He and a girl, Darlene, are discovered in the act of making love by two white men. These men order them at gunpoint to "get on wid it. An' make it good" (1993a:148). The humiliation is too much for Cholly to bear, but instead of projecting his anger at the white men, he despises Darlene:

Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. [...] For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. *The one whom he had not been able to protect* (1993a:150-151 – emphasis mine).

Within patriarchy, the male is expected to be the 'protector', and when Cholly fails in this task, he projects his anger towards the female whom he believes to have failed. Because Darlene witnesses his failure to protect, Cholly makes her the object of his rage, because it is easier to vent his frustrations at the female within the traditional hierarchical structure than actually making the oppressor the recipient of his outrage.

Cholly's hatred of the female, however, can also be read in a different way. Whereas the white oppressors choose to victimise the black man in the traditional white/black violent

hierarchy, the black man, in turn, chooses to oppress the black woman, who is his inferior in the traditional patriarchal male/female violent hierarchy. This violent hierarchy manifests itself in numerous ways, notably the male tendency to sexually impose himself on the female. This is seen, for instance, when Mr. Henry (the McTeer family's boarder) tries to violate Frieda McTeer or when Soaphead Church's sexually abuses little girls. Both these instance of child abuse foreshadow Cholly's rape of Pecola.

Cynthia Davis points out that Cholly hates Darlene because she fails to exist only for him:

That she too is image in the white man's eye is so much worse, for he had counted [...] on her existing only for him, seeing him as he wanted her to, being *his* object and *his* subject. The desire to protect her was the desire to create himself as her protector. All he can do to restore his selfhood was to deny hers further (1982:330).

Davis's assessment of Cholly's motives should not be read as a diatribe against men as such. Instead, it is an aggressive attack against patriarchy, because patriarchy allows Cholly to believe that he has a right to dominate and possess the female. Because Cholly's identity in actual fact depends on female identity within the confines of a non-hierarchical logic, he feels that the only way in which to confirm or restore his own identity, is to deny the female a part of her identity. More about this shortly.

Cholly's rape of Pecola is also a selfish attempt to possess her in order to restore his own identity. His rage at himself for being unable to protect her from the harsh world that convinces her of her own ugliness, and his rage against this system, unfortunately culminate in him making the very person he wants to protect from the system once again the victim of that system. Black women occupy the lowest position in the hierarchical network, and are thus openly victimised. A good description of the type of discrimination and conde-

scension women have to brave in their everyday existences is given when Morrison talks about the lives of Cholly Breedlove's Aunt Jimmy and her two friends Miss Alice and Mrs. Gaines:

White women said , "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." [...] When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim (1970:138).

Morrison has always shown a great interest in the ways in which the Oppressor manifests itself in the Oppressed. In other words, by victimizing the ultimate black female Other, Cholly unconsciously aligns himself with the system that has taken everything from him. This idea is best expressed in *Paradise*, where Consolata, the woman who creates a refuge for other broken women in a convent, tells Mavis, one of these women: "Scary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside" (1998:39). In *Paradise*, Morrison also criticises Deacon Morgan, one of the founding patriarchs of Ruby, and the grandson of one of the original founders of Haven, for becoming exactly that from which the initial "one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen" (1998:13) were trying to escape. When looking for a place to make their home, these original 'freedmen' are rejected by everyone they come into contact with:

Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from the Negro towns already being built (1998:13).

Their whole purpose in founding a town of their own is to escape from such unfair treatment and to create an unprejudiced environment in which all of them can live in peace. Yet when Deacon Morgan, descendent of these original founders, victimises the Convent women

whose only crime has been that of being different, he becomes exactly that which his grandparents despised:

[H]is long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenceless, the different (1998:302).

Similarly, by raping Pecola, Cholly becomes that which he actually despises. This theme is often addressed in Morrison's novels – specifically also with respect to the male/female violent hierarchy. In *Sula*, for instance, Helene Wright is scorned by two soldiers for folding under the pressure of racial oppression by giving the white conductor on the train a self-denying smile. The two black soldiers, who witness the conductor's prejudiced behaviour and Helene's smile, project their anger towards Helene rather than the white man:

Behind Nel was the bright and blazing light of her mother's smile; before her the midnight eyes of the soldiers. She saw the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble (1982:21-22).

Similarly, in *Song of Solomon*, Guitar Bains vents his anger at Pilate Dead after she plays the role of the submissive black woman in order to get him and her nephew Milkman released from prison. Because Guitar is unable to openly express his anger towards a system in which black people are discriminated against, he not only projects his anger towards Pilate, he also joins a secret vigilante organisation – the seven days – which kills a white person every time an innocent black person dies.

Like the soldiers and Guitar, Cholly vents his frustration at being defenseless against the injustices of a logocentric, hierarchical system, on Pecola. Just before he rapes her, Cholly wonders:

Why did she have to look so whipped? [...] The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet (1993a:161).

His own inability to protect turns him into a monster. Morrison describes him as someone who is "[d]angerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt [...] Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose" (1993a:159 – 160). Yet this mental freedom which allows him to become the monster who rapes his own daughter, hardly mitigates the act. In fact, Morrison warns against such freedom and Cholly's act is presented as the most heinous of crimes and condemned in severe terms. From the perspective of the reactive feminist, Morrison thoroughly denounces "this most masculine act of aggression" (1993:215), which is one of the direct manifestations of the male/female violent hierarchy in *The Bluest Eye*. Yet by showing the impact of a violent hierarchy on both poles within the opposition, Morrison takes part in the dance of the Maverick feminist who tries to move beyond binary logic.

Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, can be read as an exploration of the dionysiac woman taking part in this maverick dance. Morrison describes Sula as being "perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing" (1976:15), which is exactly what the Maverick feminist has the freedom to do. Furthermore, Deborah McDowell writes that "Morrison's novel, *Sula* (1973), is rife with liberating possibilities in that it transgresses all deterministic structures of opposition" (1988:79). One of the most important of these structures of opposition is of course the exploded male/female violent hierarchy.

This is firstly done by exploring the power of female friendship. In the patriarchal world, friendship between women has, Morrison argues, never been

a suitable topic for a book. Hamlet can have a friend, and Achilles can have one, but women don't, because the world knows that women don't choose each other's acquaintanceship. They choose men first, then women as second choice (McKay, 1983:428).

By making female friendship the focus of her novel, Morrison consciously avoids ultimate male presence and centrality, and by so doing criticises restrictive gender role stereotypes that are endorsed by phallogocentric, binary logic. Morrison simultaneously invokes numerous bipolar oppositions and problematises any clear choice between either pole in an opposition. Deborah McDowell writes about *Sula*:

The narrative insistently blurs and confuses [...numerous] binary oppositions. It glories in paradox and ambiguity beginning with the prologue that describes the setting, the Bottom, situated spatially in the top. We enter a new world here, a world where we never get to the 'bottom' of things, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions (1988:80).

The narrative revolves around the female characters Nel and Sula who are best friends and who rely on each other for self-definition. Respectively, Sula and Nel both represent different poles in binary oppositions – whereas Sula embraces change, thrives on new and different ideas, and rejects community values, Nel thinks that "[h]ell is change" (1982:108), and is described by Morrison as a "conventional woman, one of those people you know are going to pay the gas bill and take care of the children" (1976:12). Sula rejects traditional patriarchal gender role stereotypes, whilst Nel complies with them. Yet both these women are essentially unfulfilled because they give preference to one pole in the male/female binary. Whereas Sula's rejection of traditional mores is so severe that she has trouble accommodating male difference within her identity (more about this later), Nel assumes the role of the typical nesting woman who lives for her children and her man, and

consequently relies more on patriarchal objectifications of her Self than on her female Self, when shaping her own identity. Karla Holloway writes, for instance, that Sula and Nel are "choosing or rejecting various degrees of their feminine potentia (Sula's is an extreme away from the traditional, Nel's is the extreme of the traditional)" (1987:76).

Nel's mother, Helene Wright, was brought up by her grandmother and taught to hate her own mother, Rochelle, "a Creole whore" (1982:17), for who she is and what she represents. Helene does everything in her power to stifle Nel's imagination in an attempt to ensure that Nel does not follow in the footsteps of Rochelle: "Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (1982:18). Yet when Nel meets her notorious grandmother, she is greatly impressed by her warmth. This is seen, for instance, when Rochelle tightly embraces Nel just before she leaves, and Nel subsequently tells her mother: "She smelled so nice. And her skin was so soft" (1982:27). As a result of this meeting, Nel starts recognising her own identity for the first time. Having returned from her trip with Helene to her great-grandmother's funeral, Nel whispers: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (1982:28). Her meeting with her grandmother can be read as the symbolic awakening of that part of her identity which has been repressed by patriarchy. Helene conforms to the traditional, Western, patriarchal notions of female sexual restraint and tries to instill these ideas in Nel. Yet as a young girl, before she accepts her role as complaisant mother and wife, Nel's true female identity is awakened by both her grandmother and Sula. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos explains that the feelings of great loss symbolised by Rochelle's final embrace

[reflect] the separatism among women caused by polarized and largely Christian, male-created images of the feminine; the women lose their roots and connections, their continuity (1982:53).

Helene rejects these roots and tries to protect Nel from them. Yet Nel needs some outlet for her repressed imagination and is thus drawn to Sula Peace and her sexually liberated matrilineal line. Morrison writes that "[t]he Peace Women simply loved maleness, for its own sake" (1982:42), and Sula, her mother Hannah, and her grandmother Eva have no qualms about expressing their sexuality. Sula grows up with a mother who enjoys sex and makes love frequently and with as many men as she pleases. From this she draws the conclusion "that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (1982:44). Even Eva;

old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter (1982:41).

In other words, there is a distinct difference between the ways in which Nel and Sula respectively are brought up to interact with males and express their own sexuality. As a little girl, Nel is still open to the possibilities of a sexually unrepressed individuation of her feminine self, which is, as shown, seen when Nel comes to an awareness of her self and says "I'm me": "'Me,' she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, 'I want [...] I want to be [...] wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful'" (1982:28-29).

Her desire to be wonderful is the result of her fascination with her grandmother with the exotic accent, "gardenia smell and canary yellow dress" (1982:25). This desire is further kindled by Sula and Nel feels more at peace in Sula's "woolly house", than in the "oppressive neatness" (1982:29) of her own home.

This all changes, however, once Nel meets Jude, when she closes the door on her own inward journey towards sexually liberated womanhood. Morrison contrasts Nel's childhood sensuality with her repressed adult womanhood.

Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, "[t]o break through repressed female sexuality, Morrison contrasts images of stifled womanhood with girlhood sensuality" (Willis, 1987:88). Morrison reveals a difference between the way in which Claudia McTeer, whom Susan Willis calls "the author's childhood alter ego" (1987:87), and women like Geraldine and Pauline Breedlove approach sensual experience and sexuality. Geraldine, for instance, fakes her orgasms, which Willis notes, is a way in which "the woman negates her pleasure for the sake of her husband's satisfaction, thus defining herself as a tool of his sexual gratification" (1987:88). In contrast, Willis writes:

Claudia shows a resistance toward the overdetermination of sensual experience, which, as Morrison sees it, is the first step towards repression. Openness to a full range of sensual experience may be equated with polymorphous sexuality, typified by the refusal of many young children to be thought of as either a boy or a girl (1987:88).

The polymorphous sexuality Willis refers to can be equated with the multiplicity of sexually marked voices which Derrida dreams of once oppositional, binary sexuality has been overcome. As a child, both Claudia McTeer and Nel Wright have the potential of developing their uncategorised sense of sensuality into eventual mature, unrepressed female sexuality. Willis explains that "[t]he refusal to categorize sensual experience – and likewise sex – captures the essence of unrepressed childhood, which Morrison evokes as a mode of existence prior to the individual's assimilation into bourgeois society" (1987:88-89).

Unfortunately, Nel completely accepts bourgeois society's formula for female behaviour, and this is why, when Jude eventually leaves her, Nel at first thinks that even if she cleans the whole house and feeds the children like a 'good' woman, her thighs would have to be empty. She asks Jesus: "[A]re you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days all the way, O my god, to that box with four handles with never nobody settling down between my legs [?]" (Morrison, 1982:111). Unlike Sula, whose sexual expression is not attached "to social definitions of female sexuality and conventions of duty" (McDowell, 1988:83), Nel conforms completely to societal regulations and is thus unable to express her sexuality once Jude has left her¹. McDowell writes that Nel's "definition of self becomes based on 'absolute' moral categories about 'good' and 'bad' women" (1988:82). These categories result in Nel's separation from Sula, something which, according to McDowell, is anticipated in one of the narrative's early descriptions of them:

Nel is the color of "wet sandpaper," Sula is the "heavy brown" (52), a distinction that can be read as patriarchy's conventional fair lady / dark woman, virgin / whore dichotomy, one reflected in Sula's and Nel's separate matrilineages (1988:82).

In her role as 'good' woman, Nel at first turns to Jude who needs someone "to care about his hurt [...] and if he were to be a man, that someone should no longer be his mother" (1982:82). Nel is the perfect surrogate mother. Philip Page writes that "Jude does not want an equal partner in Nel, but someone who will mother him" (1995:70). Karla Holloway, in turn, points out that Jude only marries Nel "in reaction to his need to define his male

¹ It should be noted that she nonetheless still has the potential to overcome these restrictions, something which, Morrison implies, she does at the end of the novel. More about this shortly.

role" (1987:74). Jude, the patriarchal male, is only interested in the female to the extent that his own ego benefits from it and does not realise that this type of violent hierarchy has a negative impact on both him and the female he uses. This is part of the reason why Jude eventually betrays Nel with Sula and leaves her. Yet Nel herself is also partly responsible for the breakdown of their marriage. She enters the marriage without fully knowing herself¹, for she never continues the process of individuation she started as a little girl. Karla Holloway writes that, at the end of the novel, when, after having realised that she has lost her dearest friend Sula, Nel cries "We was girls together" (Morrison, 1982:174), she actually means "I was a female child, I was woman-in-potentia, and I lost it" (Holloway, 1987:67). When Nel eventually loses Jude, her journey towards individuation as a woman who can function beyond the restrictive patriarchal gender role stereotypes is resumed, even though she does not at first realise this. The fur ball which, after Jude leaves her, starts hovering just out of view to the right of her, can be read as a symbol of this possibility to give her imagination free reign and think the 'unthinkable' the way Sula does. Morrison writes that Nel:

didn't want to see it, ever, for if she saw it, who could tell but what she might actually touch it, or want to, and then what would happen if she actually reached out her hand and touched it? (1982:110).

Because her female imagination has systematically been driven underground by both her parents and husband, Nel is terrified of the possibility of 'reaching out and touching' her female Self. She relies too heavily upon the security offered by her traditional gender role

1 Karla Holloway points out that it is ironic when Nel cries "But Jude .. you knew me" (Morrison, 1982:104), after he betrays and abandons her, for "she did not know herself" (1987:73).

and the loss of Jude initiates "a disorientation of the complacent, socialized self; [... which] perhaps suggests the totality of her dependence upon conventional sex roles" (Grant, 1988:99). Holloway writes that it is Nel's potential to fully explore her female selfhood which "gathers itself into a ball of fur and follows [her] through her adulthood" (1987:75). The ball of fur disappears only at the end of the novel, once Nel recognises Sula as her friend: "A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (Morrison, 1982:174). Holloway argues that when Nel cries "We was girls together" (1982:174), she actually realises that she has denied herself a great deal of her 'female Self'. In other words, Holloway writes, Nel's cry means: "we were 'woman,' and this is what I've lost" (1987:78).

Although Sula is much more in touch with her 'female Self', she also represses an important part of her identity, because she cannot embrace male difference within her identity. For Sula, embracing this male difference within her identity entails understanding that, as much as male identity can only be defined if the female pole in the male/female binary is acknowledged, so she needs to acknowledge the male pole within her identity. Exactly what this male difference within her identity is, Sula needs to determine on her own. Like Cholly, who is "[d]angerously free" (1993a:159), Sula becomes a dangerous pariah, because she has trouble defining herself in terms of anybody but herself. Morrison writes: "And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (1982:121). Though this theme is explored in greater detail shortly, it should be noted that the reason why both Nel

and Sula¹ are unfulfilled as women, is because they both stand in a violent hierarchy towards males. Whereas Sula, like Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon*, chooses to go on her quest for selfhood on her own, at first refusing to acknowledge the male pole in the binary within her identity, Nel allows patriarchal rules regarding female behaviour to dictate her choices in life². Both allow one pole in the male/female hierarchy to dominate their existences.

One of the reasons for this is that both girls grow up without a nurturing male role-model in their lives. Eventually both women are also rejected by the men that they love. The absence of this nurturing male force, is symbolised, for instance, by the "closed place in the water" (1982:101) where Chicken Little, the boy who drowns after having been thrown in the river by Sula, disappears. Philip Page writes:

As opposed to the differences in these female pairs, the men in Nel and Sula's lives are similar but also paired: each woman lacks a brother or male friend, each has an

- 1 There are many conflicting critical viewpoints on Sula's identity and status as a woman in society. Whereas Karla Holloway argues that Sula is not affected by other definitions of herself because she functions as "the source of her own power" (1987:73) and eventually dies "with a sense of herself intact" (1987:76), Deborah Guth claims that Sula's freedom from the community has little meaning for her, because she "refuses to attribute meaning or relate to the implications of her behaviour" (1993:577). Guth refers to Sula's "failed journey toward selfhood" (1993:579). This thesis integrates the two viewpoints to show that Sula's journey towards selfhood is successful in the sense that she does not allow her own identity to be dictated by restrictive patriarchal gender role stereotypes, yet is lacking because she does not acknowledge the male pole in the male/female binary opposition within her own female identity.
- 2 This, for instance, is one of the reasons why Nel cannot understand and forgive Sula for having slept with her husband. Once she finds out about Sula and Jude's affair, she becomes the typical aggrieved widow, knowing exactly "how to behave as the wronged wife" (Morrison, 1982:120). Yet what she does not realise is that Sula actually saves her from a marriage in which she has had to give up all the potential and enthusiasm she has shown as a child. Because she subscribes to traditional gender role stereotypes, Nel does not at first realise that it is the loss of her friend Sula which aggrieves her more than the loss of her husband. In the end she understands this and says: "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" (1982:174).

absent father, and each has her most significant heterosexual relationship with a self-doubting man who departs abruptly (1995:63).

Despite the fact that the Peace women love men, the Peace household is run by women – and for very good reasons. Patriarchy makes it almost impossible for most women (and men) to achieve non-binary selfhood within the male/female violent hierarchy. One of the reasons why Sula is ostracised by the black women living in the Bottom, Medallion, is because she has not been broken by the injustices of abusive relationships and oppressive family circumstances:

She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck (Morrison, 1982:115).

Eva, the matriarch of the Peace household, knows the realities of such relationships. After having survived being married to the abusive Boy-Boy, she ensures that her family is never again exposed to the selfishness of male mastery. Morrison writes that Boy-Boy "did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (1982:32). After Boy-Boy leaves, Eva takes over complete responsibility for the survival of her offspring and relinquishes her stronghold to no male. Like Eva, Sula's mother Hannah does not like to be controlled by men. Hannah has sex with as many men as she pleases, but she does not often allow men into her bed, for "sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment" (Morrison, 1982:44), and she is obviously not prepared to make such a commitment. So, like Nel, whose father is a lakeman "in port only three days out of every sixteen" (1982:17), Sula grows up without male interference.

The absence of positive male role models in the novel can be read as a direct attack against patriarchy which almost exclusively produces domineering male chauvinists. Yet the men in the novel also suffer at the hand of patriarchy. The town lunatic Shadrack, for instance, completely falls apart because of the horrors he witnesses as a young boy during World War I. In order to cope with the unexpectedness of death and to make "a place for fear as a way of controlling it"(1982:14), Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day. On each January third, he parades through the streets of the Bottom with a cowbell and a hangman's rope, inviting everyone to "kill themselves or each other" (1982:14). Shadrack believes that "if one day a year were devoted to [death], everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free" (1982:14). Chikwenye Ogunyemi argues that Shadrack and his National Suicide Day symbolise "the nihilistic and suicidal tendencies of twentieth-century man with his World Wars" (1979:132). Like Shadrack, Eva's son Plum returns from World War I a broken man who tries to retreat to infancy through a heroin addiction. Ogunyemi writes that "[h]is name, Peace, expresses a longing for the elusive element which an embattled world fails to give him" (1979:132). Shadrack and Plum are victims of exactly the phallogocentric system which Derrida tries to deconstruct. Similarly, in *Paradise*, Morrison criticises war and the effects thereof on both men and women. In fact, she wanted to call the novel *War*, but Knopf, her publishers "feared the title *War* might turn off Morrison fans" (Mulrine, 1999:1). The war in *Paradise* is the war waged by a group of patriarchs against those who are different and who threaten their supposed purity as race: "To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (Morrison, 1998:5). Yet the effects of the World Wars and the Vietnam war are also felt by the people living in Haven and later in Ruby.

Soane and Deek Morgan's sons Scout and Easter, for instance, die in the Vietnam war. Even their mother endorses the idea of war: "How proud and happy she was when they enlisted; she had actively encouraged them to do so" (1998:100). Jeff Fleetwood, in turn, returns from Vietnam wanting "very much to kill somebody. Since he couldn't kill the Veterans Administration, others just might have to do" (1998:58). Likewise, "Harper Jury's boy, Menus, [has been] drunk every weekend since he got back from Vietnam" (1998:83)¹. The system which made the World Wars and the Vietnam war possible is the same system that allows the 8-rock men to become exactly like those people who initially rejected them on grounds of their skin-colour. This system is rejected and deconstructed by Derrida because it is rooted in oppositional logic that regards difference as opposition. Oppositional logic inevitably produces violent hierarchies, which function as the matrix for all structures of dominance and oppression. In other words, Shadrack, Plum, Easter and Scout Morgan, Menus Jury and Jeff Fleetwood are the casualties of oppositional, phallogocentric power structures. Like Cholly Breedlove, whose predicament is partly the result of his inability to live up to male gender role stereotypes, these men are unable to live up to stereotypes of male courage which require them to appreciate the 'glory' of defending one's country whilst killing the opposition. Morrison's critique of restrictive gender role stereotypes clearly extends to her male characters as well.

This is seen best in *Song of Solomon*, where Morrison makes a male character the focus of

her novel. She portrays the mythic journey of a man, Milkman Dead. Her choice of gender

1 To be precise, Menus started reaching for the bottle after the 8-rock men forced him to "give back or return the woman he brought home to marry" (Morrison, 1998:195), because she was light-skinned. Colourism and its connection to racism is dealt with in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

enables her to criticise and dismiss the traditional male mythic structure which allows the male hero to fulfill his quest without incorporating and embracing the female voice. Morrison juxtaposes Milkman's quest for self and community with his cousin Hagar's inability to achieve independence and her ensuing death. One of the reasons for Morrison's portrayal of the differences between the respective journeys of Milkman and Hagar, is, as Michael Awkward explains, "in order to expose phallogocentric myth's failure to inscribe usefully transcendent possibilities for the female" (1990:494). Awkward explains that *Song of Solomon*

is a record both of transcendent (male) flight and of the immeasurable pain that results for the female who, because of her lack of access to knowledge, cannot participate in this flight. In breaking the monomythic sequence, Morrison provides the possibilities for a resistant feminist reading which suggest the consequences of male epic journeys: the death-in-life, or actual death, of the female whose only permissible role is that of the aggrieved, abandoned lover (1990:496).

The females in *Song of Solomon*, most notably Pilate Dead, serve to reinvent this male mythic journey with respect to the female. Phallogocentric history has laid down certain fixed guidelines controlling gender roles, and both men and women have suffered in the process. Yet as a result of the hierarchical structure which grants men full presence, women have inevitably had to endure more because they were the objectified Other in the opposition, and their identity had to be denied in order for men to claim and explore this 'full presence'.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's characterisation of Geraldine shows exactly how stifling traditional phallogocentric gender role stereotypes can be for women who accept them. Geraldine's family is the black version of the typical Dick-and-Jane family which, as

Ogunyemi writes, is "a white American ideal of the family unit – cohesive, happy, with love enough to spare to pets" (1977:112). Even though this ideal is not and cannot be a reality under any circumstances, women like Pauline Breedlove and Geraldine try to live up to them and do this by rejecting and marginalising someone lower in the hierarchy. This ideal is what Morrison criticises in *Paradise*, which she wrote primarily because she could not understand why "paradise necessitates exclusion" (Mulrine, 1999:1). The dream of the Dick-and-Jane family is unattainable because it is a paradise built upon the premise of exclusion (especially the exclusion of those who do not measure up to this ideal), which, in turn is the result of oppositional, binary, either/or logic. Ogunyemi writes that "Geraldine, the symbol of what Hernton calls the 'old black bourgeoisie,' with her clean house belongs to the only black family in the novel that draws near this ideal, but she is not happy" (1977:112).

Geraldine herself is not so much an individual as a stereotype. Morrison describes her as one of a great group of women who knows how to get rid of the "dreadful funkiness" of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (1982:83). On the surface, they are the perfect wives, for, Morrison explains:

They never seem to have boyfriends, but they always marry. Certain men watch them, without seeming to, and know that if such a girl is in his house, he will sleep on sheets boiled white, hung out to dry on juniper bushes, and pressed flat with a heavy iron. There will be pretty paper flowers decorating the picture of his mother, a large Bible in the front room. They feel secure (1982:83).

Men are drawn to these women because they know that when they marry them they will be taken care of the way their mothers took care of them. Yet what these men do not know, is that this type of girl "will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world,

and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and doily, even against him" (1982:84). Like Helene Wright in *Sula*, these women do not allow any form of sexual 'funkiness' to seep into their lives. When making love, these women "will wonder why they didn't put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place – like the armpit, for example, or the palm of the hand. Someplace one could get to easily, and quickly, without undressing" (1982:84).

When Geraldine meets Pecola, she immediately associates with her everything she hates and rejects about lower class black people. When looking at Pecola, Geraldine is convinced that these types of

girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of their caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. [...] Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house (1993a:92).

In the rigid hierarchy of beauty, wealth and race which Geraldine, like Pauline Breedlove, unquestioningly endorses, Pecola does not live up to any of these artificial standards and thus occupies the lowest rung on the hierarchical ladder. Philip Page explains:

As *The Bluest Eye* examines the predicament to which a divided America relegates African Americans, it also delineates the splits within African-American culture and the effects of those splits as that culture responds to the unyielding pressures of subjugation. It portrays a social hierarchy primarily of females (from Maureen Peal down to Geraldine and on down to Pecola), based on their approximation of white standards of beauty, behaviour, and wealth (1995:52).

Women like Pauline Breedlove and Geraldine become the female advocates of patriarchy, and by making someone like Pecola their scapegoat, they endorse the very system which

has caused them to be the repressed females they are. Thus, before it is possible to move beyond patriarchal hierarchies which need some inferior in order to sustain themselves, reactive feminism, paradoxically, has to be utilised in order to disrupt both male and female complicity in patriarchy. Consequently, Morrison firstly employs reactive feminism when she rejects traditional patriarchal and phallogocentric gender role stereotypes in both *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*. In these novels Morrison depicts characters who adhere to these stereotypes and forfeit their true selfhood in the process. Once these stereotypes are shown to be fraudulent and stifling, one can consciously move beyond mere reactive feminism, and take part in the maverick dance by admitting to the play of *différance* within identity.

The recognition of difference within identity

Morrison criticises clear-cut oppositions, binary logic and the ensuing violent hierarchies in all her novels. In the novels chosen for this study, she uses various methods to explode these violent hierarchies. Her pariah characters, for instance, are used to establish a difference within the identity of all those whom they oppose or are measured against. The pariah is needed by the rest of the community for self-definition, which of course immediately implies an outer difference within their identities. So, for instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, the ultimate black female Other, is used by the community to boost their own egos. Claudia McTeer, the first person peripheral narrator, writes: "All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (1993a:205)¹.

1 Chikwenye Ogunyemi notes that the theme of the scapegoat runs through the novel: "Geraldine's cat, Bob the dog, and Pecola are the scapegoats supposed to cleanse American society through their involvement in some violent rituals" (1977:116). These scapegoats – Pecola, the cat with the blue eyes who is victimised by Geraldine's son, and Bob the repulsive old dog who is offered so that Pecola's prayer for blue eyes can be answered – with Cholly, Pauline and Sammy Breedlove, are the antitheses to the typical happy Dick-and-Jane family that Morrison describes in the opening of her novel. Their inability to live up to the Dick-and-Jane standards of white beauty and happiness, sets them apart from

Similarly, in *Sula*, the community's conviction of Sula's evil assures them of their own 'good', for, as Chikwenye Ogunyemi writes,

she can be considered a catalyst for good in the society [...] As long as she is alive, she maintains a truce among [the community's] diverse, disgruntled people, since her presence encourages a holier-than-thou attitude in her antagonists and unites them against her (1979:130-131).

In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate Dead, the woman without a navel, functions as a pariah from the day she is born. Whenever people discover the truth about her navel they start ostracising her, terrified of being "in the company of something God never made" (1987:144). Similarly, in *Beloved*, Sethe is shunned by the community, but unlike Pilate, who is ostracised because of a physical abnormality, Sethe is spurned because of killing her baby girl, an act which ironically puts her on par with the evil white slave-owners from whom she tries to save her child. Finally, in *Paradise*, like the Peace women in *Sula* and Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter in *Song of Solomon*, the convent women are the pariahs of Ruby because they refuse to conform to patriarchal, community mores.

Though much can be said about Morrison's pariah characters as such, in this study, and more specifically in this chapter, a brief analysis of the way in which the pariah is used to explode the male/female violent hierarchy in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* is made at this point. Having explored this, more specific attention is given to female difference within male identity and vice versa.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove, as a black female in a patriarchal world in which female beauty is vital for acceptance, is a pariah figure within a male/female violent society as ugly scapegoats.

hierarchy. Because she has never felt loved and accepted, Pecola becomes obsessed with the idea that she will obtain other people's affections if she lived up to white, male standards of beauty. Yet her conviction of her own ugliness and her desire for beauty (in the form of blue eyes) make it impossible for her to recognise how beautiful she really is. Morrison writes: "[S]he would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (1993a:46-47). Pecola, in other words, "becomes what she perceives" (Page, 1995:74) – internalising the Sartrean 'Look'¹. Cynthia Davis observes:

Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world, the light-skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and on and on. The temptations to Bad Faith are enormously increased, since one's own reification can be 'escaped' in the interlocking hierarchies that allow most to feel superior to someone (1982:330).

Pecola's role as female pariah is first identifiable when she is harassed by some boys at school who dance around her, singing: "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekke²" (1993a:65). Morrison writes that the boys

had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own fathers had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant (1993a:65).

Within the male/female power hierarchy, these boys comfortably use Pecola when defining themselves, for, her position as lowest in the hierarchy, gives them a feeling of superiority.

1 In *Beloved*, Morrison specifically talks about the righteous white "Look", which "every Negro learned to recognise along with his ma'am's tit" (1997:157). Devi Sarinjeive points out that the 'look' as recurring theme in *Beloved*, "signifies the objectifying practice of psychological domination and control" (1998:288).

2 Chikwenye Ogunyemi asserts that the boys' insinuation that Pecola had seen her father naked, becomes "a tragic irony when her father later rapes her" (1977:117).

Their feelings of racial inferiority are best vented by making Pecola the scapegoat – the 'blackest'. Once again the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Their reference to her naked father also asserts Pecola's position as female in a society dominated by male sexual aggression.

Unlike Pecola, who cannot defend herself against the attack of the boys because she unconditionally accepts external male definitions of herself, Sula, in a similar incident, has exactly the opposite reaction to male victimization. She rejects male definitions of the female and when, as little girls, she and Nel are harassed by a group of boys, she cuts off the tip of her finger, saying: "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (1982:54-55). Unlike Pecola, Sula does not grow up in a house that is threatened by male sexual aggression. Karla Holloway writes that Sula's "sexuality is not threatened by aggressive males; she cuts off the tip of her finger (the symbolic phallus), warning of her disregard for their sexuality" (1987:72).

Pecola does not have any emotional support in terms of friends and family, so, unlike Sula, she is unable to defend herself against the boys. Pecola also believes everything that the boys' rhyme implies about her. It is significant that her only reaction to their abuse is to cover her eyes: "She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands" (1993a:66). Pecola instinctively tries to cover her eyes as the symbol of her so-called racial inferiority and ugliness as female.

The only people who accept and love Pecola are three prostitutes who are rejected by the community (even by the men who make use of their services) because, like Sula and the Convent women in *Paradise*, they dismiss traditional gender role stereotypes and prescrip-

tions about female sexual behaviour. Whereas the men who patronise them are accepted within the community, they are ostracised. Chikwenye Ogunyemi explains that their names (Poland, China and the Maginot Line):

evoked the helplessness of France, China, and Poland in the face of the rape by more powerful forces in World War II; they evoke the helplessness of the black race raped, as it were, by the whites (1977:118).

Morrison explodes the hierarchy which rejects these women by means of inversion – whereas they are shunned for their loose morals, unlike the rest of the community, they are the only people who treat Pecola with dignity and show her the affection she deserves. The ‘good’ community is put to shame by these ‘immoral’ women. As pariahs, these women are also needed by the community to establish their own identities and supposed superiority. Philip Page writes:

They are emblems for white society’s construction of African Americans, an unalterably other community that is useful to the dominant society as a reminder of the latter’s superior position (1995:45).

That the people who ascribe to traditional patriarchal gender role stereotypes rely on the pariah status of these women in order to be able to establish their own identity, thoroughly undermines their superiority.

Similarly, Pecola’s role as pariah serves to help the community define themselves. Claudia McTeer’s closing remarks about Pecola best express this role:

We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. (1970:205).

The very fact that a person in a position hierarchically superior to another should need the inferiority of the Other in order to reinforce his or her superiority, undermines and explodes the very core of the traditional hierarchy. In other words, the fact that superiority can only exist with the simultaneous existence of inferiority, invalidates the power pyramid of superiority and the hierarchy self-deconstructs. In *Sula*, the same happens when Sula becomes a catalyst for good in Medallion:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst (Morrison, 1982:118).

Because Sula, like the Convent women in *Paradise*, completely rejects patriarchal values, she is regarded as evil. Her pariah status convinces people of their own moral superiority, which implicitly negates this very superiority. Barbara Smith writes that "[t]he town reacts to her disavowal of patriarchal values by becoming fanatically serious about their own family obligations, as if in this way they might counteract Sula's radical criticism of their lives" (1977:178). In other words, Sula's criticism of their lives, in that, unlike them, she refuses to accept any fixed patriarchal gender role stereotype (except for her one attempt at becoming the typical adoring female for Ajax), has a positive effect. If Sula causes so much good in the community, she certainly cannot be all bad. It is thus not surprising that, before Sula dies, she asks Nel what made her think she was the 'good' girl of the two: "How you know it was you? [...] I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (1982:146).

Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove needs Cholly for the same purposes that the community in the Bottom need Sula. She thrives on his sins, for they amplify her 'goodness'. She uses him 'to clean herself on', in the same fashion as everyone uses Pecola.

Morrison writes:

If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus (1993a:42).

Yet the fact that she needs him for her identity as a 'good' and upright woman, establishes the difference of his male identity within her identity. In other words, she is no longer his absolute binary opposite. The same can be said, however, of Cholly:

No less did Cholly need her. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact (1993a:42).

Here he uses Pauline in the same way that he used Darlene and later uses Pecola – namely to restore his own bruised identity by denying hers.

Despite the fact that Cholly and Pauline unconsciously need one another, they nonetheless stand in a violent hierarchy towards each other. Both of them define themselves in terms of their opposite, yet neither of them understands this. If they had been willing to consciously admit to the fact that they define themselves in terms of each other, they would have recognised the other's difference within their own identities and the violent hierarchy would have been exploded. Once the female understands that fighting for her identity is

not exclusive of the 'male identity',¹ and fighting for 'male identity', in turn, is not exclusive of 'female identity', the male/female violent hierarchy self-deconstructs.

Both men and women need to move beyond clear-cut binary oppositions to be able to take part in the maverick dance (after all, beyond the confines of phallogocentric, binary logic, both men and women can take part in this dance). This is why Sula falls apart when she is deserted by Ajax. At first, their relationship is not hierarchical – they talk to and inspire each other as equals: "They had genuine conversations. He did not speak down to her or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities" (1982:127-128). But because Sula has, "no center, no speck around which to grow" (1982:119)², like Sethe in *Beloved* who "didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (1997:164), she does not know how to accommodate the one man she falls in love with. Because she has neither witnessed nor been involved in any male/female relationship that counters the hierarchical structure of binary oppositions, she cannot sustain the one relationship that has the potential to move beyond oppositional logic. Just as Sula begins to understand that she is in love with Ajax and starts feeling possessive towards him, she thinks:

I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud? (1982:131).

- 1 In order to communicate with a questionable legacy of modernity, a Derridean approach sometimes has to revert to essentialist phrases such as 'the male identity', though these terms should be read as if under erasure.
- 2 Maureen Reddy argues that Sula's lack of center causes her to want to imitate Nel: "Sula's deepest desire is to *be* Nel [...] The wish to be Nel is what drives Sula into her sexual experimentation with Jude" (1988:37), and her eventual transformation into the domestic woman, is also an attempt to emulate Nel.

The water and soil can be read as metaphors for the male and female poles within the binary opposition. Whilst they need to stay individual, both need to accept each other as necessary supplements. Unfortunately neither Sula nor Ajax can live up to this requirement.

Sula's predicament can be better understood by looking at some secondary critical perspectives. In *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos and Karla Holloway disagree about how Sula should be read. Demetrakopoulos argues that Sula's identity is forged vis-à-vis a male principle, saying that "[e]xcept for Nel, she has no identification with other women or with her own feminine self" (1987:58). Holloway, on the other hand, writes:

I see a fundamental contrast in the book: two women, one (Nel) defined through this male principle, and the other defined through an internal well of self-identity. Sula's individualism is so extreme that she scorns male definitions (1987:68).

Demetrakopoulos's reading is based on her interpretation of the Christian and Greek goddess typology, and she consequently argues that Sula's independence and self-centredness are manifestations of the male archetype and that she "needs to ground herself in the earth and water (home and relationships) to ready herself for the salty wisdom that comes in the second stage of life for the older woman" (1987:58). To a certain extent, both of these readings are relevant for this study. Firstly, Demetrakopoulos's view that Sula's identity is forged vis-à-vis male archetypes, is inaccurate within the context of this thesis, because these so-called male archetypes (qualities like independence and self-interest) are phallogocentric constructions which may just as well be attributed to the female. Holloway, in other words, does have a point when she argues that Sula functions as "the source of her own power" (1987:73), yet this is exactly why she falls apart when Ajax deserts her in the

end. Because she does not acknowledge the trace of male identity within her own identity, she does not know how to interact with the one man whom she loves once she is confronted with the responsibility of standing in a mature male/female relationship with him. When Eva asks Sula when she is planning to get married and have babies, she answers: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (1982:92). Whilst this is a valid wish to have, Sula's inability to recognise the play of *différance* within her own identity makes her selfish and dangerous. At an early age Sula learns that "there was no other to count on; [... and] no self to count on either" (1982:118-119)¹. Because she has no respect for herself or an 'other', she becomes dangerously free, which is why she can place Eva in a nursing home and watch her mother Hannah burn to death with objective interest. When responding to Sula's assertion that she wants to make only herself, Eva says: "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man" (1982:92). Even though Eva's remark is misguided and stems from restrictive patriarchal ideas about how women should behave, her assessment of Sula's selfishness is correct and implies Sula's inability to recognise her male supplement. Similarly, when Demetrakopoulos argues that Sula should ground herself in the home and relationships, her observations are restricted by phallogocentric gender role stereotypes, yet are accurate in that Sula does need to move beyond the fixed male/female binary opposition before she can interact with fellow human beings on a mature level. In other words, female individuation can also take place within the home or relationships and even though women have the fullest right to choose to live without men, they cannot deny the presence of the male trace within their own identities. Morrison does

1 She loses her faith in any 'other' when she overhears her mother telling her friends: "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (1982:57). Soon thereafter she also loses faith in herself, when she becomes responsible for Chicken Little's death. This is explained on page 118 of *Sula*.

not want to replace patriarchy with matriarchy, and she simultaneously utilises both reactive and maverick feminism in order to overcome both extremes.

When Sula realises that she is in love with Ajax, she becomes possessive, which can be read as a clear indication of her need for a trace of the male pole in the male/female binary within her own identity. Yet unfortunately, Sula becomes the typical nesting woman and so drives Ajax away.

Ajax, in turn, is also not ready to freely accommodate Sula's difference within his own identity. When he finds her at home with a ribbon in her hair and a clean house, he panics because he realises that she might try to impinge on his freedom: "[H]e knew that very soon she would, like all her sisters before her, put him the death-knell question 'Where you been?'" (1982:133). It is significant that when he realises this, he tries "to remember the date of the air show in Dayton" (1982:134). Like Jake in *Song of Solomon* who took flight without considering the impact of his act on those who were left behind, and Milkman who goes on his quest for self-knowledge without confronting the consequences of his desertion of Hagar, Ajax, who is obsessed with flying and airplanes, abandons Sula without worrying the least bit about the impact this will have on her. Yet unlike Milkman, Ajax does not reach an understanding of his act of abandonment and the consequences thereof. It is at this point that the reader learns that Ajax's name (Ajax is a hero of the Trojan War¹) is in fact Albert Jacks, which deprives him of his heroic status.

1 For a discussion of the significance of the names in *Sula*, see Karen Stein's "I didn't even know his name: Names and Naming in Toni Morrison's *Sula*"; *Journal of the American Name Society*, 1980, 28:226-229.

Like Ajax, Jude Green is concerned only with himself. When he marries Nel, he thinks that "[t]he two of them together would make one Jude" (1982:83). He clearly stands in a violent hierarchy towards his female partner, for he tries to swallow her whole identity in order to complete himself. By depicting this relationship and eventually showing how and why it falls apart, Morrison effectively explodes the hierarchy and takes part in the maverick dance.

The best illustration of Morrison's depiction of the maverick dance is seen in *Beloved*, in which she tries to make the silenced voice of the black, female slave heard. Deborah Horvitz argues that the ghost-woman "Beloved stands for every African woman whose story will never be told" (1989:157). Morrison got her inspiration for the novel from two separate historical events. Firstly, she was inspired by a newspaper clipping about a fugitive black slave woman, Margaret Garner, who tried to kill her children in an attempt to save them from the horrors of slavery. She succeeded in killing only one of them before she was caught¹. Secondly, Morrison's imagination was sparked by the story of a young girl who was shot by her ex-boyfriend at a party. When the people asked her what had happened to her, she kept saying "I'll tell you tomorrow. I'll tell you tomorrow" because she wanted her ex-boyfriend to get away (cf. Naylor, 1985:207). In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison explains why these two incidents inspired her:

Now what made those stories connect, I can't explain, but I do know that, in both instances, something seemed clear to me. A woman loved something other than herself

¹ To be precise, Morrison discovered a copy of a newspaper clipping entitled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child" in 1974 as she edited *The Black Book*. This book chronicles 300 years of black history in America, and the article on Margaret Garner appears on page 10.

so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself (1985:207).

Morrison is fascinated by the human ability to love so selflessly, something which she says is "peculiar to women" (1985:208). By loving another so deeply, one displaces one's Self. Morrison says she tries to "project the self not into the way we say 'yourself,' but to put a space between those words, as though the self were really a twin or a thirst or a friend or something that sits right next to you and watches you" (1985:208). This is best depicted in the relationships between the respective male and female slaves and ex-slaves in the novel, for most of these people either have an understanding of the internal gender difference within their identity, or come to an understanding of this fact during the course of the novel. The male/female gender hierarchy amongst the black slaves in Morrison's novel is not as prominent as in the white communities.

In *Beloved*, the male/female violent hierarchy manifests itself mainly in the relations between white and black, and master and slave. The women in the novel suffer as the oppressed primarily because they are women who are possessions in a world of white male hegemony. The black men and women function as equals because they are in the same predicament as slaves who are dehumanised and victimised beyond all bounds of human endurance. There is no male/female violent hierarchy unless as a manifestation of the white male gender role. So, for instance, Paul D, a slave, at first misunderstands his role as man because, as Deborah Sitter explains, "he locates manhood in an objectified image of another" (1992:24). Because he is defined as a 'man' by Mr. Garner, his original owner at the ironically named farm Sweet Home in Kentucky, Paul D at first accepts the American white male definition of manliness. Paul D initially thinks that he has done many manly

things, like eating "raw meat barely dead" and crunching "a dove's breast before its heart stopped beating" (1997:42). Sitter explains that the qualities Paul D at first associates with manliness "include strength, courage, and endurance [...] but they are directed at maximizing the power of the individual to dominate weaker beings" (1992:24). In other words, manliness for the traditional white male thrives within a violent hierarchy of power and domination. In his quest towards selfhood and understanding, Paul D has to come to terms with real manliness, a manliness which respects all living beings and does not need the marginality of others as proof of its existence. His friend and fellow slave Sixo is a 'true' man in this respect, because he describes Patsy, his "Thirty-Mile Woman" (1997:24) as follows:

She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind (1997:272).

Only once Paul D, like Sixo, can see himself on equal terms with Sethe, the fictional equivalent of Margaret Garner, and he can "put his story next to hers" (1997:273), can he come to terms with himself. In other words, the black male and female slaves cannot exist in a violent hierarchy towards each other if they want to become authentic human beings. In paralleling the stories of Paul D and Sethe, Morrison embraces the dream of the maverick feminist. The gender hierarchies in *Beloved* are exploded in that they show how women and men can move on equal ground because difference does not imply opposition.

Similarly, in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison underscores male and female equality and difference by simultaneously utilising reactive and maverick feminism as she dreams of a gift beyond sexual opposition in the phallogocentric sense. Morrison explodes the

gender hierarchy anchored in patriarchal gender role stereotypes by showing the effect of these stereotypes primarily on the marginalised black female, but also on the black male. By looking at both poles within the male/female binary, Morrison shows how men and women do not, in fact, stand in opposition towards each other. This clearly reveals that both women and men can only attain a true sense of selfhood and take part in the maverick dance if they recognise that this is only possible beyond a phallogocentric system which regards difference as opposition.

CHAPTER IV

An ongoing revolution

The aim of this chapter is not to provide a Marxist reading of *Song of Solomon*¹, but to explore the way in which Morrison explodes class hierarchies in this novel. Marxism, like deconstruction, is not a homogeneous set of ideas which pertains only to the theoretical work of Karl Marx. In fact, Marxism has been employed and reworked in many different guises by many different philosophers and theorists who would call themselves Marxist and the term is not limited only to the work of Karl Marx. Marxist literary criticism, for instance, is a "twentieth-century phenomenon" (Selden, 1985:23). Even Marx's own work cannot be regarded as a homogeneous 'text', for, Derrida notes,

we cannot consider Marx's, or Engels's or Lenin's texts as completely finished elaborations that are simply to be 'applied' to the current situation. [...] No more than I have dealt with Saussure's text, or Freud's, or any other, as homogeneous volumes (the motif of homogeneity, the theological motif *par excellence*, is decidedly the one to be destroyed), I do not find the texts of Marx, Engels or Lenin homogeneous critiques (1981b:63-64).

The subject of Karl Marx's philosophical theory and its subsequent philosophical and theoretical history could fill a library. Within the context of a dissertation such as this, it is impossible to provide even a brief survey of the field. It is thus necessary to narrow down the term Marxism to the philosophical theory of Karl Marx and the advocates of this theory (unless otherwise specified), of which only a cursory overview is provided. The main thrust of this chapter is to examine the way in which Morrison dismantles violent class hierarchies

1 For a Marxist reading of *Song of Solomon*, see Susan Willis's "Eruptions of Funk" in *Specifying*, 1987:83-109.

in *Song of Solomon*. To do this, a brief outline of the relationship between Marxism and deconstruction is required, for they are not mutually exclusive theories or binary opposites and can benefit from each other. Roy Boyne, for instance, points out that

Marx's polemic against the skewed opposition between theory and practice can be seen as an instance of deconstruction: the prestige of theory is challenged and made subject to the formerly derivative realm of practice (1990:126).

Similarly, deconstruction's subversion of hierarchical class structures can be seen as contributing to the revolutionary Marxist class struggle.

Marxism and deconstruction

Marxism is a materialistic political theory stipulating that people's actions are determined by socio-economic factors and that historical change in society is brought about by the interaction of different economic and social classes. Karl Marx's opening statement to the *Communist Manifesto* summarises its main argument: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggles" (1985:79). Marxists view law, morality, religion and art to be in the service of the dialectical class struggle. Marx bases his theory on the idealistic 'Thesis - Antithesis - Synthesis - Schema' devised by Georg Hegel. With this schema Marx tries to explain history by showing that it is determined by dialectical economic relations. So, for instance, in Medieval Europe, the landlord was the thesis and the serf the antithesis, and the dialectical tension between these two resulted in a synthesis - the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, in turn, became a thesis which produced its own antithesis - the proletariat. Marx believed that this dialectical class struggle would, after revolution, culminate in a classless society consisting only of workers. Marx wanted to liberate humanity, but in order to achieve that, he had to postulate an inexorable law of

dialectical historical materialistic progression, determining the future course of events fully. Marx claims that the ideological superstructure of reality - law, morality, religion and art, (and in post-modern Marxism, language) - is one-sidedly determined by its historical economical substructure.

The discrepancies between the Marxist and deconstructionist projects already become apparent. Whereas Marx tries to *explain* reality in terms of a historical economical substructure, Derrida *interprets* it within specific (unsaturated) contexts. Johan Degenaar explains the difference between Marxism and deconstruction as follows:

Deconstruction is a strategy of irony which explores the meaning of a sign in terms of the ever-changing intertextuality or interwovenness of signs. Marxism is a method of explanation which assumes that the political perspective is not one amongst many but rather "the absolute horizon of all interpretation" (1990:164).

Yet the fact that Marx wants to *explain* reality whereas Derrida wants to *interpret* it is misleading, for the two thinkers actually both try to elicit social change through their respective *explanations* and *interpretations*. Marx's statement, that "[p]hilosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Selden, 1985:23), is not as far removed from Derrida's deconstructionist project as it might seem. Deconstruction is involved in changing discourse by exposing structures of dominance therein and by subsequently exploding the violent hierarchies within which these structures of dominance thrive. Oppressive class structures are after all also violent hierarchies which the deconstructionist sets out to subvert.

Degenaar tries to establish a dialogue between deconstruction and Marxism in terms of their respective handling of four basic signifiers: text, history, politics and revolution.

Degenaar explains that "Marxism claims that one needs a foundation to understand a sign while deconstruction allows for a plurality of interpretations" (1990:165). Whereas Marxists maintain that the text is "a site of struggle" which is controlled by the substructure of socio-economic relations, the deconstructionist argues that "the text is an intertextual event" (1990:166). The deconstructionist has also broadened the term text "to refer to any set of signs which has to be interpreted" (1990:165). Degenaar notes:

Important is that deconstruction can also use the Marxist description without reducing it to a class struggle analysis while the Marxist cannot allow for the open-endedness entailed in the intertextuality of texts (1990:166).

Furthermore Degenaar argues that respectively, Marxism and deconstruction view history differently. Whereas the Marxist sees history as an ongoing dialectical process, the deconstructionist "views it in terms of the ongoing interweaving of signs" (1990:166).

Marianne de Jong explains that history is always experienced and reported and consequently viewed through the ideological lens of the reporter. She writes:

Nietzsche's often quoted remarks on 'Nachträglichkeit' state that one always speaks after the fact. In order to speak of an experience as such, in order to relate it in its immediacy, we have to speak of what we remember of it. This seems to be the structure of 'telling what has happened'. In this the object has disappeared - it has in fact 'become history'. History has become an object of reference in a story (because it is over, it is the past) (1989:224).

In addition, de Jong points out that "[m]odern theory of ideology takes as its premise that we are all ideologised so that, in terms of Althusser, it is impossible to speak as a subject of self-reflective closure whose presuppositions are 'I know what I say', 'I mean what I say', or 'I am referring to this or that'. To refer one has to be within ideology" (1989:224).

To summarise, it is clear that history is always reported, something which can only be done through language (cf. the discussion on the rise of the linguistic turn in Chapter 2) and within language the power-structures of domination are manifested. Gayatri Spivak, who "is often called a feminist Marxist deconstructivist" (cf. de Jong, 1987:361)¹ has pointed out that the complicity between the reader and the text can be described as the position, commitment or 'stand' of the reader. In this sense her understanding and application of deconstruction is significant. Marianne de Jong explains Spivak's claims that, "[l]anguage used discursively cannot be closed in by this discourse but bears the traces of its usage, its user and the user's history, biography, sexuality" (1989a:363). From the deconstructionist perspective, history becomes a 'story' or text which has to be read. Unlike Marxists who explain history in terms of the absolute of relations of production, deconstructionists realise that history is a text and that a "final interpretation of texts is impossible since no master code is available to man [sic] who himself is a text which has to be interpreted" (Degenaar, 1990:166). When, in *Beloved*, Paul D wishes to "put his *story* next to [Sethe's]" (1997:273 - emphasis mine), he reinforces the idea that history is always filtered through individual experience. Similarly, in *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison clearly treats history as 'story' which is not only reported, but also twisted and distorted through individual memories. In *Binding Cultures*, Gay Wilentz explores "Morrison's role as African storyteller [and] her use of folklore and the oral tradition" (1992:82) in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison has made it clear that it is vitally important to investigate one's ancestry and not

1 It should be noted that Spivak, like other theorists who call themselves Marxist, has moved far beyond the original theories of Karl Marx in her treatment of Marxism, and would, in view of her 'deconstructivist' position(s), guard against homogenising 'Marxism'.

to lose sight of one's roots. In *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*, she writes, "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (1984:344). *Song of Solomon* details, amongst other things, the search of an alienated young man, Milkman Dead, for his ancestors. This search is primarily made possible through the stories of the African woman storyteller. Wilentz explains that in *Song of Solomon*,

Morrison's role as storyteller is unmistakable, and as one reads, the orature of her foremothers, as well as the oral traditions of the Black community, is evident in both the language and the structure of the novel. [...] what she puts into her fiction, in the manner of the African woman storyteller, is not only the content but the voicings of the stories that were told her (1992:82-3).

Wilentz further explains that although Milkman's aunt "Pilate is unmistakably Morrison's preferred storyteller, the other stories and the differing voices further emphasize the oral quality of the novel" (1992:84). Milkman learns of his ancestry not only through numerous stories told him by different individuals, but also through folk myth and legends such as "the tale of the Flying Africans - who escape slavery by flying back to Africa" (1992:83). In other words, history is presented as story not only by Morrison as novelist who wants to learn more about her African ancestry, but also within the novel by the individuals and different voices who present history through their own filtered lenses. Oral literature exemplifies the distance between history and the actual events of the past, which in turn verifies the deconstructionist claim that history has to be interpreted. Morrison's stories make it possible not only to present history through different voices, but also to strip "off the layers of dominant culture which has hidden both the names and values of 'that civilization which exists underneath'" (1992:97).

A good example of how dominant cultural history imposed itself on Milkman's ancestors in *Song of Solomon*, is the way in which his grandfather, Jake, got the name Macon Dead¹. When he had to register as a freed slave, a drunken Yankee soldier helped him to complete the registry of freed slaves. Milkman's father explains to him: "[T]he Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. He had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon'" (Morrison, 1987:53). Symbolically, it is thus important that Milkman scratches away at the surface of the dominant culture and learns his grandfather's 'real' name, which would steer him away from the 'Dead'-ening materialism which the name implies for him and his father and would bring him into contact with his own cultural heritage. To this end, Milkman has to listen to all the different 'stories' that several characters in the novel share with him.

That history is a 'story' or text which has to be both reported and interpreted, demonstrates that critics who claim that deconstruction is a text-centred, ivory tower theory, with nothing to offer to the realm of politics (as if politics is removed from everything else in the 'world') are misguided and trapped within the intellectual/political binarism and it shows that these critics have misunderstood the Derridean notion of 'text'. When Barbara Johnson asks why one should "not actually translate what deconstruction has done on texts into the realm of historical and political action" (1984:78), she disregards the fact that the 'text' includes the

1 'Naming' is one of the central themes in *Song of Solomon*. For an analysis of some of the names, see for instance Linda Krumholz, "Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*", *Modern Fiction Studies* 1993, 39(3&4):551-574.

realm of historical and political action. There is no rigid opposition between theory and practice in deconstruction, for the one is informed by the other. Degenaar writes:

Politics is the practice of power relations and includes all kinds of domination whether hegemonic or oppressive. One of the contributions of deconstruction to philosophy is its exposure of the way in which patterns of domination are operative in discourse (1990:167).

By exposing the structures of domination in discourse, deconstruction situates itself beyond the confines of the purely theoretical, because changing discourse is a prerequisite for political change. Derrida has made it clear on numerous occasions that "[d]econstruction [...] is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*" (1981b:93 - emphasis in original). Similarly, Marxism tries to intervene and maintains that theory and practice should not be separated. People should not merely theorise¹, but should strive to change the world. Roy Boyne explains that "Marx's belief that people make history even if in circumstances not of their own choosing made possible a much closer relation between theory and practice" (1990:126). Unfortunately, Marxism has fallen prey to oppressive metaphysics by assuming that "the validity and truth of ideas can somehow exist prior to their genuine material instantiation within existing society" (1990:126). Because Marxism is informed by absolutist, logocentric notions of what is 'true' - namely that historical change is determined by socio-economic conditions - it runs the risk of becoming yet another oppressive 'truth', when hierarchies are merely reversed. Boyne explains that

the history of the Marxist movement shows, the power of conceptual hierarchies, like us and them, domination and resistance, science and ideology, is not neutralized by

1 'Theorise' used here in the 'traditional' sense as opposed to action.

climbing from the low side to the high side. [...] If the practical achievements of the Marxist movement are questionable, this perhaps is where the problem lies. In the so-called socialist societies the old oppositions have tended to remain just as unbalanced as they were before. The history of Marxism fails Marx's own test that the truth of its achievement be enshrined in the practical-sensuous world (1990:127).

Following the deconstructionist example, Marxists can guard against this contingency by constantly overturning and displacing the hierarchies, ensuring that difference is not denied and structures of dominance not reinstated. To avoid this, Derrida urges that "we must work to locate [...] metaphysical holds, and to reorganize unceasingly the form and sites of our questioning" (1981b:10). When Boyne mentions the practical achievements of the Marxist movement, it is not entirely clear what he means. Let us assume, for argument's sake, that he refers to communist and socialist distortions of Marx's texts by extremists such as Joseph Stalin and Moa Zedong. Even Lenin has, according to Ryan, misappropriated Marx:

[t]he way in which Lenin's appropriative and manipulative reading of Marx's texts in *State and Revolution* (1917) has become a law instrumental in the oppression of state socialist working classes as well as a slogan for conservative communist parties all over the world, is a lesson in why a critical deconstructive disposition has a salutary effect for leftist theory and practice, especially in that, more often than not, that theory and practice derives its working premises from texts and the interpretation of texts, especially the texts of Marx (1982:160).

Deconstruction problematises the utopian communist ideal of a society in which there is no difference, for such a society can clearly only be sustained by force. With respect to this dream of a future society in which all class oppression is eradicated, however, Marxism and deconstruction have something in common. Just as Marxism is informed by the dream of a classless society, deconstruction is informed by the ideal of the 'gift'. Yet the first

difference between the deconstructionist and the Marxist visions of the future in this sense is that the deconstructionist knows that the 'gift' is an impossibility - something which nonetheless does not prohibit him/her to be guided by it. Another difference is that, unlike Marxism, deconstruction opens up the field of politics to encompass a much larger scope than merely socio-economic relations. Degenaar notes that the most important differences "between deconstruction and Marxism can be expressed by the oppositional terms irony and explanation, pluralisation and totalisation, transformative strategy and program for revolutionary action" (1990:170). Because deconstruction resists any complicity with closure, as a reading strategy, it could facilitate (and, surely, has facilitated, for theorists such as Rahajit Guha and Aijaz Ahmad are known, for instance, as Marxist deconstructionists) worthwhile readings of Marx, which would not, as in Lenin's reading "move Marx's text toward conclusions Lenin himself proposes but Marx in fact contradicts" (Ryan, 1982:160). Instead, it would expose possible violent hierarchies within Marx's work which would lead to closure and consequent oppression of some Other. On a practically political level, deconstruction can take part in the class struggle by "keeping open the question of revolution, because the Leninist party means closing the question, putting the proletariat back to work, and declaring the revolution over after a transfer of power which retains domination" (Ryan, 1982:194). In his assessment of Gayatri Spivak's contribution to explaining how deconstruction can act in a number of politically enabling ways, Bart Moore-Gilbert explains that Spivak is

convinced of the 'affirmative' potential of deconstruction in so far as it can act as a 'political safeguard' by preventing political programmes [...] from reproducing values and assumptions which they ostensibly set out to undermine. [...] Spivak suggests [...]

that while reversal must be effected (one cannot skip this stage), it must be succeeded by displacement of the terms in opposition (1997:85).

This 'displacement' is crucial in any class revolution - a classless society is only possible if difference is recognised, and if one group of people does not dominate and exploit another.

Degenaar explains that both Marxism and deconstruction are revolutionary theories/practices, but whereas in "Marxism the emphasis is placed on the overthrow of the ruling class by the workers with the purpose of utilising the means of production in an equitable way" (1990:169), deconstruction is interested in revolutionising discourse (and consequently ideology) by overturning and displacing structures of opposition. This active displacement of the system is clearly revolutionary. To return to an earlier point made about deconstruction as not being confined only to the realm of the theoretical, Degenaar asks why there should/could not be a shift from a revolutionary reading strategy to revolutionary political action, and explains:

Here again deconstruction would say that there is no necessary connection between revolution in the text on the pages of the book and revolution in the text on the streets of the city. Both cases are examples of texts that have to be interpreted and in both cases deconstruction would signal a warning against all forms of domination, whether totalisation in the practice of thinking or totalitarianism in the practice of politics (1990:169).

Unlike Marxism, deconstruction undermines categorical thinking and does not assume that with the advent of a classless society all forms of domination will necessarily come to an end. Yet with respect to the capital/wage labour, ruling class/proletariat binaries, Marxism has to be given credit for wanting to rupture these as part of a historical process which can

be speeded along by revolutionary action. What sets Marxism and deconstruction apart, however, is that "Marxism believes in a decisive revolution while deconstruction works with the idea of perpetual revolution based on the strategy of transformation - a strategy without finality" (1990:171). In other words, deconstruction does not envisage some future in which there is metaphysical closure - as soon as such a system is reached, it has to be critically re-evaluated and dislodged from within - the revolution never stops. This revolution moves through a never-ending cycle of reversal and displacement of the metaphysical holds and power-structures of domination which manifest themselves in language and govern interpretation.

Marxists hypothesise that there is "a foundation which is assumed to be prior to interpretation and which can therefore act as the basis of interpretation" (1990:172). This foundation is ultimately assumed to be bound up with socio-economic relations and the class struggle. Deconstruction is not averse to the idea that readers and texts are operating from within metaphysical holds - in fact this is the very premise from which it operates. It has already been noted in previous chapters that there is never an easy break from the system one tries to dislodge and the tools of this system often have to be used in order to be able to explode it. Yet the crucial difference between deconstruction and Marxism is that deconstruction tries to expose the power-relations embedded in language, discourse and the greater 'text', by exploding all violent hierarchies, whereas Marxism merely tries to explain history in terms of socio-economic concerns and tries to revolutionise the world through an active class struggle. Marxism endorses the idea that one revolution will end all forms of domination, something which deconstructionists will never accede to. By exploding, that is, reversing and displacing violent hierarchies such as manual/mental

labour, use value/surplus value, First World/Third World, bourgeoisie/proletariat, theory/practice and capital/labour, and subsequently destabilising logocentric logic which produces a discourse which in turn sustains these hierarchies, deconstruction plays an active role in the class struggle and ensures that Marx's 'texts' do not fall prey to absolutist authoritarian readings which merely cause a reversal of hierarchies. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison criticises class structures which ensure the mastery of one group over another by showing how such hierarchical structures 'impoverish' both poles in the opposition.

Exploded violent class hierarchies in *Song of Solomon*

Gayatri Spivak uses the phrase 'repetition-in-rupture' to refer to the danger many subversive political programmes face of merely reproducing values and assumptions which they initially strove to undermine. Moore-Gilbert explains:

The danger of what Spivak describes as this kind of 'repetition-in-rupture' arises from her belief that reversal of the dominant discourse alone [...] involves remaining within a logic defined by the opponent. (1997:85).

Audre Lorde concurs:

... we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (1980:287).

In *Song of Solomon*, a prime example of this kind of 'repetition-in-rupture' is presented. Macon Dead, Milkman's father, emulates white, bourgeois culture and consequently becomes the black equivalent of the white materialist oppressor who has caused his and his ancestors' feelings of alienation. Susan Willis points out that "[t]hroughout Morrison's writing, the white world is equated with the bourgeois class - its ideology and life-style.

This is true of *Song of Solomon* in which Macon Dead's attitudes toward rents and property make him more 'white' than 'black'" (1987:84). In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia mentions that there is nothing worse than being 'outdoors':

Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life. [...] There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go (1993a:17 - emphasis in original).

In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead is in the business of putting people who cannot afford to pay their rent 'outdoors'. So, for instance, when one of his tenants, Mrs. Bains, tries to explain that she cannot pay the rent, because, as she puts it, her "relief check ain't no more'n it take to keep a well-grown yard dog alive" and she has "all them babies" (Morrison, 1987:21) to feed, Macon's only response is to threaten to evict her. When she says that "babies can't make it with nothing in they stomach" (1987:21), he replies: "Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That's where they gonna be if you don't figure out some way to get me my money" (1987:21). Similarly, when a drunken Henry Porter, a "Southside nigger"¹, who rents a room from Macon, positions himself in an attic window threatening to commit suicide with his shotgun, Macon takes out his gun, saying: "I ain't aiming to get him down. I'm aiming to get my money down. He can go on and die up there if he wants to. But if he don't toss me my rent, I'm going to blow him out of that window" (1987:24). Later, when he learns of Porter's relationship with his daughter Corinthians, he evicts him. Macon Dead wields all the power his position as capitalist landlord affords him. He takes advantage of his position as superior within the hierarchy of wealth, treating those 'beneath'

1 Macon discriminates against what he calls "Southside niggers" (1987:203) whom he believes to be entirely superior to, because he owns most of the property that they rent.

him in the same callous way that his black ancestors were treated by white slaveowners.

Susan Willis explains:

For Macon Dead, Milkman's father, all human relationships become fetishized by their being made equivalent to money. His wife is an acquisition; his son, an investment in the future; and his renters, dollar signs in the bank. The human sentiments he experienced as a boy have given way to the emotional blackmail he wages as an adult. Driven by the desire to own property, the basis of bourgeois class politics, Macon Dead uses property, like a true capitalist, for further accumulation through the collection of rents (1987:97).

Macon does everything in his power to acquire and retain middle class status. One of the reasons why he marries his wife, Ruth, is the fact that she is the daughter of the most influential and respected citizen in town - the doctor. Ruth's father has a street named after him, "in recognition of the community's sole source of modern healing and earliest instance of bourgeois achievement" (Benston, 1991:88). Macon regards every key to every house he owns as symbol of his wealth, and after his fierce treatment of Mrs. Bains recalls the first time he went to visit Ruth's father: "He had only two keys in his pocket then, and if he had let people like the woman who just left have their way, he wouldn't have had any keys at all. It was because of those keys that he could dare to walk over to that part of Not Doctor Street (it was still Doctor street then) and approach the most important Negro in the city" (1987:22)¹.

1 Incidentally, Macon misjudges the reason why Ruth's father allows him to see his daughter. The doctor wants to get rid of his daughter, because he has become uncomfortable with the way in which she showers him with affection: "Fond as he was of his only child, useful as she was in his house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling" (1987:23). Macon was the first and best way for the doctor in which to release himself from his daughter's displays of affection, for, as Karla Holloway points out, "he is not only unsure of the quality of her devotion - but also the extent of his dependence on it", yet of course the doctor never explains

Macon is traumatised as a child when seeing his land-owning father murdered by white people: "... they shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches" (1987:235). He cannot cope with the gravity of these events and chooses to ignore them until he ultimately cannot even remember his father's name. He adopts white middle class, materialistic values because he has forgotten his father's real name and chooses to ignore his roots. Philip Page notes:

His servile assimilationism, his accommodation to white standards, his soul-destroying materialism, and his lack of meaningful human contacts all result from his radical dissociation from his past. Having lost all the values of his upbringing in the paradisiacal Lincoln's Heaven, he worships gold instead of his ancestors, and has substituted material objects (keys, property, cars, money) for people. Having lost the land, he has become a landlord. His desiccated life is a dialectical reversal; he has become the opposite of what he longed to be (1995:87).

Macon's acceptance of white, bourgeois standards can thus be read as his unconscious attempt at avenging his father's death. Yet this attempt takes the form of a mere reversal of hierarchies: "Macon tries to redress the crimes committed against his father, not by killing whites, but by outdoing them materially; consequently, he has lost his own spirit and the capacity for love" (1995:87). Though Macon Dead and Guitar Bains, Milkman's poor 'Southside' friend, stand at opposing ends of the hierarchical class divide, they are similar in that both of them try to make up for past wrongs committed against them by merely reversing the hierarchy. Whereas Macon tries to outdo white people materially, Guitar is a member of the "Seven Days", a vigilante organisation which randomly kills a

this to Macon (1987:106), "[w]hich is why Macon Dead still believed the magic had lain in the two keys" (Morrison, 1987:23).

white person for every black person killed. By reversing the hierarchy, both Macon and Guitar uphold a binary structure of domination, and by relishing the power which their new position in the violent hierarchy accords them, do nothing to improve the status quo - they merely start resembling the oppressor. By exposing the hidden agenda/'text' which underlies the (reversed) hierarchies endorsed by these men, Morrison effectively explodes the foothold of these logocentric structures of opposition.

The hierarchical structure in America, which has historically situated black people at the lowest rung of the ladder, operates according to logocentric logic which has as its main aim ultimate presence and closure and indelibly moulds structures of opposition in a fixed cast. When Milkman and Guitar speak to Railroad Tommy, one of the owners of the city barbershop, Tommy cites a long list of what the two black boys will never have:

You ain't going to have no private coach with four red velvet chairs [...] And you not going to have a governor's mansion, or eight thousand acres of timber to sell. And you not going to have no ship under your command to sail on, no train to run (1987:60).

Railroad Tommy's bitter tirade expresses a lack experienced by all black Americans in *Song of Solomon*, a lack which results from the fact that black people are the unprivileged members of a hierarchical society. Yet differences in wealth between individuals and groups do not per se generate conflict, provided people have the bare minimum with which to survive comfortably¹. This becomes clear when examining Macon's sister Pilate who happily lives a life undetermined by wealth. It is only when these differences become the

1 In this respect the Marxist argument that the well-being of individuals primarily depends on whether their most basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter and safety, have been satisfied, is accurate. Yet once these needs have been fulfilled, they no longer determine every decision human beings make.

source of and justification for oppression, exploitation and the abuse of authority (which more often than not happens where money is involved), that violent hierarchies set in.

The one person in this novel who seems to have moved beyond logocentric structures of oppression is Pilate Dead. Even though she is a pariah figure she is at peace with herself and others and accepts people without judging. Unlike Macon's assimilation to mainstream bourgeois culture and the radical separatism of Seven Days member Guitar Bains, Pilate opts for neither extreme:

Through the characterisation of Pilate, Morrison emphasizes the dead-end of both mainstream assimilation and radical separatism by offering an alternative - perhaps not a reconciliation but a more clearly articulated dialectic of the double-self by the acceptance of one's African values and cultural heritage (Wilentz, 1992:86).

In socio-economic terms, Wilentz's interpretation can be broadened to refer to Macon's assimilation to the stifling values of bourgeois culture, on the one hand, and the initial attempts by Guitar Bains to distance himself from it, on the other¹. Pilate offers an alternative to both by being thoroughly unencumbered by socio-economic, commodified values. Macon and his household stand in stark contrast to his sister Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter. Whereas Macon incessantly accumulates material possessions, Pilate lives a noncommodified life: "Pilate's only pretense to property ownership is purely symbolic: a bag of bones, which turn out to be her father's, and rocks, a single one gathered

1 Guitar's rejection of bourgeois values starts as a child, when the white boss responsible for the death of his father offers his mother \$40 to make up for the loss. When his mother buys him a peppermint stick with the money, his insides are turned upside down by the sweetness and what it represents. Like Macon who tells his son that when you own things, "you'll own yourself and other people too" (Morrison, 1987:55), the white man believed he owned Guitar's father and can make up for his death by offering his mother money, which is what causes Guitar's hatred of such bourgeois values.

from every state she has visited" (Willis, 1987:99). Macon tries to separate himself and his family from his sister and her lifestyle. He is constantly embarrassed by her, her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar, because not only do they live a simple life in a small, modest house, but they also sell alcohol to whomever they please without making any attempt at hoarding the money. Morrison writes: "Profits from their wine-selling evaporated like sea water in a hot wind - going for junk jewelry for Hagar, Reba's gifts to men" (1987:29). Yet Macon is nonetheless drawn to her unshackled existence. One night he walks past her house and witnesses what seems to him an almost utopian image of peace and happiness,

he crept up to the side window where the candlelight flickered lowest, and peeped in. Reba was cutting her toenails [...] Hagar, was braiding her hair, while Pilate [...] was stirring something in a pot. Wine pulp, perhaps. Macon knew it was not food she was stirring, for she and her daughters ate like children. Whatever they had a taste for. No meal was ever balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table. Pilate might bake hot bread and each one of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. Or there might be grapes, left over from the winemaking, or peaches for days on end [...] They ate what they had or came across or had a craving for (1987:29).

Susan Willis points out that "[t]he utopian¹ aspect of Pilate's household is not contained within it, but generated out of its abrupt juxtaposition to the bourgeois mode of her brother's household" (1987:98). Yet Morrison nonetheless states that Pilate seems like an unusually large character in the novel, "because she is like something we wish existed. She represents some hope in all of us" (1983:419). Her lifestyle presents some glimmer of hope not only to Macon, who momentarily snaps out of his cold materialistic world, but also to the rest

1 Pilate's household is not merely represented as utopian, but also as chaotic and anarchic.

of the Dead household who suffer under his stern rule: "Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt for his daughters sifted down on them like ash" (1987:10). Pilate's presence represents a link to their ancestors¹, which in turn represents the possibility of learning their name and consequently being relieved of the title 'Dead' and the spiritual deadness which the name implies.

One of the first links established between the respective households of Pilate and Macon, is the birth of Milkman. Rejected by Macon for her seemingly incestuous relationship with her father, Milkman's mother Ruth turns to Pilate to help repair her marriage. Pilate gives her "some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in [Macon's] food" (Morrison, 1987:125). The aphrodisiac has the desired effect and Ruth falls pregnant with Milkman. Yet when Macon learns of his wife's pregnancy, he tries to kill Milkman, after which Ruth once again calls in the help of Pilate, who then ensures that Milkman stays alive². Philip Page notes that "Pilate bridges the gap between the two houses when she abets Milkman's conception and birth, and then Milkman becomes a fully mediating character" (1995:93). Through his connection with Pilate, Milkman's journey towards the discovery of his past and his consequent individuation is set into motion. Because she offers a spiritual antidote to his father's hollow materialism, Pilate keeps Milkman alive not only physically, but also

1 In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", Morrison writes: "In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate is the ancestor" (1984:344).

2 Pilate's status as conjure woman is reinforced in numerous ways throughout the narrative. Gay Wilentz writes: "Pilate also has mystical powers. She is born without a navel, which allows her special privileges as a conjure woman" (1992:86).

spiritually¹. She becomes his metaphorical pilot (a pun on Pilate), in his flight towards understanding². She causes Milkman's birth which represents the first possibility of a search for his ancestors, whereas Milkman, in turn, becomes the link between the two households and through his journey towards selfhood offers a glimmer of hope to his emotionally deprived father, mother and sisters.

From very early on in his life, Milkman is alienated from the community. When, for instance, at the age of four, he discovers

that only birds and airplanes could fly - he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother (Morrison, 1987:9).

The passage clearly implies that there are quite a few women who do hate his mother. Morrison writes that these women "envied the doctor's big dark house of twelve rooms and the green sedan" (1987:9) and did not realise that "the house was more prison than palace" (1987:10). Ruth's socio-economic status causes her alienation and her son's alienation from many people in the community. These people feel personally affronted by the material excesses of the Dead household, just as in *Beloved*, the community cannot cope with Baby Suggs's display of excess when she hosts an elaborate party to celebrate the arrival of her daughter-in-law: "her friends and neighbours were angry at her because

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- 1 Similarly, in the Bible, Pontius Pilate keeps Jesus alive. Milkman, in turn, could be read as a failed Jesus figure and his birth offers the possibility of change and of unity between different groups and hope for all present and subsequent generations.
 - 2 The 'flight' motif is one of the main themes explored in *Song of Solomon* and the narrative is peppered with 'flight' metaphors. Numerous articles have been written on this theme. See for instance Philip Royster's "Milkman's Flying: The Scapegoat Transcended in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", *College Language Association Journal* 1982, 24(4):419-440. Royster also analyses Pilate's role as Milkman's spiritual guide, which will not be fully addressed in this study.

she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (1997:138). David

Lawrence writes:

Her former guests transfer their self-despising outrage at the poverty of their own lives onto the person who dares to dispense such a rare commodity as love with 'reckless generosity'. [...] The oppression enforced by the slaveowners is now perpetuated by the oppressed themselves (1991:193).

Similarly, when Milkman first goes to school the children treat him with the same disdain because of the way in which his mother dresses him:

[H]is velvet¹ suit separated him from the other children. White and black thought he was a riot and went out of their way to laugh at him and see to it that he had no lunch to eat, nor any crayons, nor ever got through the line to the toilet or the water fountain (1987:265).

His clothing elicits the inhospitable social assumption that, because of his affluence, he deems himself better than the black community and on par with the white community, something which neither community wants to accept. The only way in which Milkman knows how to protect himself against the community's animosity towards him, is becoming indifferent, compassionless and, like his father, materialistic and self-centred. Valerie Smith writes that "[h]is steadiness of vision and lack of compassion allow him to abuse remorselessly and unselfconsciously the people around him" (1993:281). At first, he refuses to show any compassion when his parents tell him their life 'stories'. When his father tries to explain to him his aversion to his wife, he wonders: "What the fuck did he tell me all that shit for?" (Morrison, 1987:76). His callous treatment of Hagar also shows

1 For both Milkman and his sister Corintheans, velvet represents the hollow materialism which alienates them from the rest of the community. So, for instance, Corintheans leaves her home in search of a job in order to "escape the velvet" (Morrison, 1987:198).

the excessiveness of his ruthless narcissism. At the end of his search for his ancestors, Milkman realises how cruel he was towards her, even when she tried to kill him:

He had used her - her love, her craziness - and most of all he had used her skulking, bitter vengeance. It made him a star, a celebrity in the Blood Bank; it told men and other women that he was one bad dude, that he had the power to drive a woman out of her mind (1987:301).

Hagar becomes Milkman's 'dangerous supplement', because her role as the wronged woman is necessary for him to prove his superiority as male. Hagar also occupies a position hierarchically inferior to Milkman on the socio-economic scale, yet Morrison nonetheless calls her "a spoiled child" (1983:419), because of her "insulated and pampered childhood" (Demetrakopoulos, 1987:97). Unlike her grandmother, Hagar is not strong, and the first rejection she ever has destroys her. When Milkman rejects Hagar, she says: "Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible" (Morrison, 1987:308). In an attempt to make herself beautiful for her man, she desperately tries to emulate white, bourgeois values. Being brainwashed by a capitalist, consumerist culture which fosters unrealistic notions and desires of beauty, Hagar believes she will rekindle the flame between her and Milkman if she wears the right brand-name clothing, perfume and make-up:

She bought a Playtex garter belt, I. Miller No Color hose, Fruit of the Loom panties - one white, one pink - one pair of Joyce Fancy Free and one of Con Brio. [...]

The cosmetics department enfolded her in perfume, and she read hungrily the labels and the promise. Myrurgia for primeval woman who creates for him a world of tender privacy where the only occupant is you, mixed with Nina Ricci's L'Air du Temps (1987:311).

She tries to fill the void in her life by believing in these false promises of beauty and happiness. Her experience of inferiority and insufficiency leads to this "hollow consumption [...] and demonstrates the way consumer society penetrates and impoverishes human relationships" (Willis, 1987:108). Yet on her return from the shops, Hagar is caught in a rainstorm, her shopping bags are soaked and, as Willis puts it, "her wished-for identity and future - falls into the wet and muddy street" (1987:89). Hagar's attempt to imitate bourgeois values alienates her from her community and family. Willis argues that the end result of both alienation and repression is reification:

None of Morrison's Black characters actually accedes to the upper reaches of bourgeois reification, but there are some who come close. They are saved only because they remain marginal to the bourgeois class and are imperfectly assimilated to bourgeois values. In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar offers a good example ... [her] hysteria and death mark the limits of her assimilation into bourgeois culture (Willis, 1987:90-91).

Hagar's attempted assimilation is also reinforced by her desire to 'own' Milkman, a desire which echoes Macon's earlier ambition to 'own' people. Guitar Bains explains to Hagar that ownership does not pertain to people: "You can't own a human being. You can't lose what you don't own" (Morrison, 1987:306). Guitar unwittingly articulates the foremost flaw in a capitalist system in which violent class hierarchies prevail. The financial agency that accompanies material ownership does not in itself sanction domination. It is only when this ownership is transferred to human beings, as in the case of slavery, workers in capitalism, and women and children in marriage, that exploitation and abuse ensue. By exposing this very human tendency to abuse financial power, Morrison expresses the fundamental shortcoming of a system that permits people to define the Other's identity in

terms of his or her financial status. Michael Awkward writes that both Hagar and Milkman are casualties of an uncaring, capitalist system, and both unconsciously try to break free from these constraints:

[T]he journeys of both characters are embarked upon as a consequence of their attitudes about bourgeois capitalist values. Milkman, whom Morrison is able to write into the traditional (male) epic quest plot, seeks to escape his environment not because its bourgeois values are oppressive¹, but because they demand a psychic involvement and sense of empathy for which he is clearly unprepared. On the other hand, Hagar's journey to reification and, ultimately, physical death, has its source in her adoption of a patriarchal society's almost timeless figuration of woman as object, in her futile attempt to achieve the bourgeois society's notions of female beauty (1990:492).

In other words, because of their respective gendered situations and the structure of the traditional, male myth, Milkman is more likely to successfully complete his journey². Though Hagar tries to kill Milkman, she never succeeds, and Milkman even admits that "[h]e was never frightened of her; he never actually believed that she would succeed in killing him" (Morrison, 1987:301). So even in her role as attacker, she is merely used by Milkman to advance his own status.

1 Though Milkman benefits financially from his middle-class status, he is nonetheless alienated from his community, because they perceive his wealth as an insult in the light of their own poverty. Awkward's analysis, in other words, is not entirely accurate here, for the hierarchical class structure impoverishes both poles in the binary. A logocentric system does not tolerate social difference.

2 In "Unruly and Let Loose: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*", Michael Awkward analyses Morrison's treatment of myth in *Song of Solomon*, and explains why masculinity seems to have become "a virtual prerequisite for participation in transcendent action" (1990:484). At the beginning of *Song of Solomon*, when Morrison writes: "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names" (1987:1), she refers to the fact that "[t]he fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation" (1977:46).

Milkman's arrogance is most powerfully expressed by his sister Lena. She scolds him for telling their father about Corinthians's relationship with Henry Porter, saying: "[Macon] has forbidden her to leave the house, made her quit her job, evicted the man, garnisheed his wages, and it is all because of you. You are exactly like him [...] You are a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man" (Morrison, 1987:215-6). Lena's scathing attack on Milkman is significant because it signals the beginning of his journey to the South, where he not only learns the truth¹ about his ancestors, but gradually begins to understand the pain his indifference causes others and frees himself from his father's 'Dead'-ening materialism.

Before interpreting Milkman's journey, it is necessary to briefly assess Corinthians Dead's experience as a housemaid for a white mistress. Morrison writes that "when Corinthians woke up one day to find herself a forty-two-year-old maker of rose petals, she suffered a severe depression which lasted until she made up her mind to get out of the house" (1987:189). She tries to escape from her patriarchal, class-conscious, household. The only way in which to do this, is by becoming a manual labourer - a housemaid, since, despite her college education, "colored girls, regardless of their background, were in demand for one and only one kind of work" (1987:189). As a black woman, her socio-economic status is determined by both her race and gender. Yet Corinthians is more or less content with her job as housemaid, because she desperately needs to escape from the oppressive circumstances of her own home. Manual labour is not in itself inferior to mental labour, it is only when the one pole in the opposition dominates the other, that a violent hierarchy

1 The signifier 'truth' should be used under erasure here. Milkman will learn the 'truth' through people's memories and their rendition of their individual experiences, which problematises 'truth'.

ensues. To be sure, both these categories can be subject to abuse and exploitation. Morrison writes that in her new job, Corintheans "flourished in a way, and ... [t]he humiliation of wearing a uniform¹ was tempered by the genuine lift which came of having her own money rather than receiving an allowance like a child" (1987:190). In order to have this job, Corintheans has to live a lie. On the one hand, her father would never accept that his daughter cleans someone else's home; while, on the other, her white mistress, Miss Graham, who is a poet, would not accept the truth about her educational background. Morrison writes:

Corintheans was naïve, but she was not a complete fool. She never let her mistress know she had been to college or Europe or could recognise one word of French that Miss Graham had not taught her (1987:190).

Though moderately liberal, Miss Graham needs her social status affirmed by the intellectual inferiority of her housemaid. Corintheans functions as a conversation piece for Miss Graham and her friends and serves to elevate her above the rest of her friends:

Miss Graham was delighted with Corintheans' dress and her slightly uppity manners. It gave her house the foreign air she liked to affect, for she was the core, the very heartbeat of the city's literary world. ... It was also a pleasure and a relief to have a maid who read and who seemed to be acquainted with some of the great masters of literature. So nice to give a maid a copy of *Walden* for Christmas rather than that dreary envelope, and to be able to say so to her friends. In the world Michael-Mary Graham inhabited, her mild liberalism, a residue of her Bohemian youth, and her posture of sensitive lady poet passed for anarchy (1987:191).

1 The fact that Corintheans feels humiliated by having to wear a uniform reinforces the bourgeois condemnation of the workers class. Corintheans believes herself to be superior to the average housemaid because of her middle class background, yet this superiority is ruptured because ironically, she actually prefers this line of work to the stifling middle class environment in which she lives with her parents, brother and sister.

Miss Graham is a social prototype of people who are caught up in the tension between aspiring to be different, liberated and trendy, on the one hand; and on the other hand still unconsciously nurturing old, deeply-rooted class and racial snobbery. Her motives for building a bridge between the stereotypes of mental and manual labour are purely selfish: she feels that acknowledging and indulging Corinthians's specialness would boost her own status amongst her friends. By being different she gets noticed, but the problem is that she is not prepared to face the full consequences of committing herself to radically breaking away from the injustices of convention. Doing the latter would mean that she has to acknowledge Corinthians as her equal and that would deprive Miss Graham of her own backdrop for feelings of intellectual, socio-economic and racial superiority. By depicting the relationship between Corinthians and her white mistress, Morrison ridicules, exposes and comments on the irony of those whose dithering self-image needs a constant boost by being on the forefront of reform while in fact only satisfying their own egotistical needs to be noticed as being more enlightened than ordinary people.

Morrison depicts a similar situation in her description of the old woman Circe (who looked after Pilate and Macon for a while just after their father died) and her white mistress. Milkman meets Circe on his journey South in search of gold. He finds her in an old house which was clearly beautiful years ago, but Circe has let it go to ruin after her white mistress committed suicide. When Milkman asks Circe why the woman had killed herself, she tells him, "She couldn't live without servants and money and what it could buy [...] she killed herself rather than do the work I'd been doing all my life [...] She saw the work I did all her days and died, you hear me, died rather than live like me" (1987:246-247). Even though

this white woman's social status was impossible to maintain without Circe, clearly implying that her identity is not self-sustained but co-determined by her socio-economic and racial binary opposite, the woman would rather die than accept it. Even when she realises that the work Circe has been doing all her life is so unpleasant that she would rather commit suicide than do it herself, she does not for one moment think about what impact her exploitation might have had on Circe. Circe's position as manual labourer becomes unbearable because of the exploitation and abuse that it entails. Not only does Morrison comment on the inconceivable arrogance of the white upper class, but she also shows this very category to be a figment of condescending imaginations.

Like Miss Graham and Circe's employer, Macon Dead needs his status as superior middle class black man confirmed by never stooping to the level of the proletariat. When Corintheans willingly joins the workers class she negates both the superiority of the bourgeoisie and the inferiority of the proletariat, while the manual labour/mental labour hierarchy is exploded.

Though Milkman treats Corintheans just like her father does, his journey away from home to the South is also an attempt to escape from the stifling materialistic, middle class values of his parents, although he does not at first realise this. Susan Willis writes:

If Milkman's present is a meaningless void of bourgeois alienation, the possibility of a past opens out to him like a great adventure. A quest for gold initiates Milkman's journey into the past - and into the self - but gold is not the novel's real object. Imagining that gold will free him from his father's domination and his family's emotional blackmail, Milkman comes to realize that only by knowing his past can he hope to have a future (1987:93).

Firstly, it is significant that Milkman travels South for a number of reasons. One of these is that the American South, according to Gay Wilentz, "in spite of its iniquitous history of racial segregation and slavery, has become for many African-American writers a source of heritage, one's familial home" (1992:94). Though it is ironic that the South should represent the idea of a familial home for African-American ex-slaves, "the fact remains that this is where Afro-America began and where the relationship to [their] African roots is the strongest" (1992:94). By implication, the South offers a connection to the rural countryside and nature. Willis notes that "throughout Morrison's writing, natural imagery refers to the past, the rural South, the reservoir of culture that has been uprooted [...] to make way for modernization" (1987:94). Pilate, "a natural healer" (Morrison, 1987:150), whose stories and songs spark Milkman's curiosity about his roots, also lives in 'Southside'. When Milkman starts working for his father, his spiritually impoverished life improves, because contrary to what Macon had hoped, "there was more time to visit [Pilate's] wine house. Running errands for Macon's rent houses gave him leave to be in Southside" (1987:427). Philip Royster writes:

Milkman seeks knowledge of the worlds of not merely Aunt Pilate and her family, a world of outcasts, but also the world of his father's tenants and Guitar's friends and acquaintances, worlds of poor Black people who suffer because of their class position as well as their racial heritage (1982:427).

It is ironic that Milkman, whose father believes himself and his family to be superior to "Southside niggers" (Morrison, 1987:203), not only financially but also intellectually, should seek out the company and wisdom of these people. 'South' thus also represents a world which negates bourgeois, capitalist values that equate affluence with superiority.

Secondly, it is also, as Willis pointed out, significant that Milkman's journey South should be undertaken with the initial objective of finding gold. Milkman's search for gold originally represents the possibility of domination and material wealth, as it does for his father. When Milkman's father first sees gold, for instance, "[l]ife, safety and luxury fanned out before him like the tailspread of a peacock" (1987:170). Similarly, when Milkman and Guitar initially set out to steal the gold they believe to be in Pilate's possession from her, they see a peacock and Guitar explains to Milkman why it can't fly: "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (1987:179). Ironically, it is Guitar who is weighed down by the gold and what it represents, because unlike Milkman, whose quest gradually changes from the materialistic to the spiritual, Guitar pursues Milkman primarily because he thinks his friend betrayed him by taking all the gold for himself. The way in which Guitar covets the gold resembles the materialistic attitude of Macon II. This materialism stands in stark contrast to the values Guitar expressed in the first part of the novel. So, for instance, he tells Milkman: "I don't have to tell you that your father is a very strange Negro. He'll reap the benefits of what we sow, and there's nothing we can do about it" (1987:223). Guitar understands the ramifications of being a poor individual exploited by the financially privileged classes, for as a young boy, his grandmother who looks after him, is evicted by Macon. In addition, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos writes:

He is named Guitar because he wanted one and could never afford one; this is the art form his creative urge would have taken. Like Cholly (*The Bluest Eye*) and Sula, he is the *artiste*, specifically the musician *manqué*. His creativity and brilliance turns to smoldering, lifelong revenge (1987:89).

Guitar's search for the gold negates his condemnation of Macon's materialism, not because he craves the material comfort that it would afford him, but because his attempt to kill Milkman in search thereof mirrors the way in which Macon treats his tenants. By becoming the 'oppressor', Guitar merely reverses the violent hierarchies which caused his suffering in the first place. This reversal of hierarchies is inevitable within the confines of a logocentric system which tries to guarantee presence and closure. In order to avoid this 'repetition-in-rupture', deconstructionists advocate an ongoing revolution which requires not merely a reversal but also a displacement of the system. Only once this is done is the violent hierarchy exploded, yet even then, the deconstructionist revolution is not at an end, for one should continually guard against violent hierarchies reinstating themselves, as in Guitar's case.

Milkman's journey South differs from that of Guitar because it involves him being gradually stripped of his material possessions and what they represent. At first, we see that Milkman is blinded by his wealth. When he meets Circe, for instance, and sees the squalid circumstances she lives in, he offers to give her money, to which Circe responds: "You think I don't know how to walk when I want to walk? Put your money back in your pocket" (Morrison, 1987:246). His materialism not only causes him to offend and alienate those around him, but it prevents him from listening to precisely what people say and understanding what they mean. It is thus significant that, just after he offers Circe money, she tells him: "You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (1987:247). Circe explains to Milkman why she prefers to let the house of her deceased mistress go to ruin rather than ever clean it again:

They loved this place. [...] Stole for it, lied for it, killed for it. But I'm the one left. Me and the dogs. And I will never clean it again. Never. Nothing. Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt, will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot (1987:247).

Circe's disregard for material possessions contrasts with Milkman's hollow capitalism. His meeting with Circe does, however, make an impact on Milkman and it is significant that he should ask her whether she remembers his grandfather's real name just before he leaves. This already shows a shift in focus for Milkman, whose quest is ultimately not about finding the gold, but about learning about his ancestors. Gay Wilentz writes that Milkman's "meeting with Circe and his trip to the cave start to alter the object of his search from the gold to his roots" (1992:92).

When he reaches Shalimar, the small town in Virginia where his grandparents used to live, he gradually learns to appreciate the world in which human beings are completely removed from bourgeois consumerism. Susan Willis writes:

The descent into the past means stepping out of reified and fetishized relationships. Milkman's sensitivities are abruptly awakened when, trudging through the woods, he is scratched by branches, bruised by rocks, and soaked in a stream. As all of his commodified possessions fall away - his watch, his Florsheim shoes, and his three-piece suit - he comes to realize a full range of sensual perceptions (along with some human social practices - like sharing) he had never before experienced. Entering Solomon's General store, Milkman is struck by its dramatic antithesis to the big-city department store, in which money (rather than need or use) mediates the exchange of human identities for brand names (1987:96-97).

Milkman is also overwhelmed to find that the women in Shalimar carried nothing with them as they walked down the streets:

The women's hands were empty. No pocketbook, no change purse, no wallet, no keys, no small paper bag, no comb, no handkerchief. They carried nothing. Milkman had never in his life seen a woman on the street without a purse slung over her shoulder, pressed under her arm, or dangling from her clenched fingers (Morrison, 1987:259).

Like Pilate, these women are completely unencumbered by commodities. In fact, the women remind Milkman of Pilate: "That's the way Pilate must have looked as a girl, looked even now, but out of place in the big northern city she had come to" (1987:263). For the first time Milkman moves beyond consumer society, and he is immediately fascinated by this new world: "The vision of women walking empty-handed produces an estrangement of Milkman's normal view of women who, conditioned by market economy, haul around purses like grotesque bodily appendages" (Willis, 1987:96). The socio-economic differences between Milkman and these people are immediately apparent, and it is not surprising that he offends the men by his flagrant display of wealth. When, for instance, he asks someone to help him find a new fan-belt for his car, he says: "If they can't find one, let me know right away. I may have to buy another car to get back home" (Morrison, 1987:266). The men immediately recognise the white capitalist in Milkman, for, as wage labourers, they fully understand capitalist exploitation. Morrison writes:

They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken. And what's more, who had said so in front of them ... They looked at his skin and saw it was as Black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers (1987:266).

Milkman's material possessions stand in the way of his learning the 'truth' about his past. After a broken bottle and knife fight breaks out, Milkman goes with the older men of

Shalimar on a hunt, and as he gradually loses his material possessions, which he realises had "hampered him" (1987:277), he begins to understand the language of the hunt. Philip Royster writes:

Milkman discovers that the language of the hunt reflects the oral preliterate culture of human beings living in harmony with nature; he sees that men possess a knowledge of themselves and their relationship to the earth itself that is expressed by their dialogue with nature. Milkman discovers the infinite resources of the culture of Afro-Americans which is expressed and suggested by the oral tradition of the folk (1982:435).

Only once he has lost his tailfeathers - his middle class materialism which has convinced him of an undeserved superiority over others - can he begin to understand his cultural heritage and show compassion for the people he has hurt.

At the end of the novel Milkman re-enacts his grandfather's mythic flight from slavery as he leaps toward his friend Guitar, who had just killed his Aunt Pilate, saying: "You want me? Huh? You want my life?". Philip Page writes,

his flight, like Solomon's before him, is tainted with ambiguity: are they flights from or to? Solomon left behind Ryna and twenty-one children, and Milkman leaves behind a dead Hagar and a dead Pilate. On the other hand, unlike Robert Smith, who tried to fly *away*, he flies *toward* Guitar (Davis 336), toward a mystical union with his double, who in turn seems to recognize the transcendence of the moment and to embrace his brother, his "main man" (341) (1995:106).

This ambiguity is important, for it prevents closure. While it is important for Milkman to transcend the circumstances which have alienated him from his cultural heritage, it is important that he realises the consequences of his flight. Morrison avoids closure when she leaves the novel open-ended; "there can be no final 'answer,' since final answers mean the closure of death; therefore Milkman lives *and* dies, flies *and* falls, embraces *and* kills

Guitar" (1995:106). Milkman's insights will be meaningless if he has not acquired the ability to unceasingly question his decisions and framework. This also means that there is never a 'final answer' after which all introspection stops. Allowing for the play of *différance* means that one's answers should always be re-assessed within different contexts. When Derrida says that "[t]here is nothing outside the text" (1976:158), he in fact means that "there is nothing outside context" (1988:136)¹.

Finally, it is significant that Milkman flies towards Guitar. Throughout the first part of the novel, Guitar functions as Milkman's spiritual guide, even though he is poor and in a 'lower' class than Milkman. Yet by the end of the novel the two seem to have exchanged positions, for it is Guitar who is eventually blinded by his search for gold, while Milkman distances himself from deadening materialistic values as he gradually matures spiritually. By showing both characters to be impoverished by their respective positions in the class hierarchy, and by showing the ability of each of these characters to transcend this position, Morrison not only reverses but also displaces the violent hierarchy. While Guitar has fallen prey to what Spivak calls, a 'repetition-in-rupture', Milkman is left with the prospect of endlessly perpetuating the revolution.

1 Derrida prefers not to use this formulation, because he claims it does not provide much food for thought: "In this form, which says exactly the same thing, the formula would doubtless have been less shocking. I am not certain it would have provided much to think about" (1988:136). In an attempt to respect Derrida's wishes, the formulation is only used once in this thesis.

CHAPTER V

Beyond Racism and Colourism

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison cites De Gobineau's hypothesis that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it" (1993a:168). If one scratches away at the offensive white supremacist surface, one finds the type of hierarchical thinking that lies at the root of all racist practices. Tzvetan Todorov describes racism as follows:

"Racism" is the name given to a type of behavior which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself (1986:171).

Though this definition is extremely limited because, amongst other things, it does not take into account the roles of history and institutional power which uphold racism, it nonetheless conveys the idea that slavery in America would not have lasted as long as it did were it not for prejudiced behaviour based on physical difference¹. Morrison writes, for instance, that

[t]here couldn't have been another slave society in the world with a Fugitive Slave Law². It could not work with the Greeks and the Romans, because they all looked pretty much alike. But with the black people, skin give them away. [...] With black

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- 1 Todorov's definition, though limited, should not be read as putting slavery and anti-colonial struggles or slave revolts on the same plane, because the former is supported by a whole history of institutionalised justifications for supremacy, while the latter groups occupy the lowest rung in the hierarchical ladder as a result of the former's racism. Their 'displays of contempt or aggressiveness' are thus not merely the result of physical differences but emanate from them being the exploited, silenced and abused Other in a violent hierarchy. Nonetheless, Todorov's definition is a gross simplification of a very complex issue which cannot be captured in a short definition. Given the spatial constraints of this thesis, however, a thorough assessment of racism is unfortunately also not possible.
 - 2 The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 "legalized the kidnapping and the enslavement of any black person anywhere in the United States" (Bell, 1992:14).

people, because of the physical difference, they could be seen as slaves, and subsequently are now viewed as the visible poor. We are perceived as the lowest of the classes because we can be identified that way. The visibility has made the prejudices last longer (1981:117).

Racists typically base their prejudiced behaviour not on scientific analyses, but on the most arbitrary of physical characteristics such as "differences in skin colour, pilosity, and body structure" (Todorov, 1986:172). These physical characteristics are then indelibly linked to stereotypes of social behaviour. In America, as in all other white supremacist societies, a hierarchy of difference exists which situates people of lighter skin tone higher and thus superior to people with a darker complexion, who occupy the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. These differences in complexion not only cause the marginalisation of the 'blackest' Other by those 'above' him/her in the hierarchy, it also induces what Morrison calls "racial self-loathing" (1993b:210). In her fiction, Morrison emphasises the dehumanising impact of racial self-hatred that thrives in a racist society which over-inflates physical differences on the Other. This theme is addressed in all her novels, for instance in *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola Breedlove loses touch with reality as racial self-loathing elicits her obsessive desire for blue eyes. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs tells several ex-slaves to love their flesh: "Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it" (1997:88). Baby Suggs's remarks contribute to Morrison's attempts at undermining racist structures which demand the inferiority of black people in America and elicit racial self-loathing.

It should be noted that the aim of this chapter is not to define race or racism, for no limited definition would suffice and within the confines of this thesis such a detour would not be

possible. Instead some racist practices, as well as the way in which Morrison explodes the violent hierarchies which allow these practices to flourish in both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, are explored. Not much has been written on the relationship between deconstruction and race, though Derrida has strongly expressed his hostility towards legally enshrined, institutionalised¹ racist systems such as *apartheid*². Yet his attempt at locating and deconstructing hierarchical structures of opposition within the logocentric system actively contributes to the worldwide struggle against racism.

Violent racial and colourist hierarchies

One of the ways in which to better understand deconstruction's contribution to exploding racial hierarchies is to consider Derrida's treatment of cultural difference and identity. John Caputo writes:

Derrida emphasizes the instability of the notion of "identity," that no so-called identity is, or should take itself to be, "homogeneous" or "self-identical," that indeed it is dangerous to let a group - a family, a community, or a state - settle back down into self-identity (1997:113).

Derrida's emphasis on the instability of the notion of identity is clearly linked to his deconstruction of the presence/absence violent hierarchy. With respect to racial hierarchies this entails that one group or race is privileged because it views itself as central or 'present' and sets itself up as the definer of the Other, who, in turn, is marginalised or 'absent'. Thus,

1 This does not mean that there are racist systems which are *not* institutionalised. Derrida notes that, "[w]hile all racisms have their basis in culture and in institutions, not all of them give rise to state-controlled structures" (1985:294), which is what happened when *apartheid* was implemented in South Africa.

2 See for instance Derrida's "Racism's Last Word", *Critical Inquiry* 1985, 12:290-299. Autumn.

in *Beloved*, the white slaveowner schoolteacher¹ insists that "definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined" (Morrison, 1997:190). In the American context, Morrison explains that the Other consists of black people:

in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me* - it's nothing else but color. [...] Every immigrant knew he [sic] would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group - and that was us (1989:255).

Morrison claims that the moment that these immigrants recognise the black American Other constitutes the moment that they feel they belong in America. However, the very fact that they need the black Other with which to prove their own superiority shows the identity of the oppressor to be partly determined by its binary opposite. This, in turn, negates the notion of "binary opposition". By denouncing the idea of a fixed cultural or racial identity, Derrida deconstructs it - which means opening it up to difference. In other words, this would not deprive African Americans of a common identity and history, it would merely allow for difference. Like female identity, black identity is not homogeneous, but determined by racism, sexual orientation, class, language, nationalism, religion, gender, personality differences, age and complexion, to name but a few. Difference and identity are never mutually exclusive.

The ultimate presence of the oppressor is undermined by the fact that his/her identity is never self-identical, but is "a porous and heterogeneous identity that differs with itself"

1 Schoolteacher takes over the farm Sweet Home after Mr. Garner, the original owner, dies. Schoolteacher comes to the farm "to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (Morrison, 1997:9).

(Caputo, 1997:114). Difference, on the other hand, is also not exclusively different - this difference is usually imposed on the identity of the marginalised Other. In his discussion of Derrida's comments about *apartheid*, Roy Boyne explains, for instance, that Nelson Mandela asserts,

that to be Black is not to be essentially different; but that Black is forced to be different; and that Black would wish the freedom to be the same; and that freedom would be the opening of the road to non-coercive (in either direction) difference (1990:153).

Differences between human beings do not denote inequality. Boyne seems surprised that Derrida's "declaration of enmity against state racism, and his understanding of 'the final solution' as the worst, point to something both constant and powerful within the human condition: [...] a general moral law" (1990:152). Critics generally assume that because there is no deep essence to uphold the "good", because of the play of *différance*, deconstruction has nothing to offer the world in terms of concrete moral answers against oppression. It should be clear by now that this is hardly the case. Deconstruction first of all offers a way in which to explode hierarchical structures of dominance and oppression upheld by logocentric reason. It should thus come as no surprise that deconstruction can function as a moral law - just because this "law" is flexible and should continually be re-assessed in order to avoid closure or the reinstatement of violent hierarchies, it should not be tossed aside just because it offers no final, fixed answer. None of what is said here is new and has already been addressed in previous chapters, yet it is necessary to apply all these insights to racial hierarchies in order to investigate Morrison's explosion of these hierarchies.

In "Racism's Last Word" Derrida assesses some of the most serious repercussions of an uncompromising, fixed, legally entrenched system such as *apartheid*. He analyses the meaning(s) of the word *apartheid* and notes:

Within the limits of this untranslatable idiom, a violent arrest of the mark, the glaring harshness of abstract essence (*heid*) seems to speculate in another regime of abstraction, that of confined separation [...] At every point, like all racisms, it tends to pass segregation off as natural - and as the very law of the origin. Such is the monstrosity of this political idiom. Surely, an idiom should never incline toward racism (1985:292).

When Derrida refers to *apartheid* as a "violent arrest of the mark", he emphasises the importance of the play of *différance* in language which would undermine the status of *apartheid* as transcendental signified and guarantor of presence within a patriarchal, capitalist system of white supremacy. After all, Derrida asserts,

there is no racism without a language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word. Even though it offers the excuse of blood, color, birth - or, rather, *because* it uses this naturalist and sometimes creationist discourse - racism always betrays the perversion of a man, the "talking animal." It institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes (1985:292).

In other words, if, in language, one tried to "fix the mark", the inevitable end-result would be the denial of difference. In her *Nobel Lecture*, Morrison argues that "[o]ppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge" (1993c:269). In addition, she asserts that "[w]ord-work is sublime [...] because it is generative" (1993c:271). In *Paradise*, Morrison stresses not only the damaging effects but also the futility of trying to 'fix' meaning. The controversy over the words forged for the Oven (where the community of Haven used to

gather to make their food, talk or dry themselves and congratulate each other after baptisms), is a case in point. After the Disallowing - the time when "one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen" are discriminated against by lighter-skinned black people and disallowed in black towns already being built - one of the founding fathers of Haven, Zechariah Morgan, forges an expression - "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (1998:195) - which is attached to the lip of the Oven. When the people living in Haven pack up and move to Ruby, the Oven is disassembled and taken with to their new home, where it serves only as a place where the young meet, and loses its original significance. The young people then decide that they want to change the wording to "Be the Furrow of His Brow" (1998:195), which infuriates the elders. Morrison writes that Zechariah's words, are a conundrum,

in which the "you" (understood), vocative case, was not a command to the believers but a threat to those who had disallowed them. It must have taken him months to think up those words - just so - to have multiple meanings: to appear stern, urging obedience to God, but slyly not identifying the understood proper noun or specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen or to whom. So the teenagers Misner organized who wanted to change it to "Be the Furrow of His Brow" were more insightful than they knew (1998:195).

Pat Best, who studies the history of Ruby's people, realises that after having attacked the Convent women, the men of Ruby have become "The Furrow of His Brow": "It wasn't God's brow to be feared. It was [Zechariah's] own, their own. Is that why "Be the Furrow of His Brow", drove them crazy?" (1998:217). Dovey Morgan, married to Steward Morgan, the most parochial of the Ruby patriarchs, recognises that the whole furore over the exact wording is a futile attempt to pin down meaning:

"Beware the Furrow of His Brow"? "Be the Furrow of His Brow"? Her own opinion was that "Furrow of His Brow" alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying

it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross (1998:93).

Thus, once the possibility of language to generate new meaning is stopped in its tracks, it becomes oppressive. This does not, however, imply that by generating new meaning language automatically loses the potential to be oppressive. It does, however, ensure that language unblocks itself to new possibilities of meaning that could, in turn, promote the explosion of violent hierarchies.

Derrida tries to appeal to the world to let *apartheid* - "the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many" (1985:291) - remain exactly this, the last. Derrida writes that 'the last' or *le dernier* in French is sometimes used "to signify 'the worst'" (1985:291). 'The last' can also mean "the last to date of all the world's racisms, the oldest and the youngest" (1985:291).

Derrida calls it 'the last',

since this last-born of many racisms is also the only one surviving in the world, at least the only one still parading itself in a political constitution [...] Such is the ultimate imposture of a so-called state of law which doesn't hesitate to base itself on a would-be original hierarchy - of natural right or divine right, the two are never mutually exclusive (1985:292).

By this Derrida does not mean that *apartheid* is and always will be 'the last', but he is appealing to the world to let it *remain* the last; that no racism ever again exceeds this one. This appeal, he claims, is "a call to condemn, to stigmatize, to combat, to keep in memory" (1986:158). Finally, Derrida's use of the phrase 'the last' also refers to the *apartheid* system's efforts to produce closure within language - their authoritarian last word is the ultimate 'arrest of the mark' - an attempt to fix language in the hierarchical system of oppositions which guarantees the full presence necessary for white male hegemony.

Derrida's essay was written for the catalogue of the exhibition *Art contre/against Apartheid*, which was presented as a travelling exhibition received throughout the world. Derrida appealed to the cities which hosted the exhibition to help in creating a future in which *apartheid* would be a distant memory of 'the last' racism. Though such a future was and is impossible to guarantee, Derrida nonetheless appeals to the world to at least be guided by the dream of a beyond:

Beyond the global computer, the dialectic of strategic or economic calculations, beyond state-controlled, national or international tribunals, beyond the juridico-political or theologico-political discourse, which any more serves only to maintain good conscience or denegation, it was, it will have to be, it is necessary to appeal unconditionally to the future of another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present (1985:298).

The other future which Derrida refers to is clearly a future beyond binary reason. Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon wrote a critical response to Derrida's "Racism's Last Word" in which they take him to task for his use of the word *apartheid*, claiming that by focussing on the single word, he loses sight of the historical circumstances in which the word flourished and changed over the years, consequently (they claim), separating the word from history¹. Yet in his essay, Derrida exposes the historical complicity of the European, logocentric system in *apartheid* and proceeds to address this history: "[I]t seems to me that the aforementioned exhibition exposes and commemorates, indicts and contradicts the

1 McClintock and Nixon's response to Derrida's paper and his subsequent response to them are published in *Critical Inquiry*, 1986:140-170. A summary of the whole debate is not required here - only some key aspects are dealt with.

whole of a Western history" (1985:294). Their response is typical of those who believe Derrida's "text" to be restricted to the "book", and by claiming that he separates the word from history, they accuse him of employing the very binary logic which he attempts to undermine. Such a (mis)reading of Derrida in fact imposes a form of *apartheid* on him. He responds to Nixon and McClintock's claims as follows:

In short, you are for the division of labor and the disciplined respect of disciplines. Each must stick to his [sic] role and stay within the field of his competence, none may transgress the limits of his territory. Oh, you wouldn't go so far as to wish that some sort of *apartheid* remain or become the law of the land in the academy. [...] No, in the homelands of academic culture or of "political action," you would favor instead reserved domains, the separate development of each community in the zone assigned to it (1986:169-170)¹.

It could be argued that by applying the term *apartheid* to the academic realm, Derrida does in fact remove the term from its historical significance within the South African context, which would validate McClintock and Nixon's criticism of him. Yet by using the term in this way, Derrida does not separate 'the word' from 'history', for the 'word' can never be separated from the *traces* which occupy it. Derrida merely uses it as a metaphor for academic segregation, yet the metaphor only takes on its full significance if one is aware of the historical significance of the term in South Africa.

Derrida clearly resists categorisations which would partition him off in some "homeland", which is exactly what happens if the realms of theory and practice are treated as clear-cut

1 Derrida has been criticised for the harsh way in which he dismissed McClintock's and Nixon's critical response to his paper. See for instance Paul Cilliers, "On Derrida and apartheid" *South African Journal of Philosophy* 1998, 17(1):75-88.

binary oppositions. Different sets of "binaries" do not even exclude each other, for, as this study shows, violent hierarchies of race, class and gender are thoroughly interlinked.

Deconstruction offers a way in which to break free from the distinct categories and "fixed marks" which sustain violent racial hierarchies upheld over centuries throughout the world, and in America. Paul Gray writes that Morrison "views her life and work as a struggle against the use of racial categories, or any categories, as a means of keeping groups of people powerless and excluded" (1998:4). When Derrida insists upon difference within identity he tries to resist categorisation by showing that the Self is co-determined by the Other, and are thus not mutually exclusive categories, but depend on each other. This undermines both the total presence of the Self and the absence of the Other. By continuously overturning and displacing these binaries, Derrida counters oppressive racial categories and hierarchies.

One of the oppressive hierarchies which is a direct corollary of the white/black violent hierarchy, is colourism¹. Colourism can only exist in a state that is racist, because it is elicited by self-hate which, in turn, derives from racism. It situates people in a hierarchy of inferiority/superiority based on their skin tone. Alice Walker defines colourism as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (1983:290). Walker explains that she has a mixed-race child, who, "[b]ecause she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life - in this racist, colorist society - is infinitely easier" (1983:291). She explains that many "black black women" are discriminated against

1 Colourism is also an indication of the extent to which racism thrives on physical differences.

by lighter skinned black women because the lighter skinned women deem themselves superior to them. Michelle Cliff refers to a "hierarchy of shades", which "suggests that the lighter one's skin tone the more power one has. Or the corollary, which maintains the darker one's skin tone the less human one is" (Silva, 1999:3). Brita Lindberg-Seyersted notes:

Throughout the history of African-Americans skin color has naturally been the sign that above all has indicated racial identity and the ambiguities arising out of its doubleness. In literature, from Phillis Wheatley to today's writers, the color black runs as a steady, often obsessive motif. It is true that crinkly hair, flat noses, and thick lips have often been features in - mostly negative - descriptions of blacks (1992:51).

The discrimination of lighter skinned against darker skinned people is a direct result of the violent racial hierarchy which upholds the superiority of white people based primarily on their skin colour. In her paper on a PBS documentary addressing the question of colourism amongst African Americans, Debbie Gill notes that,

[a]ccording to the film, color-consciousness came out of slavery. Lighter-skinned people were chosen to work in the main house and were given more advantages, while darker-skinned people were relegated to field work. This caused divisions among people based on color (1995:1).

There are many complex reasons for colourism, many of which Morrison addresses in *Paradise*, dealt with later in this chapter. In *Paradise*, it becomes clear that not only people of darker skin are discriminated against. Gill notes that "[m]en and women interviewed in the film said that whether they were dark or light skinned, they had all experienced discrimination in the black community" (1995:1). In *Sula*, Morrison writes that Nel is the colour of "wet sandpaper",

just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that

the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same. Had she been any lighter-skinned she would have needed either her mother's protection on the way to school or a streak of mean to defend herself (1982:52).

These are complex social constructions with a complex history, and there are no easy answers to colourist or racist hierarchisation and exclusion¹. Yet, as Roy Boyne writes, deconstruction's contribution to a world in which violent hierarchies prevail entails that "social philosophy must continue to address the rights of the other. It must continue to expose those epistemological and political practices which exclude the other in a multitude of subtle and not so subtle ways" (1990:158).

Even though Boyne refers specifically to social philosophy, his assertion is also applicable to literature - the two fields are not mutually exclusive. Morrison's exposure of racial and colourist hierarchies significantly contributes to addressing the rights of the excluded Other in literature and in society as a whole.

White supremacy: a history of racism

Toni Morrison believes it is her responsibility as black writer to reclaim the history of Afro-Americans by re-imagining the lives of black individuals:

[T]he reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance [...] There's 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 (1986:225).

1 Racial and colourist prejudices not only *manifest* themselves in language, they are also *promoted* by oppressive language. In "The Color Black: Skin Color as Social, Ethical, and Esthetic Sign in Writings by Black American Women", Brita Lindberg-Seyersted discusses some of the metaphors used in literature to describe skin colour.

Linda Krumholz maintains that in *Beloved*, Morrison "reconstructs slave history in a way that history books cannot, and in a way that cannot be appropriated by objective or scientific concepts of knowledge and history" (1992:407). Morrison also writes that she was trying to make *Beloved*

a personal experience. The book was not about the institution - Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts in order to relate to one another (1989:257).

Beloved is thus an imaginative representation of the individual experiences of specifically black people in the days of slavery - the white characters in the novel are marginal. The white Self/black Other paradigm is subverted by Morrison's (re)presentation of the lives of the historically marginalised black slaves, since these experiences were either distorted or omitted from not only America's history books but also its literature.

Yet despite Morrison's view that, "American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power" (1993:5), she argues that there is nonetheless "a black presence" in America's literature that

is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination. These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature - individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell - are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, singing Africanist presence (1993:5).

Morrison's assertions about American literature reveal that white presence in literature is, paradoxically, only made possible by the 'presence' of a black American absence. By

striving to give individual slaves a voice in *Beloved*, Morrison explores this 'absence' and rescues it from the margins of American consciousness.

In addition, Morrison explicitly ruptures popular notions about the centrality of the white race to humanity. Throughout the novel, she presents white people as ghosts or people "without skin" (1997:210) made only out of bone, or with no blood in their veins. White is no longer the definitive skin colour - having a white skin is tantamount to having no skin at all. In *Imagining Characters*, A. S. Byatt writes:

What Toni Morrison has done, I think, is [...] marginalise the whites almost entirely, destroy all their own metaphors for themselves, one after the other, so that they're not there at all except as bone and teeth. White things are bone and teeth [...] Human beings are black (1995:244).

The same conclusion about white people is drawn in *Sula* when Eva Peace talks about Tar Baby, her depressive, alcoholic tenant: "Most people said he was half white, but Eva said he was all white. That she knew blood when she saw it, and he didn't have none" (Morrison, 1982:39). In *Song of Solomon*, when Milkman asks Guitar whether he is going to kill people, Guitar answers: "Not people. White people" (1987:155). In his view, "[t]here are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one" (1987:155).

These descriptions of white people are born of a long and complex history of oppression of Americans of African descent by Americans of European descent who believe themselves to be superior to African Americans in every way. This racist illusion of the morally superior white race is disrupted throughout *Beloved*, for instance, when Morrison presents

white people in terms which they themselves would only use with reference to criminals: "Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose" (1997:180).

In both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, the reader learns of many atrocities committed against black Americans throughout American history. Thus, in *Paradise*, the parochialism of the founding fathers and their offspring is the direct result of being excluded and persecuted by brutally racist white people. This is "why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (1998:13). There are many instances of white racism in the novel, for instance, the time when some white men circle the black girls of Ruby with their cars and try to scare and assault them. One of the men exposes himself to the girls, and as the patriarchs of Ruby come out with their guns to protect the girls, they realise that this man "will do as much serious damage to colored folks as he can" (1998:13). Such white supremacist, separatist attitudes permeate the novel. Thus the racist world hampers the attempts of Deacon Morgan and Consolata¹ from finding a place where they can be alone to pursue their attraction to each other: "[T]hey talk, mostly about Where. He mentions a town ninety miles north but corrects himself quickly, because no motel or hotel would take them" (1998:237). Thus, when Paul Gray argues that the subject of race "is not mentioned a great deal in *Paradise*, perhaps because nearly all the characters are black" (1998:4), he does not take into account the undercurrent of racial oppression in America that runs through *Paradise*. Racial discrimination and slavery have precipitated the westward migration of former slaves into the sparsely populated territories of Oklahoma

1 Consolata is one of the women who is attacked by the patriarchs of Ruby. She lives in the Convent where she has created "a refuge for broken young women, on the run from husbands or boyfriends, parents or the messes they have made of their lives elsewhere" (Gray, 1998:3).

and beyond. Gray also does not take into account that we live in a "wholly racialized world" (Morrison, 1993:4), and literature is thus also racialised.

In both *Paradise* and *Beloved*, the history of racial oppression threatens to engulf the present¹. In *Beloved*, Sethe's main objective after having escaped from the physical bonds of slavery is "keeping the past at bay" (1997:42). She does everything in her power to keep her daughter Denver "from the past that was still waiting for her" (1997:42). Similarly, Paul D, Sethe's lover and friend who has also escaped from Sweet Home, has trouble dealing with his past. He keeps his memories in a "tobacco tin in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (1997:72-73). When Beloved, both the incarnation of the baby ghost who haunted 124 after Sethe killed her², and "the physical manifestation of suppressed memories" (Krumholz, 1992:400), shows up on 124's doorstep, Sethe has to start (re)membering and reclaiming her own past. Beloved feeds off Sethe's memories, she "ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it without a murmur" (Morrison, 1997:250). Ashraf Rushdy argues that Beloved "is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten" (1992:571).

1 By treating the present as being co-determined by the past, Morrison subverts and displaces the past/present or absence/presence binarisms.

2 Morrison writes that Denver "was certain that Beloved was the white dress that had knelt with her mother in the keeping room, the true-to-life presence of the baby that had kept her company most of her life" (1997:119). Beloved can be interpreted as being the incarnation of Sethe's dead baby girl and of her most painful memory - the murder of her daughter. Beloved's significance in the novel has been interpreted in many ways. For some of these interpretations, see for instance Deborah Horvitz's "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*". *Studies in American Fiction* 1989, 17(2):157-168.

Moreover, like Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Beloved, with her "midnight skin" (1997:250), functions as the ancestor and represents a link to Africa¹ and the past of racial oppression and slavery in America. Yet because these memories are so painful, no-one wants to deal with them and Beloved's presence in the novel causes much pain as she forces everyone to 're-member' their pasts. Not only Sethe, but also Denver and Paul D, are brought into contact with their pasts through Beloved. Linda Krumholz argues that Beloved is

everyone's ghost. She functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed pasts, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of a man in slavery and enabling Denver to deal with her mother's history as a slave [...] And Beloved is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive present (1992:400).

In *Paradise*, the historical past also thrives in both Haven and Ruby as a "vindictive present". After the Disallowing, the patriarchs of Ruby institute an unspoken blood rule which dictates that all the citizens of Ruby marry only 8-rock, dark-skinned people. Pat Best, whose father "was the first to violate the blood rule" (1998:195) by marrying a woman with a light skin, documents the history of the Ruby and Haven families, but when she realises that the town's history has become an oppressive force which serves to justify xenophobia and parochialism, she burns the records. Morrison writes that the twins, Steward and Deacon Morgan, the grandsons of Zechariah Morgan,

1 In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker writes: "I am worried, constantly, about the hatred the black black woman encounters within black society. To me, the black black woman is our essential mother - the blacker she is the more us she is" (1983:291). Walker's view plays a crucial role in the struggle against racial self-loathing and it encourages black pride. Yet this view of 'pure' blackness can also be misappropriated. This happens in *Paradise* where people of darker skin discriminate against lighter-skinned people.

have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened - things they witnessed and things they have not. [...] And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather - the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth (1998:13).

Ruby is founded after the male descendants of the founding fathers return from World War II to find that Haven has dwindled in their absence. They decide to repeat the past and move to a new town to secure themselves from a world "Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; [...] Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead" (1998:16). Having been oppressed and excluded on account of their skin-colour, the founders of Ruby decide to reappropriate the tools of the racist 'masters' by establishing their own community which rejects and excludes anyone who wishes to enter their settlement or threaten their racial purity. Though Haven was originally founded as a result of the Disallowing, the Disallowing itself would not have come about were it not for the white/black violent hierarchy which thrives in America. When arriving in Ruby, there is some disagreement over what the name of the new town should be until Ruby Morgan, sister of Deacon and Steward, falls ill and dies. The town is then named after her. Ruby's death and the way in which she dies becomes a symbol of the racist world from which the 8-rock people try to protect themselves. Morrison writes that

[w]hen it became clear [Ruby] needed serious medical help, there was no way to provide it. They drove her to Demby, then further to Middleton. No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them. She had lost control, then consciousness by the time they got to the second hospital. She died on the waiting room bench while the nurse tried to find a doctor to examine her (1998:113).

When several of the Ruby patriarchs decide to lash out at a group of women living in a Convent 17 miles out of town, they justify their actions by doing it "For Ruby" (1998:18), which exists as a result of "a hunger for security, the desire to create perfection in an imperfect world" (Gray, 1998:2). Deirdre Donahue explains that the black men in *Paradise* have to,

protect their women and children¹ from the hostile whites and from an unforgiving world where black death is rarely mourned. These circumstances turn the men hard, strong and merciless toward outsiders of every color (1999:2).

This unforgiving, racist world threatens to defeat the strongest of Morrison's characters and in both *Paradise* and *Beloved* the conduct of people under such extreme duress is explored. In *Beloved*, for instance, the presence of Sethe's murdered daughter Beloved serves as a reminder of one of the worst crimes committed against African-Americans during slavery, namely the separation of parents from their children. Morrison describes the pain of many slave mothers whose children are sold before they can even get to know them. Baby Suggs, for instance, thinks about the seven times she had

held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own - fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked (1997:139).

1 The fact that Donahue uses the pronoun 'their' is revealing. The male/female violent hierarchy in Haven and Ruby marginalises women and though they are never physically abused, they are ignored and silenced. Male mastery flourishes unbridled and the men eventually become like the very people from whom they have tried to protect themselves. See Chapter III for a more detailed elaboration of this theme.

Sethe, one of the few slave women who is allowed to keep her children, is so badly traumatised and brutalised as a slave that she chooses to kill her child rather than expose her to psychic death: "[I]f I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (1997:200).

When she escapes from Sweet Home, Sethe's main objective is to bring her baby girl the milk she has been trying to save for her. However, before Sethe's escape, her milk is taken from her by schoolteacher's nephews: "They held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby ... they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (1997:201). By taking Sethe's milk, they physically and symbolically take into and nourish themselves with the mother's milk of the black, African American race. Sethe's desperate attempts to keep her milk for her daughter Denver derives from the fact that she never got the milk she had a right to from her own mother: "Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none" (1997:200). Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove spends most of her time caring for a white family whose little girl with the blue eyes and corn yellow hair calls her Polly, when even her own children call her Mrs. Breedlove. Toni Morrison shows how the so-called superior white race of America exists to a large extent because of being mothered and nurtured by African American females. Morrison also uncovers an American history which has separated black children from their parents. The longing for security, stability and safety highlighted in both *Paradise* and *Beloved* is thus entirely valid in light of the American history of slavery and racism.

In *Beloved*, Paul D remembers that

[d]uring, before and after the War he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. [...O]nce he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed to be her own babies (Morrison, 1997:66).

Paul D's description of the horrors of slavery captures the extremes of oppositional logic and violent hierarchies which allow one group of people to dominate and control another. Morrison describes the devastation caused in a world where "anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore" (1997:251).

It is thus no coincidence that Paul D has doubts about his own identity and manhood, because he has never had the freedom to engage in self-definition. He wonders whether he is a man only because "Garner called and announced them men" or whether Garner was "naming what he saw or creating what he did not?" (1997:220). Paul D's insecurities about his own identity are to a great extent linked to the fact that in white minds black people do not exist as human beings worthy of anything but contempt. By projecting their xenophobic and prejudiced ideas about what they believe to be the 'savage African' onto Americans of African descent, white Americans create what they fear. This is seen in *Beloved*, where Morrison writes:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, [...] they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of

something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them (1997:198).

This jungle created by white people also spreads and invades themselves until the "screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own" (1997:199). Superiority that exists purely as a result of the way in which it dominates and controls its 'inferior' binary opposite paradoxically results in its own inferiority. Morrison is committed to exploring not only the effects of racism on the oppressed, but also believes in examining

the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions. The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour of the masters (1993:11-12).

Their racist ideologies cause white Americans to stoop to unfathomable levels of cruelty in order to maintain their position of domination and control. One of the ways in which they elevate themselves above black Americans is by viewing and treating them like animals. In *Beloved*, Morrison demonstrates this, for instance, when Sethe overhears how schoolteacher instructs his students to draw up a table with Sethe's "human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (1997:193)¹. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove is exposed to the same type of prejudicial behaviour. In the hospital where she has to give birth to her daughter Pecola, she is examined by a group of student doctors who discuss

1 Later, after having killed Beloved, Sethe defends her actions by saying that "no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (Morrison, 1997:251).

her as if she were an animal. The older, lecturing doctor, explains to the young doctors that they never have any trouble with what he calls 'these women': "They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (1993a:125). In reaction to this, Pauline "moans something awful" when she goes into labour, saying: "The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women" (1993a:125). Finally, in *Paradise*, when Ruby is dying and no white doctor is willing to help her, the white nurse tries to get hold of a veterinarian: "When the brothers learned the nurse had been trying to reach a veterinarian, and they gathered their dead sister in their arms, their shoulders shook all the way home" (1998:113). It is their fear of such dehumanising racism that causes the citizens of Ruby to retreat into their own isolated little world where they trust no-one but themselves.

White supremacy and dominance necessitate these racist ideologies which insist that black people are like animals. Their need to assert their superiority, often causes white people to treat their black slaves even worse than they would their animals. This is seen for instance, in *Beloved*, when Paul D and forty-five other captured slaves are locked down in boxes when it starts raining "till it either stopped or lightened up so a whiteman could walk, damnit, without flooding his gun and the dogs could quit shivering" (1997:109). In other words, the white men are more concerned about their guns and dogs than about the forty-six black human beings. They do not need to assert their superiority over their animals, because animals pose no threat to their position in the violent hierarchy, whereas black people do. The inferiority of black people has to be policed at all cost, since this inferiority is clearly not absolute. Morrison writes, for instance, that the Ku Klux Klan needs to suppress black people in order to survive: "Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not

live, the dragon swam the Ohio at will" (1997:66). In Derridean terms this means that the so-called superior term is always at the point of being transgressed by the *trace* of its binary opposite that inhabits it, and is much less absolute in its superiority than it appears. Because white people benefit financially from the inferior position of black slaves¹, they can never permit their own superiority to be disputed. Yet the very fact that this superiority needs to be safeguarded paradoxically undermines it.

The white masters strive to secure their superiority in many ways and Morrison uses numerous symbols to demonstrate this. For example, she describes the scar which formed on Sethe's back after having been beaten by one of schoolteacher's nephews as "the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (1997:17)². Iron is used as a symbol of slavery and white domination throughout the novel. For instance, after escaping from Sweet Home, Paul D is caught by a group of whites and locked down in a wooden box and chained to forty-six other slave men. Morrison explains that the "chain was threaded through forty-six loops of the best hand-forged iron in Georgia" (1997:109). Similarly, when Denver accuses Beloved of choking Sethe's neck, Beloved replies: "I

1 The inferior position of black slaves in the violent class hierarchy is a prerequisite for the financially privileged position of white slave-owners. Lower class white people are often also victimised by those whose financially superior positions are strengthened by the existence of the proletarian Other (though this victimisation rarely reflects the levels of cruelty to which black slaves are subjected). So Amy Denver, the lower class white girl who helps Sethe deliver her child and tries to soothe her pain, tells her: "I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. Mr. Buddy had a right evil hand too. Whip you for looking at him straight" (1997:79).

2 Sethe's scar is also described as a tree. She explains to Paul D that "[s]choolteacher made one [of his nephews] open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree" (Morrison, 1997:17). Amy Denver is the first one to tell Sethe that her scars look like a tree: "A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk - it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches" (1997:79). For a discussion of this metaphor, see Deborah Sitter's "The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*" *African American Review* 1992, 26(1):17-29.

didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it" (1997:101). *Beloved's* attempt at choking her mother parallels both Sethe's murder of her daughter, and the possession and psychic strangulation of black slaves by white slave owners. Barbara Shapiro notes that the image of the circle of iron

recalls the collars locked around the necks of the black slaves. [*Beloved's*] statement is thus true in that the slave system has choked off the vital circulation between mother and child so crucial to the development of the self. Some of the most vivid, disturbing passages in the novel describe the experience of having a horse's bit forced into one's mouth; the sense of deep searing injury to one's humanity that these descriptions evoke is perhaps compounded by unconscious resonances of violation at the earliest oral roots of our human identity (1991:199-200).

The bit used on black slaves is a symbol of both the linguistic and the bodily disempowerment of the black Other. David Lawrence writes that "[i]n *Beloved*, the question of authority over one's own body is consistently related to that of authority over discourse; bodily and linguistic disempowerment frequently intersect" (1991:190). Such disempowerment is achieved in various ways in *Beloved*. Jane Wyatt argues, for instance, that Sethe's back is "not her own", but instead "a tablet on which the slave masters have inscribed their code" (1993:478). By inscribing their code on slaves, white 'masters' deprive black people of their individuality.

The names slave masters give their slaves can also be read as an attempt to inscribe their code on black Americans. Through these names the white masters not only ensure their domination over African Americans, but also try to erase black identity. Three of the male slaves at the Sweet Home farm are, for instance, called almost the same thing: "Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner" (1997:11). The surname Garner is used to

demonstrate who they belong to, while their matching first names signify the attempt by white masters to erase their differences. Patricia Turner and Herman Gray write that

ever since the first African arrived in Jameston, Virginia in 1619 - in chains - Americans of African descent have been subject to efforts to erase their differences and in so doing, their humanity (1999:1).

When Stamp Paid, "the community mediator and catalyst, [who] tries to heal everyone" (Page, 1995:147), has to hand over his wife to his master's son for sexual gratification, he changes the name his white master gave him (Joshua), to Stamp Paid, because "[w]ith that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off" (Morrison, 1997:185). By renaming himself, Stamp Paid actively engages in the act of creating his own identity as a free man, for, within the context of slavery, "[t]o be named by others is to be deprived of identity" (Finney, 1990:28). Similarly, Barbara Hill Rigney writes that "[a]mong slavery's crimes is the theft of identity, the inflicted loss of a name and of a culture" (1991:230). When arriving at 124, Paul D's individual identity is asserted by Denver who chooses to call him Mr. D, instead of Paul D Garner. The letter D is his primary claim to individuality and freedom from white inscription. Likewise, Baby Suggs manages to challenge white definitions of herself. After her freedom is bought by her son Halle, she is overwhelmed by feeling, for the first time in her life, as if she belongs to herself. Before, she seemed to have had no selfhood other than that which her owners allowed her to have. Mr. Garner does not even know and call her by her real name - he calls her "Jenny Whitlow"¹ because her previous owner, Whitlow,

1 The name Whitlow, incidentally, is a pun on 'white low'. In other words, contrary to popular white supremacist belief, white people are not superior to black people in the white/black binary, but inferior. By not accepting the name Jenny Whitlow, Baby Suggs starts liberating herself from the shackles of

called her Jenny on the bill-of-sale. Once freed, she suddenly "saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling , 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat." (1997:141).

It is their new-found disregard for the hierarchy of oppression that allows Morrison's characters to re-define themselves in their own terms and exorcise their past. Yet in both *Paradise* and *Beloved*, exorcising the ghost of the past and ensuring that the past does not repeat itself is only possible if the effects of racial oppression and oppositional logic are understood. Only once the self-hatred, which is a direct corollary of racism, is unlearned, can one truly experience pride in one's identity without simultaneously hampering the identity of another.

Racism's corollaries: exorcising the ghost of racial oppression and dual logic

Brian Finney writes that ultimately, *Beloved*

is about the haunting of the entire Black race by the inhuman experience of slavery, about the damage it did to their collective psyche and the need to summon all the skills of their community [...] to exorcise this ghost that will otherwise turn destructive (1990:35).

Similarly, in *Paradise*, the people of Ruby are haunted by their racist past. This does not imply that racism is something of the past. However, if racism is to be challenged, one has to move beyond one's past and not repeat it by re-applying oppositional logic and imitating

white superiority (this superiority paradoxically suggests white moral inferiority). Such inversions are crucial for the explosion of the white/black violent hierarchy and should be perpetuated ad infinitum in order to subvert the authority of any pole which attempts to dominate the other.

the oppressor. Until the people of Ruby have learned to deal with and accept their past, they are constantly running the risk of repeating it.

When Anna Flood is a little girl, she is almost attacked by a scorpion, but Steward Morgan comes to her rescue:

Anna clung to him while he explained that the scorpion's tail was up because it was just as scared of her as she was of it. In Detroit, watching baby-faced police handling guns, she remembered the scorpion's rigid tail (Morrison, 1998:116).

The Ruby patriarchs react to anyone remotely different from themselves in exactly the same way as the scorpion does to Anna. Their fear of oppression has put them on the defensive and caused them to victimise the vulnerable. Their attack on the Convent is partly the result of their own colourist attitudes towards anyone not 8-rock, since what lies at the root of their hostility towards these women is Deacon Morgan's erstwhile affair with Consolata (Connie), "a beautiful, golden-skinned, outside woman with mossgreen eyes" (1998:279). In contrast to the Morgan brothers, Connie is tolerant of others (her eyes are "Unjudgmental. Tidy. Ample. Forever." (1998:48)), whereas the twins are judgemental, and neither of them "put up with what he couldn't control" (1998:278-279). Steward's motives for attacking the Convent women demonstrate how his past and his fear of being unable to protect his people from the racism his forebears have endured, influence most of the decisions he makes. He is outraged, for instance, when he thinks about

[h]ow off the course Deek slid when he was looking in those poison and poisoning eyes. For months the two of them had met secretly, for months Deek was distracted, making mistakes and just suppose the hussey had gotten pregnant? Had a mixed up child? Steward seethed at the thought of that barely averted betrayal of all they owed and promised the Old Fathers (1998:279).

Steward believes that after the Disallowing, they owe it to the Old Fathers to reject anyone unlike themselves, that is, anyone not 8-rock, in order to keep their blood 'pure'. 8-rock is an abbreviation for eight rock, "a deep deep level in the coal mines" (1998:193) and the 8-rock people are those "[b]lue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them" (1998:193). Because of their skin colour, the Old Fathers "were reduced to penury and/or field labor [...] They must have suspected but yet dared not say that their misfortune's misfortune was due to the one and only feature that distinguished them from their Negro peers. Eight-rock" (1998:193). When travelling westward, the Old Fathers, though used to divisions between white and black, are surprised to learn of a new separation:

[L]ight-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves. [...] The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain. The scattering that alarmed Zechariah because he believed it would deplete them and was now an even more dangerous level of evil, for if they broke apart and were disvalued by the *impure*, then, certain as death, those ten generations would disturb their children's peace throughout eternity (1998:194 - emphasis mine).

The 8-rock families can trace their ancestry back through ten generations and because lighter skinned black people discriminate against them, the 8-rock people, in turn, decide to exclude those who reject them. Yet they are merely repeating the injustices they themselves have suffered. Many people in and around Ruby suffer the consequences of the unspoken 8-rock rule of racial purity. Pat Best's father, Roger Best, for instance, is the first 8-rock to violate the blood rule and he, his wife Delia and descendants are shunned by the community because of their 'impurity'. In her genealogy Pat Best writes: "Daddy,

they don't hate us because Mama was your first customer. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me" (1998:196). The 8-rock people, particularly the men, refuse to accept Roger's wife, "a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering" (1998:197), since she reminds "them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place" (1998:200). When Roger arrives in Ruby with his new wife, everyone's disapproval is tangible, yet only Steward has "the gall to say out loud, 'He's bringing along the dung we leaving behind'" (1998:201). Delia Best and her second child die in childbirth because the Ruby patriarchs refuse to help her, inventing reasons why they are unable to come to her rescue, for, as Pat Best writes, "[e]ven with their wives begging they came up with excuses because they looked down on you, Mama" (1998:197).

Pat Best tries to extricate herself from her light-skinned heritage by marrying Billie Cato, "partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Catos and the Blackhorses" (1998:198). Yet Pat does not manage to eschew her 'impure' blood and, she writes to her father, that "although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin on to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would" (1998:196). Pat's self-hate is a reversal of the traditional colour hierarchy that dictates that lighter-skinned people are superior to those with a darker complexion. Yet were it not for the racist system that excluded the 8-rock people, they would not have started idolising their own black skins and Pat would not have devalued her own racial heritage. Her racial self-loathing is thus directly linked to the white/black violent hierarchy which persists within American minds. Instead of recognising the oppositional logic which causes the discrimination against her and her daughter, Billie Delia, Pat cannot help but to revile her own daughter, thus

emulating the behaviour of a long list of oppressors. The two of them fight incessantly and Pat realises that "ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow" (1998:203).

Her treatment of her own daughter mirrors that of the citizens of Ruby, since Billie Delia is victimised by these people throughout her life. As a three year old girl, Billie Delia does something which confirms all the suspicions the people of Ruby have about her mixed-race blood. When Nathan DuPres invites her to ride on his horse one Sunday, she drops her panties before stretching out her arms for him to pick her up. She does this because as a little girl she is still too young for underwear and only wears them on a Sunday, and whenever riding the horse prior to that Sunday she enjoyed the way her "skin felt against that wide expanse of rhythmically moving animal flesh" (1998:150). Yet her behaviour causes her to get "an unintelligible whipping from her mother and a dose of shame it took her years to understand" (1998:151). Though her mother reacts to this in the same way everyone else in Ruby does, she later realises that "had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was - only an innocent child would have done that, surely" (1998:203). From that day on, Billie Delia is perceived as being "the fastest girl in town" (1998:59), and "[s]he quickly learned the cautionary look in the eyes of girls whose mothers had warned them away from [her]. In fact she was untouched" (1998:151). Her light skin accords her the label 'sexually promiscuous'.

The unspoken rule which dictates that the 8-rock community stays a homogeneous group of people with more or less the same ideas and exactly the same bloodline, leaves no room for difference, which is necessary for any relation to the Other. Derrida argues that

[t]he privilege granted to unity, to totality, to organic ensembles, to community as a homogenized whole - this is a danger for responsibility, for decision, for ethics, for politics. [...] Now this does not mean that we have to destroy all forms of unity wherever they occur. I have never said anything like that. Of course, we need unity, some gathering, some configuration. You see, pure unity or pure multiplicity - when there is only totality or unity and when there is only multiplicity or dissociation - is a synonym of death. What interests me is the limit of every attempt to totalize [...] because the relationship of the unity to itself implies some difference (Caputo, 1997:13).

In other words, the racial identity of the 8-rock people implies some difference within itself, and if this difference is disregarded, the 8-rock community not only oppresses the Other, but by doing so, they also harm themselves, for, as Derrida explains, either pure unity or multiplicity (or pure homogeneity or heterogeneity) is synonymous with death. This explains why Haven started dwindling when the men went to the war, and also why Ruby is slowly rotting away from within. By setting itself up as the pure binary opposite of the Other, the patriarchs of Ruby have become the "Furrow of His Brow". Blind to their own inadequacies, the Ruby men blame the Convent women for everything that goes wrong in their own midst:

Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for

VD shots common. [...] the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women (Morrison, 1998:11).

Yet what these men do not realise is that what really connects all these catastrophes is their own parochialism and colourism. Hence, the mother who is knocked down the stairs by her daughter is Pat Best, and the differences between her and her daughter are a direct result of the colourist attitudes of Ruby's people. Furthermore, the four damaged infants born in one family are the children of Sweetie and Jeff Fleetwood, and though the men somehow blame the Convent women for these children, Morrison suggests that the 'pure' 8-rock blood may have become incestuous: "[A]lthough Lone had delivered some of Jeff's sick children long before the first woman arrived, they wouldn't let a little thing like that keep them from finding fault anywhere but in their own blood" (1998:277). Unable and unwilling to change - having 'fixed the mark' - the Ruby patriarchs are incapable of recognising the enemy within their ranks, and the ghost of dual logic is only noticed after they have attacked the innocent Convent women. After the incident at the Convent, most of the people from Ruby who witness it are shocked and disillusioned by what they have become: "How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?" (1998:292).

The acceptance of difference is crucial for self-growth and understanding. Ruby does not deteriorate because of the influence of the Convent women. The problem lies within themselves. When Soane Morgan dreams about bright feathers that seem not to belong in her kitchen sink, she realises that the problem does not lie with the feathers, but with her sink: "[S]he'd been concentrating on the colors, while the point was the sink. 'That's no place for them, you know.' The strange feathers she had invited did not belong in her house"

(1998:155). The bright feathers (symbolising the Convent women) are too colourful and diverse for her bleak sink which leaves no room for difference. The word 'yourself' implies a difference within identity - the 'your' is different from the 'self', and excluding the Other, is thus detrimental to the Self. The healing process that is necessary for coming to terms with racism cannot take place in the colourist environment which the 8-rock patriarchs have established in Haven and Ruby. The ghost of the past manifests itself in Ruby as colourism, and before healing can commence, this ghost needs to be exorcised.

In both *Paradise* and *Beloved*, exorcising the past means moving beyond hierarchical reason which requires the inferiority of some Other for its survival. In *Beloved*, the slaves and ex-slaves have to learn firstly to reject white definitions of themselves which insist on their own inferiority and cause racial self-loathing, and secondly, not to reappropriate 'white' dual logic by rejecting and turning against each other, or, in Brian Finney's words, not to allow the ghost to "turn destructive" (1990:35). When Sethe kills her little girl Beloved, she allows her past to consume her present. Devi Sarinjeive argues that, "Sethe's killing of her baby is the resurgence of the 'jungle'" (1998:289). In a conversation with Bill Moyers, Morrison explains that for Sethe, whether or not to kill her baby "was an impossible decision. Someone gave me the line for it at one time which I have found useful. 'It was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it'" (1989a:272).

After Paul D learns that Sethe killed her baby daughter, he tells her "Your love is too thick" (Morrison, 1997:164). Similarly, in *Paradise*, Reverend Richard Misner, the person who "is closest to [Morrison's] own sensibility about moral problems" (1998a:4) realises that the people of Ruby love their children "to death" (1998:210), by isolating them from the

rest of the world in an attempt to protect them from it¹. In *Beloved*, both Sethe and Beloved repeat the behaviour of the slave-owners by loving too possessively. Terry Otten argues that

Sethe's crossing into freedom with her children transforms her relationship with them. Having *entered* the free state, she cannot allow *her* children to return to slavery - her love becomes the more boundless and free. Unlike Denver, who is born *in* freedom, Beloved was birthed in slavery; consequently, Sethe's bond with her is warped by the shadow of slavery (1993:659 - emphasis in original).

The hierarchical structure of slavery permits people to possess others. Sethe's identity is infringed upon by slavery, yet, once she is freed, she claims ownership of her daughter's life by killing her, thus infringing upon her daughter's identity. This possessive behaviour is then repeated once again when Beloved returns from the dead and tries to consume her mother's identity. Beloved tells her mother "I am Beloved and you are mine" (Morrison, 1997:214). As the past starts consuming the present, Sethe, Beloved, and Denver try to possess each other. When Stamp Paid tries to enter 124, he hears the different voices of the three women, but "[a]ll he could make out was the word *mine*" (1997:172). Sethe, for instance, says: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (1997:200), and Denver, in turn, states: "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (1997:209). Philip Page maintains that these ingrown dependencies

drain away their lives. Denver is still unable to function in the outside world, Beloved becomes increasingly tyrannical and infantile, and Sethe loses her physical and

1 In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar's love for Milkman is also suffocatingly thick, and in *Sula*, Eva Peace's love for her son Plum causes her to kill him. For a discussion of love as destructive force in Morrison's fiction see Terry Otten's "Horrible Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction", *Modern Fiction Studies* 1993, 39(3&4):651-667.

emotional strength. In fact, their relationships, for all their love, are increasingly possessive (1995:138-139).

As they try to possess each other their identities merge until they are no longer able to recognise their individual identities. Beloved's desire to possess her mother becomes so extreme that it threatens to kill Sethe. Deborah Horvitz explains that there is

a connection between this ruling Beloved and the slave-driver. Because any attempt to possess another human being is reminiscent of the slave-master relationship, Denver links Sethe and the slave-drivers when she warns Beloved that Sethe, like "the men without skin" from the ship, "chews and swallows" (p.216) (1989:161).

Like colourism in *Paradise*, the possession of human beings is one of racism/slavery's corollaries in *Beloved*. Whereas in *Beloved* mothers and children are not allowed to love each other, in *Paradise*, the racist world dictates that black people have to be ashamed of their black skin. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that once mothers and children have the freedom to love each other, this love takes on excessive proportions, and once the black citizens of Ruby have the freedom to experience racial pride, they overemphasise and idolise their blackness. Yet both possessiveness and colourism have a negative impact on the lives of not only those who occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy, but also those who perpetuate it. Only once the dual, hierarchical logic that sustains these side-effects of racism is understood and discarded can the racial hierarchies be exploded and the healing process commence.

Denver is the first one to escape from the destructive triad by seeking help from the women in the community. What finally brings about the disappearance of Beloved as a vengeful reminder of the past "is in part the collective will of the entire Black community" (Finney, 1990:35). The singing of the women who gather outside her house "broke over Sethe and

she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (Morrison, 1997:261). Linda Krumholz explains that

the former slave women understand the context within which Sethe acted; they shared in many of her miseries. And so her fellow sufferers come to her aid to exorcise the ghost of her past preying on her life, because Beloved is in some sense their ghost, too [...] The power of the women's voices joined together has a creative capacity that symbolises and ritualizes Sethe's cycle from spiritual death to rebirth (1992:402).

When Denver's white employer, Mr. Bodwin, arrives while these women are singing, Sethe confuses him with schoolteacher who is "coming for her best thing" (Morrison, 1997:262). Determined that her child should not be taken from her, she launches an attack on the white man. Beloved witnesses this, and just before she disappears, she is standing on the porch, "smiling" (1997:262). This time, instead of killing her child, Sethe directs her anger at "the white source of her agonized condition. The past is not repeated but left behind" (Finney, 1990:35). It is significant that Beloved disappears right after Sethe has tried to attack the white man. To a certain extent, Mr. Bodwin becomes the symbol of slavery and Sethe's attempt to attack him signals her recognition of slavery and all its manifestations, as the hierarchical system that forced her to turn against her child. Before Sethe can reach him, however, the black community comes to her rescue and as they surround her, they "make a hill. A hill of black people, falling" (Morrison, 1997:162). By so doing, the black women protect Sethe against the dangers of repeating the cycle of oppression in yet another guise. Sethe is "washed clean of her sin and guilt by the Black community" (Finney, 1990:35). Having exorcised the ghost of dual logic which has threatened to haunt and consume the black community, they no longer repeat the past by either possessing or excluding and rejecting each other. It is significant that Sethe is jolted from Beloved's possessive arms

by the "voices without words" (Krumholz, 1992:403) of the community women. Because the language of slaves have been taken from them by white people, they choose to use a different signifying system - beyond the oppressive language used by the white masters: "[T]he voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (Morrison, 1997:261). Whereas the language used by the white oppressors is 'fixed' in the dual logic which leaves no room for the play of *différance* (that is neither a concept nor a word), these women try to break the back of this 'fixed' word by reverting to some primeval language which contains only sounds - no fixed words. The sound of their voices can be linked to Derrida's *arche-writing*, "that which exceeds the traditional (restricted) sense of the word in order to release all those hitherto repressed significations which have always haunted the discourse of logocentric reason" (Norris, 1987:122). Signs are combined to form limitless and open-ended chains of signification which resist the temptation of closure.

Language can be a healing force if it unblocks itself to the play of *différance*. Philip Page notes that "healing is most often accomplished through language" (1995:147). This is best seen just after Denver leaves the house in search of help for her mother and sister. Nelson Lord, the boy from her past whose original questions - "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (Morrison, 1997:104) deafened her, is the second person to make a positive impact on her life after she leaves the house (her former teacher Lady Jones being the first):

All he did was smile and say, 'Take care of yourself, Denver,' but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind (1997:252).

Nelson Lord's healing words contribute to the imminent exorcism of Beloved - the ghost of a racist past. Ashraf Rushdy explains that

[t]his encounter demonstrates Denver's growth. She knows now her shared history - her family's, her community's, her culture's. As much as Nelson's original question had been the closure of language for her, so now is his amiable comment a renewal of communication (1992:585).

Nelson Lord's few words have the power to open up language for Denver and she is able to move beyond her past and the oppressive language of slavery which tries to 'fix the mark' into a new world of knowledge¹.

In *Paradise*, Morrison also criticises those who try to fix the mark or have the 'last word' and shows that the white/black violent hierarchy can only be exploded if the play of *différance* within language is acknowledged. While fighting over the wording of the phrase at the Oven it is Steward, the most unrelenting of the Ruby patriarchs, who has the 'last word':

As could have been predicted, Steward had the last word - or at least the words they all remembered as last because they broke the meeting up. 'Listen here,' he said, his voice thick and shapely with Blue Boy. 'If you, any of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eyed snake' (Morrison, 1998:87).

It is thus significant that Steward is also the one who shoots Consolata when the men attack the Convent women. Consolata, with her light skin and green eyes, poses a threat to his and his brother's descendants and he does everything in his power to avoid 'tainted blood'

1 For a discussion of the therapeutic power of words, see Page (1995:148-149).

from entering his bloodline. When Steward has the 'last word', his behaviour mirrors that of the *apartheid* government in their attempt to create an all-white 'paradise' in South Africa. The theologico-political discourse of the *apartheid* government of South Africa dictates that *apartheid* laws are founded in theology. In "Racism's Last Word" Derrida writes: "since political power originates in God, it remains invisible. To accord individual rights 'to immature social communities' and to those who 'openly rebel against God, that is, the communists' would be 'a revolt against God'" (1985:296). In other words, the individuals who upheld the *apartheid* laws had God on their side (or so they thought), and whoever questioned this divine right, questioned God. Similarly, in *Paradise*, when the Ruby patriarchs attack the Convent women, they believe God supports them: "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (1998:18). In *Sula*, Morrison also shows how religious ideology justifies racial hierarchies. When, for instance, a white bargeman finds the body of Chicken Little in the river, he immediately assumes that it must have been some black parents who drowned their child:

He shook his head in disgust at the kind of parents who would drown their own children. When, he wondered, will those people ever be anything but animals, fit for nothing but substitutes for mules, only mules didn't kill each other the way niggers did ... Later, sitting down to smoke on an empty lard tin, [he was] bemused by God's curse and the terrible burden his own kind had of elevating Ham's sons (1982:63).

Morrison clearly satirises and condemns the rigid religious practices which inform the actions of people who believe in their own divine superiority. In *Paradise*, Morrison offers an antidote to Steward's religious intransigence in the form of Rev. Richard Misner who is willing to listen to the young people of Ruby. After his return from the meeting where he had the 'last word', Steward thinks that "[h]ad he any sons, they would have been sterling

examples of rectitude, laughing at Misner's notions of manhood: backtalk, name changes - as if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man" (1998:95). Morrison tries to show that 'word magic' has everything to do with what it takes to be a man - especially the type of man who accepts difference and does not set himself up to be superior to an Other.

Just before questioning Misner's word magic, Steward recalls a story about the time when his older brother Elder Morgan attacked two white men for hitting a black prostitute. While he is fighting with the men, a small crowd gathers around them and start yelling for the police. Frightened, Elder runs away, leaving the prostitute there on the pavement, something for which he never forgives himself:

He didn't excuse himself for running, abandoning the woman, and didn't expect God to cut him any slack for it [...] Steward liked that story, but it unnerved him to know it was based on the defense and prayers for a whore (1998:95).

Steward's reaction to this woman mirrors his reaction towards the Convent women whom he despises because he believes them to pose a threat to his community's racial purity. Steward's desire for security and happiness has turned him into someone whose "power to control [is] out of control" (1998:308). His position is summarised by Morrison's words: "how exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it" (1998:306). There is no hope for a future without oppression - a paradise - if those who are different are victimised. Violent racial hierarchies are only exploded if 'strange feathers' are allowed and accepted within one's own house. The Convent women understand this and Steward's twin Deacon eventually also learns this.

After the attack on the Convent women, Deacon realises that by victimising these women, he has become "what the Old Fathers cursed" (1998:302). His journey towards understanding takes him to Rev. Misner whom he tells about the time when some white men ordered his grandfather Zechariah and his twin (the two of them were known as Coffee and Tea) to dance. Whereas Tea accommodates the whites, Coffee decides to take a bullet in his foot instead. After that day, Coffee never spoke to Tea again. Deacon realises that Coffee's reaction to his brother is the direct result of his own racial self-hatred: "Coffee couldn't take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself" (1998:303). In other words, Deacon comprehends that the racial self-hatred which is instilled in black Americans by the white supremacist system has to be overcome for the cycle of oppression to be broken. This realisation is the first step towards exorcising the destructive ghost of the past and moving beyond violent racial hierarchies.

In both *Paradise* and *Beloved*, Morrison offers a glimmer of hope for a world that is not dictated by racial oppression and exclusion. In *Beloved*, it is significant that Denver, who eventually rescues her mother from the grips of a destructive past and "represents both the future and the past" (Krumholz, 1992:403), should be named after Amy Denver, the lower class white girl, who, "despite her own mistreatment and vulnerability, provides physical and spiritual salvation for Sethe" (Page, 1995:146) after Sethe escapes from slavery. It is through Amy's help that Denver is born. Ignês Sodre writes that

it is very important in terms of hope for some resolution of the racial conflict that Denver's life begins with help from a white girl, that the couple when Denver comes into the world is made of two women, one black and one white (Byatt, 1995:202-203).

Another character who assists Denver as she goes out into the world is her old schoolteacher, the mixed race Lady Jones whose "light skin got her picked for a colored girls' normal school in Pennsylvania and she paid it back by teaching the unpicked" (Morrison, 1997:247). She is the first person whom Denver turns to after having left her house and her words "Oh, baby" (1997:248) help Denver face the world: "[I]t was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (1997:248). Lady Jones represents a future relationship between black and white beyond violent racial hierarchies. Denver decides to follow in her footsteps by becoming a schoolteacher, to which Paul D responds: "watch out. Nothing in this world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (1997:266). Yet it is important that both Lady Jones and Denver usurp schoolteacher's position as educator, for, as Linda Krumholz writes, Denver

must take away from [schoolteacher] the power to define African-Americans and make their history in a way that steals their past, their souls, and their humanity (1992:405).

By becoming a schoolteacher, Denver contributes to redefining African American history. Moreover, since Denver is named after Amy Denver and the pupil of the mixed-race Lady Jones, she represents the unceasing subversion of white/black violent hierarchies.

In *Paradise*, Morrison also tries to move beyond structures which pigeonhole people on grounds of their race. She claims, for instance, that "[r]ace is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing" (Quoted by Gray, 1998:4). The opening sentence of *Paradise* reads: "They shoot the white girl first" (Morrison, 1998:3). Yet when reading the novel, the reader finds it almost impossible to identify who the white woman living in the Convent is. To this, Morrison comments:

I did that on purpose [...] I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter (Quoted by Gray, 1998:4).

Through language, Morrison facilitates the ongoing explosion of racial categories. These unceasing explosions and reassessments of fixed ideologies leave the world with the hope that one day, human beings will no longer be pigeonholed and judged purely on grounds of their race or skin-colour and that difference will no longer be seen as a disability. In her Nobel Lecture, Morrison uses the Tower of Babel story to demonstrate the impossibility of reaching 'paradise' if difference is not acknowledged and respected:

Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty, if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life, not heaven as postlife (1993c:270).

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

In a study of literature it is not only appropriate but also necessary to address violent hierarchies. Literature should no longer function as isolated works of fiction through which the reader can escape from reality and the world 'out there'. Literature plays an increasingly important role in unveiling structures of oppression, notably in the work of Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. By putting Toni Morrison in the centre of an analysis of violent hierarchies, it is possible to highlight the extent to which literature and literary language ought to be seen as a form of societal criticism. In this regard, Jacques Derrida's appeal to a new, non-binary logic which exposes hierarchical structures of domination in language is indispensable.

Since the rise of the 'linguistic turn' it has become apparent that language is not merely a mirror faithfully reflecting reality but rather a system of signification which carries with it a whole range of already established connotations. In other words, the very nature of language repeatedly confirms that meaning never escapes the connotative inter-linkages co-determining the context of denotation. With this in mind, Derrida demonstrates that the sign in itself is empty (deferrable), since the meaning of the sign can only be determined by looking at other signs. As a result, the character of the sign becomes relational. Derrida uses the term *différance* to demonstrate the way in which signifiers tend to both temporally and spatially defer meaning. Throughout the history of metaphysics, people have been trying to freeze the play of *différance* in order to establish a transcendental signified or 'fixed mark' which guarantees ultimate truth or presence. By inhibiting the play of

différance, a whole range of binary oppositions in which one pole of the opposition dominates the other has been sustained.

One of these binaries which Derrida deconstructs through the play of *différance* is the speech/writing hierarchy. Throughout metaphysical history, speech has been privileged over writing because it has been believed to be closer to ultimate truth. Yet in his reading of Rousseau, Derrida shows that at the root of a desire for ultimate presence or truth in speech lies the given that this presence is, in fact, not fully present and that only through writing, something which both temporally and spatially removes the author from his/her words, Rousseau manages to get some of the presence he craves for in speech. By deconstructing binary oppositions such as speech/writing and presence/absence, Derrida shows that the two poles in a binary pair function as each other's supplement and that there is no clear either/or choice between the two. The two terms in an opposition are thus co-constitutive and the superiority of the one over the other can never be guaranteed. What seems to stand in direct opposition to a certain sign is thus always *inside* the sign in some way. Derrida also uses the term *trace* to demonstrate that the supposedly superior term is always at the point of being transgressed by its so-called inferior, something which thoroughly undermines the superiority of the prior term. This explains why, throughout logocentric, metaphysical history which has sanctioned the marginalisation of some Other, the play of *différance* has been inhibited in order to ensure that the superiority of the 'master' term is not challenged.

The dominance of one pole in a binary pair over the other - the violent hierarchy - always re-establishes itself. This is why Derrida insists that these oppositions should not only be

continually reversed, but that such reversal should also go hand in hand with an ongoing displacement of the logocentric system which causes these hierarchies to become entrenched in the language through which human thought is accessed (and which shapes our thought). Derrida's attempts at deconstructing dual logic in language should by no means be seen as being confined to and limited by language. Deconstruction should rather be seen as an attempt to de-limit language. When Derrida suggests that "[t]here is nothing outside the text" (1976:158), he means that there are no truths independent of the network of signifying traces through which we access and understand our world. Derrida also substitutes this 'text' with terms like writing or '*arché-writing*' and by deconstructing hierarchical oppositions in language, he also ruptures the greater 'text' or '*arché-writing*'. This 'text' is an open, heterogeneous field of forces which include political and institutional practices.

By deconstructing violent hierarchies such as serious/nonserious, literal/metaphorical and political/intellectual, Derrida undermines the inferior status of literature, consequently earning literature the right to address unfair structures of dominance and oppression in the world 'out there', which is also just part of the greater 'text'. There no longer is a clear division between literature and the 'world'. Thus, if literature is to move beyond the marginalisation of some Other, it has to guard against limiting the play of *différance* and the consequent entrenchment of violent hierarchies. Releasing language to the play of *différance* does not result in complete undecideability of meaning which would leave one without answers to concrete moral or political dilemmas. It merely entails that these 'answers' are always re-examined within different contexts.

Morrison is thoroughly aware of the dangers of the 'dead language' of closure which limits the play of *différance*. In her Nobel Lecture, she writes:

... a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written; it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance. However moribund, it is not without effect, for it actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences (1993c:268).

Like Derrida, Morrison is interested in letting the Other be in its Otherness, and she actively criticises the dual logic which causes the Other to be silenced and subjugated. Yet she is also interested in showing the impact of violent hierarchies on both the excluder and the excluded. With respect to the male/female violent hierarchy, this entails (in simplistic terms) showing that the two poles in the opposition are never mutually exclusive. In order to explode this violent hierarchy in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison both denounces patriarchy and oppressive gender role stereotypes, and demonstrates female difference within male identity and vice versa. Though the latter description does not capture the full complexity of the issues at stake, it may serve as an approximation of the Derridean notions of reactive and maverick feminism.

Despite the fact that Derrida criticises the system which tries to subdue the Other, he nonetheless stipulates that a clean break from such a system is impossible. Recognising one's own application of dual logic becomes a prerequisite for also continually questioning one's own ideological stance. As soon as one believes that the system one tries to dislodge has been transcended, one risks ignoring the remnants of that system within one's own ranks. So, when Alice Walker coins the phrase 'white female chauvinism', she refers to

the fact that many strands of white feminism have merely re-employed the oppressive logic of patriarchy by excluding and silencing black women.

Derrida uses the phrase reactive feminism to refer to the vital process of disrupting the phallogocentric system whilst still using the tools of this very system. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison employs reactive feminism as she condemns patriarchy and oppressive gender role stereotypes by demonstrating the effects of these patriarchal constructions on both poles in the binary pair. In *The Bluest Eye*, both Pecola Breedlove and her father Cholly find it impossible to live up to the requirements of their respective gender roles. Even though Cholly is also a victim of the patriarchal system, unlike Pecola, he, as a male, is backed by this system. This is what makes it possible for him to victimise those who occupy a lower position than him in the male/female violent hierarchy. He rapes Pecola, who, in turn, completely loses touch with reality. In a racialised, chauvinist world ultimate female beauty is stereotyped in the image of a milky white skin, straight blonde hair and blue eyes. As females are judged primarily by their physical appearance, failure to live up to these false images of beauty can have devastating consequences for someone like Pecola Breedlove who in many ways occupies the lowest rung in the hierarchical ladder.

In *Sula*, the effects of patriarchy are demonstrated in various ways. So, for instance, both Nel and Sula grow up without a positive male role model in their lives. As a result, neither of these women later have fulfilling relationships with the men that they love. Part of the reason for this, however, is the fact that the men in their lives are also trapped within the patriarchal system and try to dominate 'their' women either by being overly possessive (Jude) or excessively independent (Ajax). In addition, both Nel and Sula suffer because

they either completely accept or reject their gender roles. Thus Nel becomes the typical nesting wife and loses much of her individuality and potential, and Sula, who rejects these stereotypes, is shunned by the community women because unlike them, she has not been broken by the injustices of abusive male/female relationships.

Reactive feminism's denunciation of patriarchal and phallogocentric gender role stereotypes is a necessary step in the process of exploding the male/female violent hierarchy. Yet reactive feminism can only guard against a mere reversal of hierarchies if it acknowledges that it is fighting with the same tools as the system which it rejects. Such an acknowledgement should coincide with an acceptance of maverick feminism which embraces the play of *différance* and difference within identity. Even though, for practical purposes, these two forms of feminism are treated as chronological phases, they should in fact be employed simultaneously - the one cannot be separated from the other.

In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* Morrison makes use of the pariah to demonstrate the Other's difference within the identity of the excluder. Pecola Breedlove, the 'blackest', 'ugliest', Other is used by the community to confirm their own superiority. Similarly, Sula Peace becomes a catalyst for good in *Medallion*, where her so-called evil inspires everyone to be good to each other. The pariah status of these two females undermines the notion of superiority, since it can only exist in the presence of someone else's inferiority. The men in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, for instance, establish their own superiority in terms of the inferiority of the female Other. Cholly Breedlove and Jude Green use their female counterparts for the completion of their own identities. Yet these men live unfulfilled lives because they do not recognise that their own identity in fact depends on the female

difference within it and that by depriving some female of her full identity, they damage themselves. Similarly, Nel and Sula also have to admit to the male difference within their own identities before their journey towards selfhood (which is never completed) can commence in earnest. Only then can the woman who dreams of a gift beyond sexual opposition take part in the maverick dance.

Morrison also explodes violent class hierarchies in all her novels, notably in *Song of Solomon*. In this regard a brief assessment of some of the similarities and differences between the thought of Karl Marx and Jacques Derrida is necessary. Like Marxism, deconstruction is actively involved in the 'class struggle', yet the two approach the struggle in different ways. Both Marxism and deconstruction try to rupture the skewed opposition between theory and practice. However, whereas Marxists believe in practical intervention in the 'real world' (beyond the text) by overthrowing the ruling class in order to utilise the means of production in an equitable way, deconstruction argues that there is nothing beyond the text and that by overturning and displacing hierarchical structures of opposition in discourse, it is actively involved in the 'practical' class struggle. Marx sees the 'text' as a 'site of struggle' determined by socio-economic events, whereas Derrida sees it as an open, heterogeneous plurality of signifying possibilities. Derrida's understanding of the 'text' is thus much broader than the Marxist one. For Derrida, not only practical politics, but also history is part of this greater text, because all history is ultimately reported and consequently subject to the play of *différance* in language, opening it up to many signifying traces. For Derrideans, history becomes a 'story'. So, Milkman Dead has to learn about his ancestry and cultural heritage through the stories told to him by numerous people in the novel. In contrast, Marx does not recognise history as part of a greater text, but rather

explains it (as everything else) in terms of socio-economic class relations. Through dialectical historical materialistic progression, Marx believes that one day a utopian society, in which all class conflict and difference will be eradicated, will be achieved. The Marxist class struggle is informed by this belief. Similarly, deconstruction is informed by the dream of the 'gift', yet unlike Marxists, deconstructionists know that this gift is an impossibility - they are merely guided by it.

For deconstructionists the dream of the gift also entails that the revolution is never at an end - as contexts change, so our questions and answers must change and be re-assessed in order to avoid what Gayatri Spivak calls a 'repetition-in-rupture'. This refers to the danger many revolutionary political programmes face of remaining within the logic defined by the opponent and thus repeating certain values and assumptions which they initially set out to subvert.

In *Song of Solomon* this 'repetition-in-rupture' is demonstrated through characters such as Macon Dead and Guitar Bains. Both these characters try to compensate for past wrongs committed against them by merely repeating the cycle of oppression. Macon Dead, for instance, tries to outdo white people materially in an (unconscious) attempt to redress a past of class exploitation by white people. In his own black community Macon resembles the white capitalist oppressor as he exploits everyone lower than him in the class hierarchy. One of these people who experiences this exploitation (by both Macon and white capitalists) firsthand is Guitar Bains. Yet instead of rejecting the logic of the oppressor, Guitar reappropriates it, firstly by joining the 'Seven Days' and later by turning against his friend Milkman in his desperate attempt to get his hands on some of the wealth which has eluded

him all his life. Morrison offers an antidote to Macon's deadening materialism and Guitar's vindictiveness in Pilate and at the end of the novel also in Milkman. Pilate lives a rich and fulfilled life entirely unencumbered by the material excesses which Macon believes to be the only key to happiness. Ironically, the rich Macon is thoroughly unhappy, whereas Pilate lives in spiritual harmony.

Milkman's journey towards individuation leads him to an understanding of the fact that his bourgeois, capitalist values can thrive only if someone lower than him in the class hierarchy is exploited. Morrison explodes, for instance, the manual labour/mental labour or proletariat/bourgeoisie hierarchies by showing the superior term to be thoroughly determined by its so-called inferior. Yet in order to avoid a 'repetition-in-rupture', this demonstration of difference within identity should extend both ways and should be repeated ad in finitum, since oppositional logic inevitably produces a reversal of violent hierarchies.

Finally, Morrison's treatment of violent racial hierarchies in *Beloved* and *Paradise* shows her commitment to addressing the rights of the historically marginalised. Morrison emphasises the absurdity of American racism which has survived over the years mainly as a result of superficial concerns such as differences in skin colour. Once again, she rejects the way in which difference is treated as a disability. Derrida, in turn, insists that difference should be treated as an integral part of any identity and that there is no such thing as a homogeneous, self-identical identity. Groups of people who insist on such a homogeneous identity not only end up oppressing the Other, but also hurt themselves.

In "Racism's Last Word" Derrida discusses the type of language used by the advocates of *apartheid* in their attempt to eradicate any difference within white ranks, setting black people up as their direct opposition - the essentially different. He refers to the term *apartheid* as a 'violent arrest of the mark' - the ultimate attempt to suppress the play of *différance*. By focussing on the word *apartheid* and appealing to the world to let it be the 'last' racism in the world, Derrida does not mean to imply that all acts of racial violence are merely words, but that racism has to have a word. By attempting to 'fix meaning', not only language, but also the reality which is accessed and shaped by this language becomes oppressive. Such language leaves no scope for the possible explosion of violent hierarchies, whereas generative language at least opens up the possibility of such explosions. By exposing and rejecting the logocentric text which underlies a system such as *apartheid*, Derrida does not limit himself to the 'text' or language, but moves beyond these restrictive categories by subverting the very assumptions by means of which such categories become limiting.

In both *Beloved* and *Paradise* Morrison tries to subvert oppressive, logocentric 'texts'. She exposes and condemns a whole history of racism and white supremacy in America by re-imagining this history through the eyes of black individuals, thus causing a shift in the white Self/black Other paradigm. In both *Beloved* and *Paradise* she thoroughly undermines white centrality and superiority by showing the impact of this 'superiority' on black and white individuals in America. Because this white superiority is clearly not absolute, white people have sunk to appalling lows to prove and maintain their superiority. Morrison effectively overturns the white/black violent hierarchy by demonstrating the moral inferi-

ority of the white oppressor caused by his/her racist ideologies. Morrison demonstrates how black people have been viewed and treated like (or worse than) animals throughout American history. She also gives numerous examples of the way in which black people have been physically abused and dehumanised as a result of racism, particularly in *Beloved* where such abuse has been so excessive (if indeed any abuse can be seen as *not* excessive) that the ex-slave Sethe chooses to kill her own baby daughter rather than expose her to the horrors of slavery. In both *Beloved* and *Paradise* the history of racism poses a constant threat to the mental well-being of black people who have to live with this fear, and in their search for safety and security, these people have themselves reappropriated the dual logic of the oppressor.

Morrison demonstrates how the ghost of racism has the potential to turn destructive amongst the oppressed. In *Paradise* this 'ghost' manifests itself as colourism, one of racism's corollaries which situates people in a hierarchy of shades based on their skin colour. In a racist society where whites are considered superior to black people, darker-skinned black people are often discriminated against by lighter-skinned black people. In *Paradise*, the 8-rock forefathers of Haven and Ruby have been 'disallowed' in many black towns as a result of their skin-colour. The history of colourist and racist oppression stays with the people of Ruby as a 'vindictive present' and they consequently refuse to tolerate anybody not 8-rock, thus merely reappropriating oppositional logic. This oppositional logic eventually almost destroys "the one all-black town worth the pain" (Morrison, 1998:5). Similarly, in *Beloved*, the ghost of slavery manifests itself in Sethe's house as extreme possessiveness which threatens to destroy her and her family. Like colourism in *Paradise*, possessiveness becomes one of racism/slavery's corollaries in *Beloved*. Both

these corollaries have a negative impact not only on the oppressed but also on those who perpetuate the oppression. Only once the ghost of dual logic is exorcised can the healing process commence. Dual logic also manifests itself as oppressive, logocentric language in both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, and only once this language is allowed to accommodate the play of *différance* can there be a possibility of continually exploding and moving beyond the cycle of racist hierarchisation. Morrison presents some hope of a world beyond racist hierarchies through Denver, named after the lower class white girl Amy Denver in *Beloved*, and through the Convent women who disregard differences in skin-colour in *Paradise*.

Morrison's explosions of gender, class and racial violent hierarchies demonstrate that the process of subverting the logocentric system can never come to an end. Oppositional logic has a tendency to manifest itself in the ranks of the oppressed, inevitably causing a mere reversal of hierarchies. In order to deal with this contingency, there can never be a 'final answer' or fixed mark which indelibly limits the free-play of *différance*. This is valid for the characters in her novels as well as the readers of her texts. At the end of her novels Morrison never insists on a 'final answer' that would be true for all eternity and all contexts. Rather, she leaves her novels open and ambiguous so as to encourage the reader to continue the process of perpetual explosion. In her writing Morrison tries to emulate the oral tradition, and, as she argues in an interview with Christina Davis,

You don't end a story in the oral tradition - you can have the little message at the end, your little moral, but the ambiguity is deliberate because it doesn't end, it's an ongoing thing and the reader or the listener is in it and you have to THINK (1986:232 - emphasis in original).

This ongoing process can have a practical political impact only if the reader takes up this challenge, embraces the free-play of *différance* and continually questions oppositional logic. This study should not be considered the last word either, but should be perpetuated by means of ongoing research into the nature of violent hierarchies and dual logic and the possible disruption of both these metaphysical constructions. There are many more violent hierarchies which are exploded in Morrison's fiction. For instance, her explosion of the past/present violent hierarchy in *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *Paradise* needs to be assessed and in *Sula*, the heterosexual/homosexual binary is ruptured, as Barbara Smith demonstrates in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism". The violent hierarchies of gender, race and class can also be detailed in all her novels, not merely the novels chosen for the specific chapters of this study.

Deconstruction's contribution to literature's status as form of societal criticism entails that a study of violent hierarchies in Morrison's fiction should coincide with a study and explosion of these violent hierarchies in society at large. On a practical level this entails that the readers of her novels continually re-assess and undermine the sexist, classist and racist absurdities of their everyday lives.

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