

Re-evaluating Essentialism:

An Analysis of Toni Morrison's Essentialist
Presentation of Religion in *Beloved* and *Paradise*

Thea Larsen Gustavsen

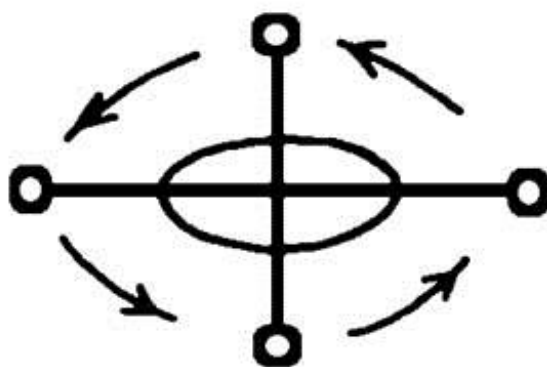


**A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies,
and European Languages
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
MA Degree
Spring 2014**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to prove that the established reputation of essentialism is undeserved, and argues that Toni Morrison's presentation of religion and spirituality in *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1998) contains both implicit and explicit essentialist perspectives. The overall claim is that Morrison's general method of withholding information in her narratives, and her corresponding expectations of readers' ability to fill the missing gaps, can be interpreted as implicit essentialism when it concerns spiritual practices and beliefs. In both novels, the religious presentation surrounding "the ancestral presence" – Baby Suggs, holy and Consolata Sosa – is analyzed as a depiction of essentialist attitudes towards "the black experience" or "the black community." It follows that Morrison holds religion and spirituality as a core or an essence to the black experience, one that has endured the hardship of temporal and spatial changes, and that remains a part of black identity even today. In addition to demonstrating how both novels could be seen as portraying this belief *implicitly*, this study also shows that Richard Misner in *Paradise* – the Afrocentric Reverend who functions as an ideal reader – in fact represents an *explicit* essentialist attitude. Misner holds a remarkably significant position in *Paradise*, and his function in the narrative is the chief realization of this study. Along with other substantial tendencies in Morrison's essentialist perspectives, his character has been paramount to the re-evaluation of essentialism in this thesis.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION: “If You Cut Yourself Off From the Roots, You’ll Wither”	1
The Debate: Essentialism versus Anti-essentialism.....	4
Theory and Criticism: African American Literature.....	7
African Traditions of Religion and Spirituality	13
CHAPTER 1: Crossing Over to the Other Side in <i>Beloved</i>	17
Hidden Essentialism in <i>Beloved</i>	18
The Ancestral Presence: Baby Suggs, holy.....	22
Demands on the Reader: Ghosts and Otherness.....	27
CHAPTER 2: Staying in Touch With the Roots in <i>Paradise</i>	37
The Ancestral Presence: Consolata Sosa	38
Disconsolate Readers Doing the Endless Work.....	43
Explicit Essentialism in <i>Paradise</i>	49
CONCLUSION: “The Ease of Coming Back to Love Begun”	57
WORKS CITED:	63

INTRODUCTION:

“If You Cut Yourself Off From the Roots, You’ll Wither”

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

– Toni Morrison (qtd. in Caldwell 243)

Essentialism has an unmistakably bad reputation both in and outside of literature. In a comprehensive account of critical theory for literary and cultural studies, *How to Interpret Literature* (2011), Robert Dale Parker writes that, when it comes to essentialism, the reality is that “most people whom other people call essentialist do not call themselves essentialists” (103). When accused of stating essentialist arguments, most people will make numerous excuses and try their best to explain how essentialism was far from their intentions. Parker is remarkably present in his own text, using a very personal style of writing, and he is recurrently sharing his own points of view, such as: “from my own antiessentialist perspective, or – to use my own more modest term – from a nonessentialist perspective...” (103). Logically, Parker’s perspective is easily detectable in his account of the debate surrounding essentialism and anti-essentialism. Although he realizes that some arguments are difficult to place solely within essentialism or anti-essentialism, he takes a definite stand against essentialism, and he is of course right when stating that it is easy to critique essentialism because of how “it can often deteriorate into plain prejudice” (104).

At one point, however, I think Parker shows a limited understanding of essentialism, because he casually links it to racism: “[t]he person who believes that all blacks love to dance and sing is an essentialist, as well as a racist, and that kind of essentialism helps give essentialism a bad name” (104). It seems a bit drastic to equate racism and essentialism like Parker does in his statement, even though racial essentialism can be said to contain racist connotations. Yet, what makes his statement easier to understand is a consideration of historic occurrences like the black minstrel shows in 19th century America, such as Robert Nowatski presents in *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (2010) (1-9). Today, this type of claim about black people is clearly essentialist,

but it does not suggest that black people belong to a race inferior to others, which essentially makes Parker's argument less trustworthy due to his lack of the historic context. From my point of view, essentialism grounded in racial experience does not have to be associated with racism, and it does not deserve its solely bad reputation.

Parker describes an essentialist as someone who "believes that the issue at hand, whatever it may be, has an underlying essence, a basic and defining set of qualities that do not change across history and geography" (103). This belief is what separates essentialists from anti-essentialists, who, on the other hand, believe that people's identity is an ongoing process constructed by society. Stuart Hall provides a clarifying definition of identity in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in which he proposes: "[p]erhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (110).

Although I agree with both Parker and Hall about the ongoing process of identity making which is never complete, my thesis argues that there might be some qualities in certain groups of people that are more resistant to change, but that nevertheless influence identity making throughout time. The line between viewing identity as only essence or only process is not as easily drawn as Parker conveys, and many scholars and critics discussing race struggle with keeping to their anti-essentialist disclaimers, usually issued in the beginning of their texts precisely to make sure that their statements are not perceived as essentialist. Interestingly, even Toni Morrison, who writes with a considerable racial awareness, has deployed this method of using anti-essentialist disclaimers in her critical work, and nonetheless ended up conveying implicit essentialist attitudes.

Toni Morrison's fiction expresses, beyond question, a unique position on how African Americans have been neglected in American literary history – with a constant endeavor to fill significant gaps regarding the black community and experience in the United States. As someone who has spoken the unspeakable on behalf of a people discredited through history, Morrison is undoubtedly concerned with how race has been constructed by society and "the white gaze." Consequently, some critics might state that a critique of black essentialism "to some extent underpins all of Morrison's work" (Peach 138). In this thesis, however, I claim that there is an underlying commitment to essentialist perspectives underpinning both her fiction and non-fiction, and that this attitude not necessarily is all that bad. Toni Morrison and several other African American intellectuals end up using rhetorical strategies that depend on a variety of racial essentialisms as they ground their arguments in racial experiences. In most

cases, it is not an adequate protection to state, once in the beginning of the text, that you do not mean to essentialize or be affiliated with any ideas of that sort. Many do not realize how referring to a “black community” and an “identifiable blackness” – with numerous references to “us” and “we” – is similar to that of lapsing into racial essentialism. I aim to show that it is difficult to draw a distinct line between essentialism and anti-essentialism, due to the abovementioned habit, and this information should be of interest to anti-essentialists.

If anti-essentialist critics are inattentive to how they express themselves in relation to African Americans, or other racially and ethnically defined groups, they could end up being interpreted as the very thing they argue against. It is easy to overlook such hidden essentialist content in their arguments, and they should be concerned about how their claims are clearly destabilized by it. As mentioned, Morrison deploys this same logic in some of her critical essays, but in this thesis, I want to suggest that she also uses the same strategies in her novels. The distinctive mark of the black community that I find her to present and treat as a fixed essence is religious and spiritual practices and beliefs.

In my thesis, I would like to prove that Toni Morrison uses essentialism to create a unity and a shared identity among the “initiated” people belonging to the black community outside of her novels, which is visible through her presentation of pan-African religion and spirituality in *Beloved* and *Paradise*. By claiming that the Nobel Prize winning Toni Morrison – one of the most recognized writers of literature dealing with racial issues – ends up displaying essentialist perspectives in her work, I want to demonstrate that the established reputation of essentialism is unearned and that essentialism is less problematic than everyone believes it to be. My analysis relies on a collection of evidence taken from statements Morrison has made over the last decades, mostly through interviews and critical essays. She has eloquently expressed that she writes for *black* people in a black style of language filled with exclusive sounds, metaphors and phrases, and that she writes to rectify the lack of a personified and acknowledged black presence in American literary history – with a hope to provide for the black community today what the old spirituals and oral storytelling used to do.

Inspired by different scholars that will be presented subsequently – even though they clearly differ in their approaches to essentialism – I have formulated my own definition of the term to clarify how I analyze the two primary works. The approaches that are in accordance with my own view are the ones that include culture as a basis for essentialism – the ones that do not limit a view of essentialism to biology only. Building on several definitions, and related to characteristics of groups of people, I understand essentialism as the belief in a shared identity and a common ground of knowledge based on a historical and cultural essence

known to and experienced by the whole group in question. This belief has to do with self-identification, and racial identity can refer to “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms 3). How other people identify or define the group is not of importance, and the kind of essentialism that I focus on in my thesis is related to this way of defining racial identity. Essentialism and racial identity is not equated, though, but they are closely related in this study due to how they are similarly based on self-identification and personal perceptions.

In this introductory chapter, I will examine different notions of essentialism and anti-essentialism, and discuss how essentialism relates to a distinguishable “black identity” or “black community.” With the help of various prominent scholars within the African American literary field, I try to outline some of the most established views and attitudes towards essentialism and race. The scholars and critics that I have decided to incorporate into my discussion are the ones that I have found to express – implicitly and explicitly – specific positions to either essentialism or anti-essentialism. From here, my introduction consists of four parts: first, I present the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism; second, I consider different concepts of race and identity through the ideas of some selected critical race theorists; third, I present my two main sources for knowledge of African traditional religion; and finally, before commencing on the first chapter, I present the structure of both chapters and give a brief overview of their components.

The Debate: Essentialism versus Anti-essentialism

If we imagine an axis with essentialism and anti-essentialism at the two far ends, I would argue that scholars like bell hooks and Cornel West end up moving in the middle of the axis, around the intersection between the two perspectives, even though they would never admit to having essentialist thoughts about race. Other scholars like Paul Gilroy and Walter Benn Michaels are, on the other hand, more consistent in their claims about race and thus safely located at the anti-essentialist side of the axis. Where Morrison herself is situated on the axis, in the quite unique position as an “artist-critic” (McBride 135), is the main inquiry of this thesis, and is discussed throughout. These scholars are discussed further in the next section of the introduction, and they will feature at important stages in the rest of the thesis as well.

What made me turn to essentialism as a main focus in this thesis is La Vinia Delois Jennings’s comprehensive study of religion in Morrison’s work: *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (2008). In this book, Jennings claims that religious beliefs and practices, like the ones Morrison treat in her novels, are “the cultural elements that are most resistant to

temporal and spatial changes” (6). I agree with Jennings in thinking about religion and spirituality as somewhat “timeless” cultural elements, affecting people throughout history, and this view is significant in relation to my global claim. In racial essentialism, the essence believed to be possessed by the entire group can be a “natural, supernatural, or mystical characteristic,” which is understood as being “immune to social forces” (Austin 12-13) – as a contrast to being adaptable to different cultural contexts. Similar to the habit of issuing anti-essentialist disclaimers, Jennings claims that her intention is *not* “to exoticize or essentialize Blackness” (14). In the same introduction, however, she also states that Morrison incorporates African traditional beliefs “to qualify her work as irrevocably Black” (12) and that her depiction of these beliefs mirror “identifiable qualities of Blackness, ancient African ways of being and knowing, that presently linger consciously and unconsciously in African America” (6). Thus, Jennings suggests that these beliefs remain in every African American *today*, whether they acknowledge them or not, which is very interesting for my overall project.

In *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (1989), Diana Fuss presents a more nuanced account of essentialism than what Robert Dale Parker does in his brief description of it. She defines essentialism, as it is most commonly understood, “as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). Both Fuss and Parker occupy the position of an anti-essentialist, but through that position they treat essentialism in quite different ways. Fuss explains how her own position throughout the text is that of “an anti-essentialist who wants to preserve (in both senses of the term: to maintain and to embalm) the category of essence” (xiv). She questions the established difference between essentialism and constructionism, and she wants to show that the bar between the two “is by no means as solid and unassailable as advocates of both sides assume it to be” (xii). The main claim in Fuss’s book is that “there is no essence to essentialism, that (historically, philosophically, and politically) we can only speak of *essentialisms*” (xii). Fuss further explains that her book also aims to prove how constructionism “really operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism” (xii).

Fuss confronts what she calls “the most rigorous anti-essentialist discourse of all” (12) – deconstructionism – and claims that “the possibility of any radical constructionism can only be built on the foundations of a hidden essentialism” (12-13). Her discussion of Derrida’s phrase “always already” is similar to the way in which Morrison presents traditional religious beliefs supposedly known to black people. Fuss interprets this phrase to appear frequently at the points where Derrida “wishes to put the brakes on the analysis in progress and to make a turn in another direction” (15), and in her opinion: “[t]he danger (and the usefulness) of

‘always already’ is that it *implies* essence, it hints at an irreducible core that requires no further investigation” (17). This interpretation of the term would probably be disagreed upon among post-structuralists, seeing as Fuss brings essence into the equation, but despite potential objections, I find her analysis interesting because it reminds me of how Morrison presents religion in her novels. Religion is the information that needs no further explanation in her work and therefore hints at an irreducible core or essence to “the black community.”

One scholar who explicitly links Morrison’s critical work to essentialism is Dwight McBride. He bases his argument on Fuss’s definition of essentialism when he argues that Morrison ends up using rhetorical strategies grounded in racial essentialism in her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.” In his article, McBride seems to be suggesting that essentialism has received an unfairly bad reputation, and he supports the necessity of “strategic essentialism” (150). Related to racial self-identification, strategic essentialism can be seen as a method for minority groups to defend themselves in activism and reclaim their own identity from within. Gayatri Spivak, who coined the term “strategic essentialism,” is said to suggest that, in certain periods, “the employment of essentialist ideas may be a necessary part of the process by which the colonized achieve a renewed sense of the value and dignity of their pre-colonial cultures” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 79).

McBride states that Morrison is careful to issue an anti-essentialist disclaimer in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” but that she nevertheless ends up both arguing for and depending on a variety of racial essentialism based on racial experience (133). The disclaimer he refers to is indeed anti-essentialist, but not related to race. It concerns the definition of literary quality, which Morrison states is “seldom universally agreed upon by everyone at all times” (3). Her essay is difficult to interpret, McBride continues, because of the way “it boldly enacts a carefully articulated form of racial essentialism even as it understands the critical risks involved in such a move” (133). He believes that her rhetorical strategies are common among African American intellectuals, and claims that even the scholars informed by much poststructuralist thought “almost without fail (and out of political necessity), pause to genuflect before the shrine of essentialism” (134).

McBride mentions some obvious examples of racialized discourse in the second part of his essay, which he describes as “the overly popular catch-phrases or calls to unity like ‘Blacks’ and ‘the Black community’” (139). He calls these phrases totalizing descriptors: “[t]hey serve to make us think [...] that ‘the Black community’ is knowable, totalizable, locatable and certainly separate from or other than the speaker (Black or non-Black in some cases)” (139). McBride continues, in the third part, to focus on mainly two forms of

essentialism done by several African American intellectuals. The first one he mentions is the use of “we” or “our,” which are phrases similar to “the black community,” and he is under the impression that the use of such unifying words “may be a way of avoiding an *explicit* essentialism, but it hardly escapes lapsing into an *implicit* essentialism” (145).

The other well-established essentialist method McBride submits is the popular use of anecdote in which scholars portray relating experiences. He writes that testifying and storytelling are “methods of self-disclosure that legitimize the critical project as somehow more authentic, bearing a direct relationship to ‘experience’” (146). The contemporary examples are numerous, McBride writes (in 1993), and he mentions among others Houston Baker’s introduction to *Long Black Song*, “any number of essays by bell hooks,” and also – what he calls one of the most illustrative examples – the preface of Cornel West’s book *Race Matters* (146). As a conclusion to his essay, McBride states that it is “in an attempt to represent one’s own experience in a language that is not intended to do that work, that a strategic essentialism becomes an almost indispensable tool” (150). The reasons behind the use of essentialism among African American intellectuals are given in a fittingly essentialist manner, most likely with a clear intention, as he closes his essay with these wise words:

It allows us to speak categorically in a discourse that seems to demand and respect labels. It enables us to speak to and about a people whose individual lives may be markedly different, but who nonetheless suffer from a common form of racial hegemony. It permits us to hold up the possibility of a unity, albeit fictitious, that makes our burdens more manageable because the load is shared (150).

Theory and Criticism: African American Literature

As the preceding quotation shows, the African American scholar Dwight McBride does not find essentialism as problematic as other scholars seem to do. He focuses on its possibility to create a unity in which they can share the load, even though the foundation of such a unity is based on something that might be constructed and therefore not entirely real. Most African American scholars normally take a poststructuralist and deconstructionist perspective in their writing, which consequently makes them take an anti-essentialist standpoint. In the works of black scholars like bell hooks, Cornel West, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall, “race” understandably holds a paramount position, but only in a wish to move completely beyond it and accomplish a raceless society. A resemblance between the scholars with an anti-essentialist attitude is that they seem to acknowledge how essentialism was needed at some point in history, but that this need is long gone and belongs to a “distant” past.

In his acknowledged article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall states that there are at least two different ways of thinking about “cultural identity,” and the first of these

is a position that defines it in terms of “one culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (111). He continues: “[t]his ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence [...] of the black experience” (111). Hall explains how this conception of cultural identity has played a critical role in post-colonial struggles, and that it held a center stage position in movements such as Négritude and Pan-Africanism in the first decades of the 20th century. He states that we should not underestimate or neglect the importance of rediscovering essential parts of identity, but he aims to show that his second way of thinking about cultural identity, with a stronger focus on differences, is more apt for a modern society: “[i]t belongs to the future as much as to the past” (112). Cultural identities come from somewhere, Hall states, but they undergo constant transformation and are subject to the production of history, culture and power. Yet, he clearly understands why some people would adhere to a belief in essences.

Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice (2013), is the title of one of bell hooks’s newest publications, and her aim is thus clearly exposed from the very start. Comparable to Hall’s arguments presented above, hooks also recognizes that an essentialist and collective perspective of black identity existed at some point in history, but believes it to be entirely absent at the time when she wrote the book: “[t]here is no longer a common notion of shared black identity” (2). She writes specifically of religion in relation to this lost identity that can no longer “draw folks together in meaningful solidarity” (2), and claims that there was a time in the United States “when it was just assumed that every black person was a Christian or at least coming from a Christian background. This is simply no longer the case” (3). The theological language that “once served as a basis of communication and bonding” (3) can no longer be assumed due to the diverse and changing religious practices.

In this book, hooks attempts to “think and write beyond the boundaries that keep us all overracialized. To find a way to move beyond race is not only the goal of critical thinking, it is the only path to emotional longevity, the only true path to liberation” (8). What is interesting to see, then, is that in her final chapters, hooks turns in part to spiritual practices and beliefs for her conclusion on how to move beyond race. Even though she denies the existence of a shared, collective notion of identity with any fixed meanings or essences today, she supports her final arguments with the spiritual legacy derived from former slaves coping with a life in freedom. Moreover, she claims that it is evident that the reason why black people experience hopelessness and despair nowadays is the lack of contact with their spiritual foundations (188). I experience these last statements to have essentialist viewpoints

implicitly embedded in them, exemplified through the following quotation with the relating of experience, the use of words like “us,” “our,” and “black person,” and especially her vernacular use of “folks,” which is consistent throughout the whole book:

Anyone, and especially any black person seeking to move beyond race, can find in spiritual practice a way out of manmade constructions. Throughout the history of black experience in the United States, folks have given powerful testimony to the meaning of spirituality in our lives not as a path that takes us away from reality but as a path of mindful awareness that enables us to accept and cope with reality (188-189).

Additionally, another part of her concluding statements is worth mentioning: “[w]hen we are able to feel wholehearted empathy with everyone, we can move past all artificial distinctions separating and estranging us from one another” (189). This sentence causes me to pause and reflect on how consistent her ideas really are. She makes it exceptionally clear that the main problem in the world is “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (5), and that “white supremacy is the covert ideology that is the silent cause of harm and trauma” (5) – essentially what needs to be noticed by everyone as a practice informing our daily lives to be able to move beyond race. At the end of her book, I am not convinced that bell hooks would be able to follow her own instructions and feel a wholehearted empathy with *everyone* – for instance a rich, white man – and this impression weakens her cause.

Walter Benn Michaels, on the other hand, writes specifically about the essentialist/anti-essentialist debate, but he does not seem to take a clear personal stand for one or the other side. Rather, what he questions in *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2004) is the debate itself, and he argues that the debate is so fundamental in contemporary theory “not because the disagreements between the two positions are so fundamental but because their agreement is” (35). Their agreement, Michaels writes, is based on the value of difference itself, and their dispute is basically one about whether difference is physical or cultural. Thus, he draws the line between essentialists and anti-essentialists based on their understanding of difference as essentially physical or as essentially cultural (35). He is mainly concerned with wherever people locate themselves on the axis between insisting on difference and eliminating difference. His own argument, however, is “to attack the axis, not to argue for one or another position along it” (33). Michaels’s understanding of essentialism as only biological differs from Parker, Fuss, and McBride as their views are presented above, and also from my own definition stated earlier.

Michaels is careful to mention that he does *not* take an essentialist position, even though he presents racial essentialism in this slightly ironic manner: “[n]othing is more common in American intellectual life today than the denial that racial identity is a biological

phenomenon and the denunciation of such a biologism as racial essentialism” (137). His most articulated anti-essentialist disclaimer, however, is related to his preference of the subject position of the reader in the creation of meaning in texts. He favors the subject position of the reader over the author’s intentions, and states that his argument, in miniature, is “that if you think the intention of the author is what counts, then you don’t think the subject position of the reader matters, but if you don’t think the intention of the author is what counts, then the subject position of the reader will be the only thing that matters” (11). In the first chapter, then, Michaels states that his essentializing of the subject position of the reader “does not depend on any account of that position which might be called essentialist” (32). He further explains that it is not a question of what determines the subject position, like race, culture, sex, or gender, but that it has to do *only* with the relevance of the subject position.

Michaels’s firm distinction between who counts in the creation of meaning in a text, the reader or the author, is discussed further in the next chapter, substantiated with the differing and more flexible arguments of Wolfgang Iser. Some of Michaels’s more recent and alternative arguments concerning class, race and diversity, taken from *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006), will be included in the second chapter, in relation to “middle class” interpretations of *Paradise* on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The main focus in this book differs substantially from mine, because he clearly dislikes dressing up race as culture (7). Therefore, it does not receive as much attention as *The Shape of the Signifier* in this study.

Among the critical scholars that I have chosen to include in my thesis, Paul Gilroy is probably the one located at the most far end of the axis towards anti-essentialism, and also the one that I consider to convey the most abstract notions of racial identity. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), he argues for the absence of any unifying factor or structure among black people: “[i]n the name of anti-essentialism and theoretical rigour it suggests that since black particularity is socially and historically constructed, and plurality has become inescapable, the pursuit of any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures is utterly misplaced” (80). He further writes that attempting to uncover cultural practices that might connect the scattered black people of the world with each other and even with Africa is “dismissed as essentialism or idealism or both” (80). Gilroy’s statements diverge from Michaels’s, who seems to argue that an essentialist perspective is solely concerned with biological and physical unity, which suggests that Gilroy would agree with me in viewing cultural practices such as religion and spirituality as essences.

In *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000), Gilroy argues for the need to move completely beyond race, to dispose of any ideas of race, and to focus solely on what he calls a “planetary humanism” (2). He believes in the possibility to create a raceless society, although he admits that it is a complex project and that his arguments have idealistic components: “[i]t has a utopian tone, but that should not disguise its practical purposes” (7). Gilroy is clearly an anti-essentialist, and shares his disbelief in common and collective characteristics of a black community. One of the first tasks to liberate humankind from “race-thinking,” he argues, is to explain how a demise of “race” is not a move to be feared. Among the people that have been subordinated by race-thinking and the social structures that go along with it, there have been obvious needs for protection against the abuse, but Gilroy explains how this has “unexpectedly” evolved into solidarity, joy and collective strength within the group (12).

Of the specific traditions that have evolved, Gilroy declares: “[u]nder the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture” (12). Such ideas of racial particularity, he continues, are difficult to relinquish when they are “inverted in this defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation” (12). His solution is to persuade and reassure these groups “very carefully” (12) that they will be able to keep their “precious forms of solidarity and community” (12-13) even though they join him in abandoning “race” as the basis for belonging. He clearly acknowledges how important the community and collectivity really are to some people, and, unfortunately, his promise of its survival in a raceless society is not sufficiently reassuring. Gilroy’s raceless society can also be perceived as an overly abstract future, literally without any color or heritage, which is a rather depressing prospect.

In the same manner as Hall, Gilroy refers to the previous need for black people to essentialize their own history and identity through movements such as Black Nationalism. He states that there now is “a chance to break away from the dangerous and destructive patterns that were established when the rational absurdity of ‘race’ was elevated into an essential concept and endowed with a unique power to both determine history and explain its selective unfolding” (14). Clearly, he does not see any use for it in a modern society, which he believes should put all its effort into moving beyond race as a concept.

In relation to Toni Morrison’s public exposure of authorial intentions, it is necessary to recall Walter Benn Michaels’s rigid division between two approaches to reading. Through interviews, we know that Morrison’s intention *is* that the subject position of the reader should

count in the creation of meaning in the text, which complicates his argument of either/or. As a distinguished writer of both fiction and non-fiction, Morrison holds an extraordinary position as an artist-critic, and McBride describes her as being “the most prominent artist-critic in contemporary American and African American letters, a position that uniquely qualifies her to speak to the variety of impacts that poststructuralist discussions of ‘race’ and ‘experience’ have had for African American artists and intellectuals” (133). He discusses how Morrison deconstructs the categories of artist and critic “in ways that ultimately legitimize and empower her position as artist-critic” (135), and by challenging these boundaries, she “creates a legitimate place in critical literary discourse for her own voice” (136).

Throughout this thesis, there is a strong focus on Morrison’s critical essays and other significant accounts given by her in various interviews as a means to uncover the complicated descriptions of religion and spirituality in *Beloved* and *Paradise*. The three non-fiction texts under inspection are: “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1988), and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). The main source for interviews is *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, a collection of 24 interviews and conversations edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie – with Morrison’s support (xiv). For practical reasons, I refer to the people conducting these interviews, and not to Morrison, for the reader to be able to distinguish between the twelve different interviews that I refer to from this collection. Where significant, I indicate the specific date when the interview was conducted, and the rest of the dates can be found in the Works Cited list. In these interviews, Morrison shows openness about her art and willingly shares her intentions and meanings, even her intention of deliberately making readers struggle by withholding significant information. Readers and critics influenced by the ideas of Roland Barthes might not appreciate Morrison’s openness, seeing as they consider discernable authors “to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (“The Death of the Author” 315).

Paradoxically, Morrison is helping us understand more *and* making it harder for us at the same time. This recognized intention of hers is significant in relation to my claim of there being essentialist perspectives embedded in her fiction, because it would indicate that people outside a black community will have a more difficult time understanding certain parts than the ones situated within. Morrison writes “in order to enlighten black people, not from a need to explain to the others...” (Gilroy *Small Acts* 176-77), and the essence of the black experience that I believe Morrison to incorporate in *Beloved* and *Paradise* is the knowledge of specific African traditional religious beliefs and practices.

African Traditions of Religion and Spirituality

My guides towards specific knowledge concerning Morrison's depiction of African religion are La Vinia Delois Jennings, in *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (2008), and K. Zauditu-Selassie, in *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2009). They both give thorough and detailed information about the religious dimensions in Morrison's novels, and they provide exclusive knowledge specifically concerning *Beloved* and *Paradise*. In other words, these two scholars offer readers a path into the spiritual universe that Morrison places her characters in; a spiritual world whose true components are deliberately hidden by the author herself, because she seldom guides the way for those not "initiated." Both Jennings and Zauditu-Selassie are also engaged with the idea of religion and spirituality representing something particularly "black," and they both speak from the subject position of belonging to the community. Even though I base my analysis heavily on their studies, my stance is that of a curious outsider to the community, similar to Richard Misner in *Paradise*. What separates my focus from theirs is that I explicitly state that Morrison conveys essentialist attitudes, and also that I do not regard these as negative aspects of her work.

Zauditu-Selassie proposes that "displaced Africans maintained their *existing core values* to ensure their psychic and spiritual integrity and created a nation out of many people" (my emphasis) (8). She uses the term "collective remembering" to explain how African Americans are informed by African spiritual ideas through "the relocation and reclamation of the conscious spiritual, and historical, and cultural knowledge" (11) common to them. She also states that a significant way for people of African descent to live, given the historical experience of living in an unknown country, is to hold on to something that is a constant. Spirituality "provides that constant and is an active principle that influences all aspects of daily life" (11). To me, these arguments indicate an essentialist belief in religion and spirituality being a true essence of the African American community throughout time, even though she never explicitly says so.

Zauditu-Selassie is thus not as reserved or constrained as Jennings is when it comes to expressing ideas that might be interpreted as essentialism. Her goal in the book is "to define and interpret a few underlying spiritual realities that transcend the written word and provide a context for the deeper meaning beyond literary events" (18-19) in Morrison's novels. Further, she argues that critical circles and models based on typical Western linear worldviews are inadequate to examine African American literature, because she believes that they have "failed to establish that spiritual expression is an essential principle in the lives of African people" (19).

In their extensive study of African religion and spirituality in Morrison's novels, both Jennings and Zauditu-Selassie provide specific examples concerning what goes on in the Clearing and in the Convent, under the leadership of Baby Suggs and Consolata – the two places and people on which I base my close reading and analysis. The symbols particular for each novel are elaborated on in each chapter. In this introductory chapter, however, I have chosen to expand on the Yowa cosmogram, which is a key symbol representing pan-African spirituality, equally significant and common for both novels. One of the most noteworthy religious symbols that survived the Middle Passage is in fact this single geometric symbol imported from Congo, which Morrison, according to Jennings, incorporates in her writing to prove the existence of African beliefs and practices in the black community of present-day America. Its simple construction symbolizes a whole range of beliefs and philosophies originating in West and Central Africa, and it can be seen in the main scenes of events chosen from *Beloved* and *Paradise*. An illustration of the cosmogram is featured on the second title page of this thesis, and an explanation is provided in the following paragraph.

Simply put, the Yowa cosmogram is a cross within a circle that represents the four solar positions in a counterclockwise spiral: sunrise and sunset on the horizontal line, and midday and midnight on the vertical line. The Yowa “resembles the Greek cross but [...] it does not signify the crucifixion of Christ” (Jennings 19). The circle represents reincarnation, and the spots where the horizontal and vertical axes of the cross align with the outer circle stand for “the four moments of the sun,” and three of these four spaces represent “the phases of life on earth” and “the fourth marks the spiritual existence beyond the earthly realm” (19). In the middle of the circle, where the axes of the cross intersect, lies the crossroads where the physical and the metaphysical worlds meet – the flesh and the spirit. The cosmogram appears in a North American, Christian manifestation in the form of “the ring shout,” in which worshippers physically form the Yowa in a sacred dance, shuffling counterclockwise in a circle. This dance is performed “to remember familiar ancestors and to communicate with the ultimate ancestor, God” (20).

The cosmogram appears frequently throughout Morrison's novels, especially in substructures like landscapes, bodyscapes, and also interior spaces, and stands as a symbol of “reincarnation, unification, balance, reconciliation of opposites, and the backward spatialization of time...” (Jennings 20). Jennings sums up how the Yowa is exemplified in the Clearing and in the Convent, under the leadership of the two preacher women: “Baby Suggs, holy, calls worshippers from the trees encircling the Clearing to perform the ring shout” and “Consolata Sosa and her coven of four [...] ritualistically celebrate within a circle of burning

candles in the cellar of the Convent the inseparability of spirit and flesh, the defining doctrine of Vodun” (21). In both rituals, the collective is incredibly important for the healing process, which further ties these two scenes in with essentialist thoughts. According to Morrison’s novels, the healing of people is possible only through collectivity: through the black community with a focus on their past and shared spirituality. Consequently, to gain a complete understanding of the healing processes one would have to accumulate a sufficient amount of knowledge, or one would possibly have to belong to the actual community itself.

Zauditu-Selassie acknowledges the difficulty most people have with reading Morrison’s novels. They are not known to be easy or accessible reads, but she boldly claims that the novels are accessible only to “the initiated.” By initiated, Zauditu-Selassie refers to “those readers who are willing to acknowledge the cultural and spiritual ideas originated by African people” (12). Morrison describes her intended audience through various interviews, shown through essentialist examples such as: “[t]here is a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language” (LeClair 124) and “Black people rely on different sets of information, and we explain things in different ways” (Wilson 135). When introducing approaches to debate world literature with particularly “other” aspects, Christopher Prendergast mentions Victor Segalen – who was an explorer and literary critic among other things – because according to him “we are never ‘closer’ to another culture (and hence liberated from the traps of ethnocentrism) than when we fail to understand it, when confronted with points of blockage to interpretive mastery” (Prendergast xi). I include this definition because I agree with how readers will essentially be closer to another culture when they recognize the basic differences between themselves and the other, than if they were not be able to notice any significant cultural distinctions at all, and this mindset influences my analysis. Thus, the essentialist attitudes in Morrison’s presentation of religion and spirituality in *Beloved* and *Paradise* are not something negative, but rather an entrance into something even more exciting for readers on the outside willing to make an effort.

Both chapters are divided into three parts of roughly equal length, with slightly different emphasis in each chapter. The first chapter lays a foundation for the remaining thesis, mostly focused on tracing implicit essentialism in *Beloved*, whereas the second chapter logically takes the analysis to a higher level, with a stronger focus on proving how essentialism has received an unearned reputation. Both chapters present the ancestral presence that the religious and spiritual community revolves around and a way for readers to counter and deal with the otherness of the text, which provide fundamental information for my analysis of essentialist perspectives.

CHAPTER 1:

Crossing Over to the Other Side in *Beloved*

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

Beloved (103)

Serving as a literary memorial for 300 years of abuse and violations, *Beloved* tells the story that no one wants to remember. Morrison reveals: “I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia” (qtd. in Angelo 257). With this mission, Morrison takes on quite a heavy burden, but she manages to deal with a particularly difficult and traumatic past in a way that makes it more accessible for the rest of us. What she offers through her intricate narrative is a possible solution on how to deal with trauma, of any scale, a process that she unquestionably links to the collective and the community. Even though she restores a forgotten part of American history to a more approachable entity, there is a considerable amount of information withheld from readers, especially surrounding Morrison’s presentation of religion and spirituality. As this chapter progresses, it elaborates on specific scenes in *Beloved* wherein Morrison narrates with a hidden essentialist attitude.

In this chapter, I mainly aim to prove that one can use the implicit essentialist attitude inherent in Morrison’s non-fiction to claim that the amalgamated beliefs found in the community in *Beloved*, especially in relation to Baby Suggs and her unconventional preaching in the Clearing, are narrated with essentialist undertones. As a reader of *Beloved*, and regardless of racial identity, one encounters a heavily complex narration of religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, this chapter relies heavily on Jennings’s portrayal of traditional African beliefs in *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, in addition to the concept of magical realism, which proves helpful when trying to decipher the specifically “other” aspects of *Beloved*. Even though essentialism poses a challenge to readers, due to how Morrison has made it easier for some than others to fill the missing gaps, I aim to demonstrate that it does not necessarily indicate a blockage of interpretation in readers with the right mindset. Also, Morrison’s essentialist perspectives do not always work the way she might have intended for them to work.

Hidden Essentialism in *Beloved*

One of Morrison's well-known statements about blackness functions as a sort of anti-essentialist disclaimer to her work in general, when she expresses that her "vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; villifying whiteness rather than reifying it" (*Playing in the Dark* xi). This is her overarching goal when writing, but there is evidence to be found in both her non-fiction and in interviews that uncovers her difficulty with keeping to this ambitious aim. That is, I understand essentialist values concerning "the black community" to be contained in what she refers to as "romanticizing blackness." Whether the lapsing into an essentialist undertone is on purpose or a case of pure unconsciousness is a challenging task to solve. Still, Morrison is a master manipulator of language and its functions, and one can therefore draw the conclusion that she is most likely conscious of several possible ideas that readers and critics may derive from her texts – even the ideas that seem to be unconsciously conveyed by her. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Dwight McBride experiences Morrison's essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" as very difficult to decipher because of the way it "boldly enacts a carefully articulated form of racial essentialism even as it understands the critical risks involved in doing such a move" (133), supporting the idea stated above about her being conscious of her own portrayal of multiple meanings and possibly contradictory ideas.

One of Morrison's motives when writing a novel is to make sure that African Americans still receive the significant information inherent in classical and mythological stories concerning their shared culture and past. "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories we heard years ago. But new information has to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel" ("Rootedness" 58). Consequently, we can expect her texts to be created with a strong focus on the ability to speak to this "we" and tell them specific things in a specific way not necessarily meant for, or available to, the people excluded from this racially defined category. Morrison does not explicitly state that religion or spirituality figured as a part of the now lost storytelling, but she explains that her own "use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for [her] and for the black people [she] knew" (Davis 226). Morrison explains how "it's not as though it's a thing you do on Sunday morning in church, it's not a tiny, entertaining aspect of one's life – it's what *informs* your sensibility" (226).

This kind of all-consuming spirituality that Morrison expresses to be informing all aspects of black people's lives could just as easily be informing and entertaining the life of a

non-black person. A white person can grow up influenced greatly by a black community in the neighborhood, or one can simply be affected by spirituality from other places. In fact, because it is possible for white people to understand the spirituality inherent in Morrison's novels, they can also self-identify with it in the same way as black people can. The reality is that many black people would also have to learn it, which is further elaborated on in the next chapter, making the acquirement of this specific knowledge an equal task for both white and black people possessing some prior involvement with such beliefs and worldviews. Then, if Morrison intended the spiritual connections in her novels to be discernible for black people only, it could be said that her essentialist perspectives to some extent undermine their own essentialism. My overall impression is that Morrison did not intend for white people to be able to understand *more* than some black people, seeing as she generally wants those not used to being one the outside to feel like the outsider for once.

In relation to Morrison's treatment of religion and spirituality as an obvious part of black communities, it is interesting to compare Morrison to different statements made by bell hooks in *Writing Beyond Race*. Although hooks discusses the changing religious practices today and the loss of a shared theological foundation, she does not focus on or mention African religion and cosmology in the same way as Morrison does inside and outside of her novels. Towards the end of her book, however, she does elaborate on a black, spiritual legacy and its importance. She refers to the period when black folks came out of slavery and into freedom, which aligns with the context of *Beloved*, and describes how they "found in liberation theology a way to be in the presence of a divine spirit that was liberating" (187). I experience this statement as a contrast to her introduction, in which she uncompromisingly states that a shared cultural and historical identity marker, such as their spiritual foundations, can no longer draw black people together. It is possible to notice her desperate longing for a shared spiritual identity that can unify them, yet she does not seem to believe that this is a likely prospect in our time. My assessment of hooks is that she fails to represent a clear anti-essentialist approach due to this contradiction within her book and her underlying essentialist attitudes and rhetorical strategies.

In *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, a collection of dialogues and conversations between bell hooks and Cornel West, they both have a strong focus on their religious affiliations and gladly share it with readers: "[b]oth Cornel and I come to you as individuals who believe in God. That belief informs our message" (8). West further embellishes on the link between Christianity and "the black community:" "[o]ne of the reasons we believe in God is due to the long tradition of religious faith in the Black

community. I think, that as a people who have had to deal with the absurdity of being Black in America, for many of us it is a question of God and sanity, or God and suicide” (8). It is noteworthy that West draws a direct connection between his and others’ belief in God today, in modern times, to the long tradition in the black community. Morrison, hooks and West are all considered black intellectuals, although expressing themselves in diverse arenas, and they are concerned with how racialized discourse and internalized racism exist in all aspects of modern societies and how it is expressed through whites and blacks alike. To me, it is also evident that the three of them share a continued hope and belief in the notion of black people as individuals with a special need to be part of a spiritual and religious community in order to survive hardship.

The concentration on a collective spirituality reveals how these three intellectuals, at least unconsciously, treat it as an essence of “the black experience,” which in effect makes their texts convey an essentialist attitude. Yet, Morrison diverges from both hooks and West in that her spiritual beliefs represent a combination of Christianity and a more supernatural, cosmological belief derived from African ancestors, which is a more essentialist point of departure. The amalgamation of religious and spiritual beliefs presented in *Beloved* is in many ways connected to the “we” that Morrison uses when referring to the black people and community. In “Rootedness,” she describes how seemingly contradictory views of the world and reality traditionally have been blended together to create the typical, and perhaps essentialist, black cosmology:

It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting (61).

Jennings considers Morrison’s depictions of characters like Baby Suggs, who comprises the positions of a living elder, a living-dead ancestor and a priestess/preacher, to mirror “identifiable qualities of Blackness, ancient African ways of being and knowing, that *presently linger consciously and unconsciously in African America*” (my emphasis) (6). Even though Jennings disassociates herself and her study from any essentializing or exoticizing gestures at the end of her introduction, echoing the status quo practice, I still find many of her accounts crossing over to “the other side,” and they serve as good examples when tracing essentialist attitudes in *Beloved* and *Paradise*. Critics such as Gilroy would probably strongly disagree with how Jennings expresses herself in relation to identifiable qualities of blackness, due to how she completely reverses the process of moving beyond race. The main inquiry in

this thesis is to prove that Morrison crosses over to the other side of the axis in the same manner as Jennings does, by showing how she treats religion and spirituality as an essence in order to create a unity among black people. As mentioned, knowledge of this essence has to be learned, in most cases, opening up the possibility for non-black readers to become a part of this unity, notwithstanding Morrison's purpose. The essentialism in her novels is thus not as problematic as many would think, due to how readers both in and outside of "the black community" have to put down a tremendous effort to understand, and non-black readers especially can learn from the experience of being the outsider and perhaps be able to accomplish an insider position as well.

The textual evidence for Morrison's focus on, and incorporation of, African spiritual and religious practices is, however, subtle and implicit, and perhaps not visible for the untrained, or inattentive, eye. Despite the fact that one *can* learn, most readers outside academe and outside a specific black community will probably have a difficult time detecting the particular symbols connecting the Clearing in *Beloved* to traditional religious beliefs and practices originating in West and Central Africa. Even academic intellectuals and readers would have to have explicit and first-hand knowledge of this complex field to be able to unravel all the meaning embedded in this scene, because of how much significant information is either withheld from us or hidden particularly well.

Baby Suggs is the character with the most essentialist opinions in the novel, as she blames "whitepeople" for all the harm done in the world. In *her* context, however, nobody can take away her right to do so. On the last day of her life, she announced to Sethe and Denver the lesson she had learned "from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople. 'They don't know when to stop,' she said, and returned to her bed, pulled up the quilt and left them to hold that thought forever" (122-123). Even though Baby has every right to her view, the level of generalization is interesting – especially of how Morrison writes that the others were left to hold that thought *forever*.

Baby Suggs represents the ancestor, and her views relate to Morrison's own recollection of how her father believed blacks to be superior to whites. Pelagia Goulimari discusses this type of essentialism and elevating of the black experience in *Song of Solomon*, and writes that the ideology of Morrison's father incorporated the "black essentialism that affirms an a priori black moral superiority and white inferiority," (65) which is envisioned through ancestral presences in her novels. In *Beloved*, Morrison clearly envisions this essentialist attitude through the most significant ancestral presence – Baby Suggs, holy.

The Ancestral Presence: Baby Suggs, holy

Baby Suggs dedicates most of her freed life to help the local community of other former slaves adjust to their new form of living. To be able to live their lives to the fullest in the here and now, and also in the future, these people have to confront their painful pasts and the ideas imprinted in their heads – and they have to learn to do so. In the community, “she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (*Beloved* 102). Every black man, woman and child follow her to the Clearing – described as a “wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (102) – a place where she does her best to reunite their spirits to their distant bodies. She has an unconventional style in her “sermons,” with no lectures on how to clean up their lives and to sin no more. She rather operates with a simple demand that they reclaim the power over their own bodies and love the flesh with all their heart, and that they *themselves* got to love it hard (103-104).

The significance of her healing and preaching becomes clear to the readers when we witness Stamp Paid’s effort to talk her into returning to the Clearing after the Misery that wore her out completely. He tells her that she cannot quit “the Word” because it was given to her to speak, but it does not seem to affect her, because she claims that she will have nothing to say if she did decide to turn up. Stamp becomes more and more agitated and does not realize his shouting before the immediate and uncontrolled response leaves his mouth: “Say the Word!” (210), and continues: “‘You got to do it,’ he said. ‘You got to. Can’t nobody Call like you. You have to be there’” (210). Stamp Paid symbolizes how the people in their community are remarkably dependent on her Call and the unique healing powers that go along with it. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison speaks of the importance of such collective healing in the memory and the re-memory: “when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they’re two, and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual – and the collective” (248). One of the reasons why Baby Suggs is never able to return to her true self, and also why Sethe is unable to fully heal her own spirit and flesh, is to be found in this quote. These two women are not “two, three or four” in their working through of horrible events; they are only one. In the end, no one in the community does for Baby Suggs what she does for them; nobody provides the healing remedy for the healer herself.

Sethe experiences 28 amazing days of collective sharing and loving when she first arrives at 124 Bluestone Road. These 28 days, however, is all the collectivity she will ever experience, at least until the very end of the novel, and these first days of happiness “were

followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life” (204). Sethe blames herself for Baby Suggs’s collapse, because she connects it with her arrival at 124, and especially with the incident in the shed: “[h]er faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived” (105). At the same time, however, Sethe admits that “[t]here was nothing to be done other than what she had done” (105). It is evident that being a witness to the attempted slaughter of all four grandchildren and the actual slaughter of the two-year-old, by their own mother, is more than anyone should be able to endure. In addition to her interior spiritual conflicts after the incident, “Baby Suggs’s suffering is caused by her community’s envy and lassitude – their consequent failure to warn her of the slave catchers’ approach” (Bate 40). The community clearly envies Baby Suggs and her abilities: “[t]oo much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always at the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick...” (161). Instead of returning the help and assistance, after all she has done for them, they let their resentment stand in the way, and do nothing to stop the four, approaching horsemen.

After the first read, one might remember the character Baby Suggs as someone rooming very large in the novel as a whole. Upon closer inspection and further readings, however, one realizes that she neither occupies a large portion of the narrative space, nor is she described in an extensive fashion. Estimated from my own experience, this is a discovery that might surprise some readers. When Morrison explained, in an interview, how she did not describe the character Pilate Dead a lot in *Song of Solomon*, but that she still comes off large on the page, it reminded me of how I experience Baby Suggs. Morrison tells of how she saw Pilate so clearly: “I wanted to communicate the clarity, not of my vision, but of a vision so that she belongs to whoever’s envisioning her in the text. And people can say, ‘Oh, I know her. I know who that is. She is ...’ and they can fill the blank because they have invented her” (Moyers 274). Morrison has also said that because Pilate indeed was such a large character for her personally, she had to prevent her in taking too much control in the novel, and thus ended up not letting her say too much. Yet, Pilate still holds a large and memorable position in the narrative, and the reason for this, says Morrison, is because “she is something we wish existed. She represents some hope in all of us” (McKay 144).

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs represents a hope in all of the characters, and in us, despite of her collapse. Her work in the Clearing stands out in the narrative as invaluable to the other characters’ healing and general well-being. Baby Suggs can be interpreted as what Jennings describes “the ancestral presence” to be: a hybrid entity that blurs the lines between the

living-dead ancestor and the living elder. When alive, she is the wise and comforting living elder closest to the ancestor in age; she mediates the metaphysical and physical realms in the function as the informal “priestess” of her community; and after her death, her strong imprint on lives and the community lingers on (85). Jennings lists up Baby Suggs among other Morrison characters that are “living bridges to the past and to those who have passed on and, as memory bearers, may be thought of as biomaterial memory. They enable active, ontological, timeless presence for the ancestors despite the ancestors’ physical absence” (86).

Baby Suggs’s function and authority in the community is similar to a regular preacher in an organized religion, such as Christianity, but she clearly draws on inspiration from African cosmological belief and philosophy when she performs the Call. In a conversation at the Bodwins, after she had been bought free and left Sweet Home, Baby Suggs tells of how she does not need to see a reverend even though she had not set foot in a church in ten years. Woodruff recommends that she go see Reverend Pike, because he will be able to reacquaint her. Her answer is: “I won’t need him for that. I can make my own acquaintance” (173). Her own brand of preaching offers something more than what can be offered in a church, and her great big heart provides the spiritual guidance that her community is in desperate need of.

An aspect of the black religious community that Morrison presents in “Rootedness” is clearly related to Baby Suggs and her function. Morrison tells of how there were “spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout” (56). The Clearing represents the kind of “spaces and places” in which the black community conducted unofficial spiritual work. The collective sharing of strong and suppressed emotions is at the center of attention in the Clearing, and the traditional ring shout that is being performed there, in the actual shape of the Yowa cosmogram, is a feature that Morrison still sees in some black churches today. The shout is “a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person” (56-57). What takes place in the Clearing symbolizes an essential quality of the cultural history and identity of black people, as Morrison explains how this type of collective sharing and healing is part of their joint past as well as taking place in the present. These essentialist qualities should therefore function as a place of entry for readers in search of a greater understanding.

One of Baby Suggs’s most important lessons to the community is in direct opposition to the Christian practice of elevating the spirit over the flesh. Contrary to the fixation on the

afterlife, Baby Suggs alternatively teaches her “congregation” to reconnect their spirit to their bodies in the here and now, and this great sermon deserves to be quoted at length:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* [...] This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved” (103-104).

The speech symbolizes the importance of being comfortable in one’s own body and to reclaim control over the flesh that has been other people’s property for most of their lives. The body should not be something separate from the spirit, but the two should rather function as an interconnected entity in their earthly lives. The constant engrossment in ideas of spaces and places such as slavery and the restricted teachings of Christianity haunts and limits the community in experiencing their free lives to the fullest. For Morrison, spirituality need not necessarily be Christian, but is rather a combination of different worldviews and beliefs.

One can easily notice how Baby Suggs does not function as a typical and predictable Christian or preacher, due to her unconventional approaches and emphasis when doing the Call. “In addition to indicating that she does not head a Christian congregation, Baby Suggs’s designation as an ‘unchurched preacher’ denotes that she may be considered a lay priest outside the doctrinal jurisdiction of the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Jennings 163). Jennings’s way of reasoning is a natural and rational response to Baby Suggs and how her character is focalized and described – a religiously defined connection that most readers will discern. The particularities, however, of her spiritually amalgamated worldview and belief system pose more of a challenge. In the middle of the Clearing, at the intersection of physical and metaphysical movements and communication, is where I experience the essentialist qualities of *Beloved* and how it is written. This space represents the most exclusionary part of the narrative, due to the complete absence of information regarding pan-African spirituality.

Toni Morrison grew up in “a family of people who were highly religious” and their “sources were biblical” (Jones and Vinson 177). They did, however, combine a serious devotion to Christianity with something that Morrison experienced as being located outside the Bible. Morrison reveals about her family that:

They did not limit themselves to understanding the world *only* through Christian theology. I mean they were quite willing to remember visions, and signs, and premonitions and all of that. But that there was something larger and coherent, and benevolent was always a part of what I was taught and certainly a part of what I believe (Jones and Vinson 178).

Like Morrison's family, the black community in *Beloved* seems to share this religious affiliation. The Christian faith clearly holds a significant position among them, but they also blend into their worldview something more "supernatural." Morrison relates the type of amalgamated worldview portrayed in *Beloved* directly to the vast imagination of black people, and she aspires to capture this imagination in her work: "[t]hat is, I want my books to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they encompass some great supernatural element" (McKay 153). She continues with the essentialist rhetoric inherent in the use of plural pronouns: "[w]e know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all the parts of living are on an equal footing [...] These things make the world larger for them" (153).

Most of the characters take for granted that spirits from the other side regularly pay their visits, and that a communication with ancestors across realms is a possibility. Amy Denver, the white girl who helped Sethe give birth to baby Denver, foreshadows the future incident at 124 and its consequences: "[a]nything dead coming back to life hurts" (42). The readers are quickly introduced to 124 as a haunted house. Sethe once suggested to Baby Suggs that they could move, to be free from the ghost, to which she asks "What'd be the point?", and continues: "[n]ot a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby" (6). As we learn to know, through the experiences of the characters, the "crawling-already?" baby girl comes back to haunt the women in the house, first in ghostly form, and then eventually in flesh 18 years later.

Morrison has stated that the place you go to, right away, when you read *Beloved*, is linked to a belief in ghosts. It is a shared human response to the world, because as a child you did not, due to this belief or knowledge, put your hand under the bed at night (Caldwell 242). *Beloved* takes you back to this feeling: "[w]hen *Beloved*'s flesh-and-blood manifestation shows up at Sethe's house one day – no lines on her palms and no history to speak of – her presence seems as ordinary as an afternoon visit from the local preacher" (242). Morrison has revealed her own continued belief in ghosts as an adult, in an interview with Marsha Darling, and she admits that to be able to understand certain parts of the novel, like how *Beloved* actually gets impregnated by Paul D, you have to know that ghosts and spirits are real and not "...just as a thought" (249). Morrison continues to explain that "the purpose of making her real is making history possible, making memory real – somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table so you have to think about it, whatever they may be" (249).

In this thesis, for practical reasons only, I use “African” to denote a whole range of beliefs and practices originating on the vast African continent. The main elements I refer to are the cosmology and spirituality allowing for a broader view of reality and the world than what Christianity and Western science do. I am well aware of how slaves who came from the African continent, also came from different countries, villages, languages and beliefs. However, it is worth mentioning that, in many ways, it was the insertion into the Western world through slavery “that ‘unified’ these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past” (Hall 114). The kind of pan-African spirituality that I refer to is thus an amalgamation of several traditions melted into one collective belief. Hence, the abovementioned view of reality could be said to agree perfectly with African religion and philosophy, because Morrison explains that, in this world, it is “very easy for a son or parent or a neighbor to appear in a child or in another person” (249). Jennings clarifies how most African traditional societies “believe in an afterworld where the ancestors – living-dead – reside when their earthly lives expire” (9). She also describes ancestors and their roles in a way that clearly connects to *Beloved*, especially Baby Suggs, but also the incarnated Beloved: “ancestors serve active religious roles in which they instruct their surviving lineage whose remembering of them and active calling of their names indefinitely extend their personal immortality in the afterworld” (9). Consequently, many Western readers, or readers with other religious backgrounds, will have to stretch their imagination and perception of reality when entering the complex worldview in *Beloved*.

Demands on the Reader: Ghosts and Otherness

The essentialist way in which Morrison narrates the religious and spiritual aspects of *Beloved* is to a great extent interconnected with all the other aspects of the community. Such aspects are mostly presented in an implied and “unspoken” type of manner, taking up little narrative space, because it is considered one of the most fundamental, essential and identifiable assets of black people and their collective culture. Morrison feels no need, as she has openly stated, to explain, justify or defend any of these ideas, because the ones she essentially writes for will already be in possession of this knowledge.

The complex knowledge that comprises Jennings’s study is knowledge that few readers will likely possess. For instance, Jennings explains how in local spiritual traditions within the African continent, such as Ibo, Yoruba, and Bakongo, and other African burial rituals, “participants dancing at the edges of a cleared space in a counterclockwise direction –

the east-to-west movement of the sun – shuffled slowly to insure that their feet did not lose contact with the ground and to imprint the earth as they circled (164). And, more specifically, that the circular pattern in which they danced, and the direction they did it, imitated the geometric form of the Yowa cosmogram (164). Then, as a slight contrast to the concentration on direct African heritage, Jennings continues to write that what takes place in the Clearing, “the emotional spectacle,” is more similar to the shout in “modern African-American holiness worship services” (164). She does not express whether she includes in these services what Morrison means when she says “black church;” if the worship of holiness that Jennings refers to includes the Christian God or not remains unstated. Though she does mention that, in these services, dances are being performed “in the spirit” during for example singing of a spiritual or *gospel* song, which provides a relation to Christianity (164).

Two additional examples from the Clearing demonstrate how an easily accessible religious characteristic and a more detailed and inaccessible one are presented in the same narrative space. Most people will recognize that the Call Baby Suggs is performing is rooted in call and response, which is a method of oral exchange originating in Africa and preserved well in “modern sacred and secular African-American discursive forms such as the sermon” (Jennings 164). The comparison stops there, however, because the content of her Call and the broader method of her delivering it do not resemble a sermon given in the Christian church. Still, the call and response and Baby’s unorthodox messages and ways of healing provide a link to a cosmology and spirituality that lies outside the United States, and this reflection is comprehensible for most readers. The dichotomy inherent in these examples – of both accessible and inaccessible knowledge – supplements Morrison’s intricate writing method even further, and shows how significant the participation and the imagination of the reader truly are for extracting meaning from the written text.

Moreover, Jennings exposes a few other unique religious qualities that accompany Baby Suggs in the Clearing, and among them is the distinctiveness of the stick she uses to commence the spectacle. In the narrative, we are witness to this modest description: “[a]fter situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put the stick down” (103). This is the only occurrence in which the stick is mentioned, and it does not appear to have much inherent quality in itself. Jennings offers the enlightening account of the stick being “a mayombo-styled stick that Voudoun priests and priestesses carry,” which indicates that Baby’s Call is fashioned after a Voudoun peristyle that “expresses the doctrinal ideology embedded in the shuffling-step pattern to which those gathered move” (164).

Morrison might have been aware of the exact property of a stick in a ceremony of this sort, or she simply incorporated a ritualistic component known to her culture and community passed through generations in oral storytelling.

Morrison explains that she is “conscious of all sorts of things – nature and magic and a kind of mother wit as well as a certain kind of cosmology about how Black people during that time apprehended life simply because they didn’t trust anybody else’s version of it” (Jones and Vinson 176). The trust issue among black people lingers on, she continues, and she tells of how she herself does not trust much research as a result of their history: “[t]hat’s why I can’t trust much research when I do novels because most of the information I want is not written. I mean I can’t go to most history books. I can go to some now, I suppose, but *certain kinds of things* I have to either remember them or be reminded of them or something” (my emphasis) (176). This interview was conducted in 1985, and her work on *Beloved* had probably started by then. My conjecture is that what happens in the Clearing is, for the most part, *not* based on an extensive research through history books, but rather on her own memory of stories from her childhood and a careful reflection upon them. She has stated that she does not study folklore for this very reason: “they are family stories and neighborhood stories and community stories” (Jones and Vinson 183). It is imaginable that religion and spirituality are one of these “certain kinds of things” that she has to gather from memory, indicating that she recognizes it as an essence of her community’s joint experience.

To be able to face, and also to accept, the otherness that essentialist perspectives create, readers might need a tool to guide them through challenging phases of the narrative. Magical realism – traditionally used to describe the work of Latin American writers – is practical when dealing with ghosts and other magical, “unnatural,” aspects in Morrison’s novels. In their extensive essay collection on magical realism, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris introduce the different magical realist texts under discussion to include the supernatural not as a simple or obvious matter, but as an *ordinary* matter; “an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of integrated realism” (Zamora and Faris 3). For the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road, the presence of the baby ghost is an ordinary everyday matter. Morrison is open about her own belief in ghosts, which makes it easier to understand why she dislikes to be identified with magical realism (Taylor-Guthrie xii). For her and the characters, the supposedly “supernatural” and “unexplainable” situations are not set apart from reality. Ghosts have the ability to make an absence present, and in a text they will challenge the nature and limits of the knowable: “[t]heir presence in magical realist fiction is inherently oppositional because

they represent an assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of Western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable, controllable” (Zamora 498). Ghosts also propose “a model of the self that is collective: subjectivity is not singular but several, not merely individual and existential but mythic, cumulative, participatory” (498).

Morrison grew up in a household that experienced and remembered visions, signs and premonitions; a house “in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what ‘really’ happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable” (Davis 226). In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs embodies this quality, and at one point in the narrative she has a confusing premonition of something she cannot decipher, and the only way she knows how to describe it is as an odor of “a dark and coming thing.” She squeezes her eyes tight to see what it is, but all she can make out are some high-topped shoes she did not like the look of: “[w]hat could it be? This dark and coming thing. What was left to hurt her now?” (163). The scene foreshadows the four horsemen arriving and the Misery that followed, and demonstrates Baby’s ability to sense and be aware of things not necessarily rooted in the real world.

When Stamp Paid talks to Ella about the new girl at 124 and *what* she might be, her answer is “[y]our mind is loaded with spirits. Everywhere you look you see one.” Stamp Paid replies that she knows as well as he does “that people who die bad don’t stay in the ground” (221). Ella, initially skeptic towards this presence that Stamp talks of, does not deny his statement in any way, and we are made aware of the prevailing view of the spirit world. The second part of the book begins “124 was loud. Stamp Paid could hear it even from the road” (199). Stamp Paid’s difficulty with entering 124, after Baby Suggs died, is a testimony to how ancestors and spirits are believed to linger in the real world after they have passed on to the next. This house is a place with particularly heavy action, and the tired and exhausted Stamp fights through the voices to knock on the door. Although he cannot cipher but one word, he interprets the voices to belong to the people “of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons.” Then, after a line break, his thoughts are made to stand out and summed up in three powerful words: “What a roaring” (213).

Magical realism will prove beneficial for readers trying to fathom Stamp’s description of the roaring voices surrounding 124, especially after *Beloved* has arrived. Lois Parkinson Zamora eloquently states that the quality of some ghosts is to “carry the burden of tradition and collective memory: ancestral apparitions often act as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, or as reminders of communal crimes,

crises, cruelties” (497). *Beloved* is not just Sethe’s dead baby come back to life, she is also – at the same time – a collective ghost of all those individuals who lost their lives due to slavery, and such apparitions “float free in time, not just here and now but then and there, eternal and everywhere” (498).

After Ella is convinced that 124 is occupied by Sethe’s dead child in bodily form, she gathers and assures a group of women that a rescue is in order. Her thoughts on the presence of ghosts and how to deal with them exemplify the shared perception of reality in the novel. Ella does not support how Sethe reacted in the shed, but she strongly believes that past errors should not take possession of the present. She declares that she respects ghosts as long as they show out from their ghostly place and are concerned with “shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such” (302). When a ghost takes flesh, however, and comes into her world, Ella is not as willing to accept it: “[s]he didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion” (302). The characters’ commonly shared acceptance of communication between worlds and realities is significant in relation to how Morrison expects the reader to fill in the textual gaps missing to make sense and create meaning. To be able to enter this reality, most readers will probably have to leave behind many of their own preconceptions.

The last couple of paragraphs have shown how readers of *Beloved* are introduced to the beliefs of the characters, one tiny bit of puzzling information at a time. Morrison is not known to give away too much information – “I tend not to explain things very much” (McKay 151) – and this constant withholding of information from readers is part of her overall style and intention. Her readers are not “handed ready answers but rather must become part of a tale’s resolution” (Taylor-Guthrie vii). In “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” Wolfgang Iser eloquently demonstrates the significance of the relationship between the reader and the text, and of how, through the reading process, these two parts make the work come alive. The convergence of text and reader, he writes, “brings the literary work into existence” (279). Related to Morrison’s way of writing, Iser describes how one can perceive a literary text as something like “an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination,” and he elaborates: “[i]f the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would have been the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us” (280).

Similar to Iser, Morrison shares her explanation of the reader’s involvement in her novels in a discussion with her friend and colleague Claudia Brodsky. The taped conversation took place at Cornell University in 2013, and in it, they are mostly concerned with language,

evil and “the white gaze.” Morrison names her method of writing “invisible ink,” because to her it means writing in a way that the reader gets taken in and joins the author in creating the novel – the act of leaving implicit or invisible clues to the meaning. According to Morrison, the meaning lies hidden in the structure of her novels, because she *always* knows where it is heading – she always knows the ending before she starts writing – and this will reveal itself through the structure (“Language, Evil and ‘the White Gaze’”). Corresponding to her personal description, Iser explains how all sentences in literary works, in their capacity of transferring information, “are always indications of something that is to come, the structure of which is foreshadowed by their specific content” (282).

Morrison admits that she shows the reader where it is going at the same time as she withholds significant information: “[w]hat is left out is as important as what is there” (“Rootedness” 59). Through language, she summons certain responses in the reader, and this type of information is not easily detectable. She tells us that it is a process of gaining exclusive information, which is morally grounded and hard won (“Language, Evil and ‘the White Gaze’”). By comparing Wolfgang Iser to Walter Benn Michaels, in relation to Toni Morrison’s own explanations above, I conclude that Iser supports what Michaels does not: that both the subject position of the reader and the intentions of the author can be seen as significant at the same time. Since the rise of the configurative meaning of the text “can only come into being through the process of reading,” Iser states that we “may conclude that this process formulates something that is unformulated in the text, and yet represents its ‘intention’” (292).

In the same manner as the characters in *Beloved* were snatched from any place to another without preparation or means of defense, Morrison gives no introduction into this novel. She wanted the reader to be “kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population” (xii). This approach might not be appreciated by all readers, but reading Toni Morrison is not supposed to be an easy task. If you are looking for “easy, passive, uninvolved and disengaged experiences” (Davis 233), such as television experiences or “how-to” books, you have chosen the wrong author: “I won’t, I won’t do that” (233), she affirms. Readers in want of an easy experience with a clear and valuable lesson are discussed further in the next chapter, substantiated with an article concerned with *Paradise* as the chosen book for Oprah Winfrey’s book club in 1998, and the challenges this novel caused for that particular audience.

Morrison has expressed a yearning for critics who will know what she means when she writes “church,” or “community,” or when she speaks of an “ancestor,” or a “chorus.” I

interpret this yearning to imply an essentialist perspective grounded in racial experience, due to how these words obviously mean something more to her simply because of her African-American background. For her, the content of these words are extensive and reaches far beyond their plain, literal meaning, because her “books come out of those things and represent how they function in the black cosmology” (McKay 151). This longing is understandable when it becomes clear how many and diverse aspects of the lives of black people that were present in the church alone. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison is confronted with her description of the bonding of the community in the church as being the theatre of life, and she elaborates: “[t]he society was there, the art was there, the politics were there, everything was there” (Ruas 116). This elaboration, on both the church and the community, indicates how rich and comprehensive these two societies are to Morrison and her cultural background, as well as implying the inability of “outsiders” to fully understand their meaning.

In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison exposes some of her exclusionary ideas about language and the writing process, with a special emphasis on “the sound” of certain words and phrases, to which LeClair states that not all readers “are going to catch that (124). Her response is necessary to quote at length, because it illustrates one of Morrison’s most essentialist opinions. She explains that the phrase “Quiet is as kept” is:

a piece of information which means exactly what it says, but to black people it means a big lie is about to be told. Or someone is going to tell some graveyard information, who’s sleeping with whom. Black readers will chuckle. There is a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language (124).

She continues to explain with the help of some instructive contrasts to other distinguished writers: “I never asked Tolstoy to write for me, a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio. I never asked Joyce not to mention Catholicism or the world of Dublin. Never. And I don’t know why I should be asked to explain your life to you. We have splendid writers to do that, but I am not one of them” (124). Morrison is not fond of writers who deliberately try to create a universal text, and she explains how she finds universality in literature a concept hopelessly stripped of meaning and often with the result of becoming a burden, especially for black writing. She implies that lots of black people writing books about blacks for blacks end up losing something vital along the way if they try to write in a universal manner: “[t]hey were writing for some readers other than me” (125). Morrison admires William Faulkner as a writer of regional literature, one who managed to write specifically about a particular world. This is why, she believes, his work is considered good *and* universal – and that is what she wishes to do as well (124).

Keeping in mind Segalen's approach to other cultures than one's own, mentioned at the end of the introduction, it is in fact possible to interpret Morrison's essentialist perspectives in *Beloved*, and in *Paradise*, as inclusive qualities and certainly not something diminishing her work. By writing specifically for the black community and about that particular world, she creates literary works that are good and universal, but it does require a tremendous effort and a specific mode of reading on the reader's part. The ones who do not belong to this community can learn from the experience of being the outsider and the "other," a situation that Morrison evidently has intended for to happen, but they can likewise be able to reach an insider position as far as knowledge of pan-African spirituality goes. Morrison's essentialism is thus prone to undermine itself, making it less problematic for outsiders.

Concerning the status of *Beloved* as a ghost or not, Martha J. Cutter argues for a reading of *Beloved*, in "The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*," in which she questions the supernatural explanations to a great degree. Cutter and I are two distinct and individual readers, and so it is clear that "we fill in the gaps in [our] own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities" (Iser 285). I struggle to accept Cutter's reading of *Beloved*, and how she is surprised and puzzled over the huge amount of readers and literary scholars that decide that *Beloved* is a ghost. Cutter writes that, in her mind, the text balances between realistic explanations of *Beloved*'s presence, "she is an escaped slave woman who has been sexually abused by a white man," and supernatural ones, "she is Sethe's dead child come back to haunt her" (62). Cutter presents *Beloved* as "an excellent example of what Tzvetan Todorov has called the fantastic" (62), and, in the subsequent discussion, I thus base my arguments solely on how Cutter defines the fantastic in relation to *Beloved*, and not on Todorov's main work.

According to Cutter's article, the fantastic seems to disregard the union of multiple realities present in *Beloved*, the combination of real and supernatural events, which is integrated and acknowledged as a normal part of the characters' everyday life, and not something to question or hesitate upon. Morrison might have intended for the typical Western, or perhaps non-black, reader to hesitate, which is why there are realistic explanations for *Beloved*'s presence incorporated into the narrative. Nevertheless, she most likely takes for granted that the people she essentially writes for will know and experience *Beloved*'s compound presence with a complete naturalness.

Cutter's main inquiry is that "the narration in *Beloved* [sic] creates a too close identification between the main characters' points of view and the point of view of the reader" (62). The result of this, according to her, is that the readers simply end up believing that

Beloved is the ghost of Sethe's child, which ultimately makes the meaning of the text closed and finalized. It is true that Morrison aims to have open, ambiguous endings: "I don't shut doors at the end of books" (Jones and Vinson 177). Yet, the acceptance of Beloved as Sethe's child returned to her in flesh, or any other supernatural and scientifically unexplainable occurrence, does not interfere with or diminish the overall meaning, which remains open and resists closure. Morrison acknowledges that there exists a common habit of wanting to hang on to what we know, even though we might miss out on revelations of incredible knowledge by doing so. In her opinion, this view of the world "may be so narrow and so pitiful and so shabby and so lonely that we die of starvation because we are not feeding off it, yet this other, very rich perception may terrify us" (Ruas 111). Her statement implies that Cutter is the one who truly ends up behind a closed door because of how she is not willing to fully let go of her own preconceptions, and it is "only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences" (Iser 295).

The fantastic, as discussed here, proves difficult to separate from magical realism. The minor dissimilarities between the two, however, are of big significance when applied to *Beloved* and Morrison. Magical realism is a concept that acknowledges that the magical part of reality is experienced as nothing but realism by the ones inhabiting the narrative world. It does not question the likeliness of incidents or people to be real or not – if the characters accept what happens as real and ordinary; magical realism does the same. For an "outsider," the ideas presented in magical realism are applicable to novels like *Beloved*, and they will provide a mode of reading in accordance with Morrison's cultural context. Cutter's presentation of the fantastic, on the other hand, proposes a more limited understanding as it is caught up in, and cannot let go of, rationalistic and scientific explanations for supernatural occurrences. In my opinion, the clear either-or approach inherent in Cutter's argument stands in opposition to Morrison's depictions of the belief in ghosts and ancestral presences, visions and signs, collective memory and healing – all of which point to an understanding of Beloved as the *collective* ghost of Sethe's baby girl and the "Sixty million and more."

As previously stated, Morrison does not appreciate to be labeled a writer of magical realism. She has expressed her impression of how it excludes the political framework by calling it "magical" and "unreal," and she has stated that "for literary historians and literary critics it just seemed to be a convenient way to skip again what was the truth in the art of certain writers" (Davis 226). It is therefore reasonable to believe that she would dislike an association with the fantastic even further. As a genre, the fantastic undervalues the reality in the novel to a greater extent, and thus stands in greater contrast to Morrison's depictions of

combining real and supernatural parts of life as the most natural thing in the world for black people: “I don’t want to disregard that mythology because it does not meet the credentials of this particular decade or century. I want to take it head on and look at it. It was useful for two thousand years” (Ruas 113). Cutter ultimately decreases the narrative world of *Beloved*, because she denies and devalues the things that make their world larger.

Beloved is constantly referred to as a novel that haunts its readers and that is impossible to take a pass on – proof of Morrison’s ability to make a reader’s world larger. This chapter has elaborated on the potential essentialist views inherent in Morrison’s depiction of religion and spirituality in the lives and experiences of Baby Suggs, Sethe, Stamp Paid, and the others in *Beloved*, and also outside the novel through her non-fiction. Morrison has made several statements about the black community and the black experience, and of how certain parts of this culture are shared by all black people – at least in America – which all point to an idea of a shared identity and unity with essential qualities. Although expressed in 1981, these two statements reveal how Morrison essentializes the black experience: “My feeling is that Black culture survives everywhere pretty much the same way” (Wilson 136), and “From my perspective, there are only black people. When I say ‘people,’ that’s what I mean” (LeClair 124).

It is noteworthy how Morrison lets the community in *Beloved* recognize, at last, how significant their collaboration is for both collective and individual healing. She thus demonstrates for her readers both how the people in the community managed to get to this point of realization – through their common spiritual essence – and how it helps them all to move forward and leave trauma behind. In *Paradise*, however, Morrison complicates the community feeling and collective healing even further, and this novel presents an even more open ending than the one in *Beloved*. Written about ten years after *Beloved*, *Paradise* is noticeably a demonstration of how Morrison has developed and advanced her ideas about race and identity, which would logically indicate that her former implicit attitudes connected to essentialism might not be in accordance with this novel. This logic characterized my initial hypothesis concerning *Paradise*, yet, when I began my close reading, it changed completely.

CHAPTER 2:

Staying in Touch With the Roots in *Paradise*

That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale.

Paradise (264)

In *Paradise*, Morrison has advanced her method of presenting “race” and racial signifiers to a whole new and groundbreaking level. During the writing stage, she revealed how she tried to first “enunciate and then eclipse the racial gaze altogether” (“Home” 9). From the very first, shocking sentence – “They shoot the white girl first” (*Paradise* 3) – the readers are thrown into a mystery that will prove to be unsolvable, which provokes “an endless interpretive game” (Aubry 361). Morrison has explained that she wrote “white” with a clear intention, not tall or fat, which indicates that race is going to play a significant part in the narrative, but not in the way most people are used to encounter race in literature. She explains that it “played another kind of role which was to signal race instantly and to reduce it to nothing” (Aubry 361). Her intentions are therefore similar to critical race theorists, like bell hooks and Paul Gilroy, in that she expresses a wish to move beyond race and erase the need for racial signifiers altogether, although Gilroy would probably not want race indicated in that way. She withholds any physical or cultural signifiers to how the women in the Convent look or behave, because only then are we able to see who they really are – to see them as individuals.

Behind this profound racial consciousness, *Paradise* is a novel that presents pan-African spirituality in the same essentialist manner as *Beloved*, and the ceremonies taking place in the cellar of the Convent, under the leadership of Consolata Sosa, directly parallel Baby Suggs in the Clearing. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate that Morrison has also included characters in *Paradise* that directly represent essentialist attitudes towards the need for a spiritual connection with their African heritage to improve the quality of their lives. Even though many readers struggle to comprehend this novel, I will argue that *Paradise* has a more didactic undertone than *Beloved*, which ultimately causes Morrison's implicit essentialism to become more explicit. The conversation between Patricia Best and Richard Misner is significant in this respect, seen in connection with the subsequent chapters on Consolata and Lone, and Misner is fundamental to my re-evaluation of essentialism.

The Ancestral Presence: Consolata Sosa

In *Paradise*, the principal provider of spiritual guidance is Consolata Sosa, as she demonstrates how, in order for the characters to “learn to live,” they must “negotiate borders not only between life and death and past and present but between all binaries” (Anderson 307). Similar to Baby Suggs, Consolata is the most discernible ancestral presence in this novel, and when discussing this position, Jennings informs that the capacity to “blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other” is an “aesthetic quality of Black art that Morrison skillfully manipulates” (85). The belief in how amalgamated views of religion, spirituality and reality are inevitable parts of the black experience is essentialist, and Jennings represents this belief in her analysis of both Morrison and my two primary texts. The next pages demonstrate how the particularities of the religious and spiritual practices in *Paradise* are complex and inconceivable, but nonetheless narrated with little or no embellishment, which is what that the average reader would need to understand significant events.

Consolata performs the unity inherent in the position as the ancestral presence by merging ontological boundaries that “fuses the spiritual and physical universes” (Jennings 85), and she also embodies the syncretism of African-Brazilian Candomblé with Catholicism and indigenous beliefs. Jennings provides this illustrative summary of Consolata’s transcultural background:

Rescued from the streets of Brazil by American nun Mary Magna and taken to the United States via Panama, Puerto Limón, and New Orleans to a convent seventeen miles outside of Ruby, Oklahoma, Consolata Sosa, the West African traditional priestess figure of *Paradise*, culturally bears African, European, and Amerindian religious beliefs and practices (166).

What reawakens Consolata’s memories of Candomblé from her childhood in Brazil, after having received instruction in Catholicism from the American nuns in the Convent, is the special blend of African American folk Protestantism with African traditional beliefs that Lone DuPres epitomizes and teaches. This revitalization of unconscious memories shapes the way Consolata ascends into the role resembling the “mãe de santo” (mother of saints) of Candomblé: the priestess in charge of the worship and rites in the traditional sanctuary called “terreiro” (166-167). Jennings continues to compare the cellar where the women gather at a cross and circle, and the rest of the Convent, to the typical Candomblé terreiro. This, she informs, is a residence that typically includes “a central room used for major ceremonies; [...] separate rooms where novices or devotees spend much of their time in seclusion; the living quarters of the priest(ess); and a garden of natural and cultivated vegetation that provides the

priest(ess) with sacred plants” (167). Jennings also connects the placement of the Yowa Cosmogram on the cellar floor in their sanctuary to another, more specific, Candomblé characteristic of Consolata, as she argues for the symbol on the floor to augment the construction of Consolata as the water priestess “Yemanjá” (168).

Yemanjá is a Candomblé “orixá” – similar to the category of “loa,” which are the gods, spirits or saints of the Voudoun pantheon – and she is depicted as “a mermaid with ample breasts, the symbol of her maternal, nurturing nature, and her oceanic colors are blue, white, and green” (168). Jennings uses many examples to connect Consolata to Yemanjá, and two of the most significant ones are the dress that Consolata is wearing when she dies, which is a blue dress with a white collar that she quickly slips on when she hears the intruders, and the memory of Piedade that pervades Consolata’s consciousness. Piedade is known as the Candomblé manifestation of Madonna, and, in *Paradise*, this female figure is drenched in references to water, the ocean and shades of blue. Moreover, the Piedade we are introduced to in the narrative is frequently interpreted as Consolata’s mother, and the last section of the novel is reserved for what seems like the reunion of mother and daughter in a beach-like scenery, paradoxically described as being located “down here in Paradise” (318).

Consolata is, like Yemanjá, “the guardian of women, the womb, childbirth, fertility and witchcraft” (Jennings 169). As a recurrence, female visitors keep entering the Convent because maternal issues lead them there. Even though Morrison is not generally concerned with feminism, because she does not want “a freedom that depends largely on somebody else being on his knees” (Koenen 73), feminist issues are nonetheless clearly represented in the Convent. In addition to the four women who stay for longer periods of time – Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas – other female inhabitants of Ruby pay their visits to this remote residence for various maternal reasons. Soane Morgan, Arnette Fleetwood and Sweetie Fleetwood come to the Convent looking for help, guidance or answers of some kind, even though their husbands are terribly skeptic towards this secluded place – eventually resulting in their intrusion and massacre of the five women living there on a semi-permanent basis. Consolata and Baby Suggs are clearly similar in how they function in the community as spiritual leaders and guides, helping people to confront their issues collectively.

Both Consolata and Baby Suggs experience being broken down, weak, exhausted individuals incapable of helping others and also being the most advanced healer and leader a traumatized community could wish for. Baby Suggs collapses *after* having provided healing and help in the Clearing, whereas Consolata has her breakdown *prior* to the rise towards a position as “mother of saints.” Connie, as she is initially called in the narrative, goes through

a personal transformation so substantial that the other women hardly recognize her – due to her having kept to herself in the darkness comforted by alcohol for such a long time. Now, she firmly says to them: “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (*Paradise* 262). She gives them the opportunity to leave if they have places to be and people to see, but no one does: “in no time at all they came to see that they could not leave the one place they were free to leave” (262).

From here on, we are told that they gradually lost the days in the so-called “loud dreaming” sessions that commence in the cellar, which is how Consolata teaches the women to confront their own, and the others’, painful, haunting pasts in a collective, arduous struggle. In the perplexing narration of this loud dreaming, probably with the intention to show the readers how chaotic and demanding it must have been for the women, we recognize past experiences from the different women in the Convent as we are told that “[t]hey enter the heat in the Cadillac” with Mavis; “[t]hey kick their legs underwater, but not too hard for fear of waking fins or scales also down below” with Pallas; and each of them “[r]uns up and down the halls by day, sleeps in a ball with the lights on at night” like Seneca did (264). In a collective sharing of hidden and neglected emotions, the women start to heal.

In the beginning, the four women choose a position to lie in on the scrubbed cellar floor. Their chosen position will be their permanent template in the ceremonies, in which they lie on the floor inside a ring of lit candles, undressed and exposed. Consolata’s subsequent introductory speech, “which none of them understood” (263), ultimately tells the same lesson that Baby Suggs preaches in the Clearing – that one should not separate the flesh from the spirit. This comparison between the two preacher women is, in my opinion, valid when their speeches are read alongside one another. In “‘Passing On’ Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” however, Sarah A. Aguiar claims that Consolata is “giving lessons in death” and for that reason, Aguiar suggests that Consolata’s rituals could be seen as representing “a *separation* of the spirit and the flesh” (517). Although Aguiar’s focus on death in all aspects of the novel is fascinating at times – for instance her suggestion that the women in the Convent, some or all of them, are in fact dead before the massacre – I find her interpretation of Consolata’s rituals to lack evidence because of the eloquent speech she gives in relation to the ceremony. Aguiar seems to exclude the contents of this speech in her analysis of the loud dreaming sessions, or else she would not have been able to claim that Consolata guides her novices to separate and detach their spirits from their bodies. Consolata’s semi-cryptic speech contains many of the same elements as the one Baby Suggs

gives, and it impressively sums up Consolata's own journey through life – a journey that has helped her to arrive at this point of revelation:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed until I met another. My flesh so hungry for itself it ate him [...] When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones [...] One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Her me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve (263).

Through the experiences of growing up under the guidance of her rescuer Mary Magna, with the concomitant instruction in Catholicism, and her sexual encounter with Deacon Morgan that ended badly, Consolata demonstrates, in this speech, that she has finally realized how one cannot disconnect the spirit from the body. She distinctly indicates that the two parts must operate in a balanced unity in order to make a person whole. Also, it mirrors how the men refers to the women of the Convent, during the first narration of the raid: “[b]odacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (18), as they try to justify their horrible actions. *Paradise* obviously critiques normative Christianity's separation of women into categories of either good or bad, based on how the sacrificial Virgin Mary reigns over the sinful Eve (Romero 417). Far from this belief, then, “Consolata becomes aware that both Eve and Mary, body and spirit, must be acknowledged if she is to be whole again” (Fraile Marcos 112).

As a contrast to *Beloved*, *Paradise* presents *two* women with the ability to connect with the other side and who epitomize the amalgamation of different beliefs and practices – mostly a combination of the Christian faith and traditional African religion. In fact, the one who inspires and motivates Consolata to connect with her inner power, that she herself has neglected, is the aging midwife Lone DuPres. Being a faithful Catholic woman, Consolata initially asserts that she does not believe in magic because “the church and everything holy forbade its claims to knowingness and its practice” (*Paradise* 244). Lone understands that she must convince Consolata slowly and in an unaggressive manner, and to counter Consolata's clutch on the Christian faith as her sole understanding of the world, Lone simply says: “[s]ometimes folks need more” (244). Consolata answers that faith is all she needs, but Lone explains how one cannot separate God from his elements, from the work he has created, and her command is: “[d]on't unbalance His world” (244). As we know, Consolata eventually takes Lone's advice and indulges in this “alternative” way of living, and she proves to be able to “integrate the best of both teachers, combining reverence for the way of the spirit with respect for the carnal life of the body” (Grewal 48).

In other words, “sometimes folks need more” stands as an expression for the necessity to stay in contact with something beyond organized religion, and also scientific rationality, in order to experience self-realization. In this thesis, it has an additional function as a metaphor for Morrison’s essentialist way of writing as she withholds significant information from readers that do not belong to “the black community.” The particularities concerning what takes place in the Convent and in the loud dreaming sessions are colored by an essentialist attitude because of how the details to a great extent are left out. The connection to Candomblé – through Consolata’s new leadership and general conduct; the organization of their living situation in the Convent; and the ceremonies taking place in the cellar – is too exclusionary and restricted for all readers to comprehend, which hints at an essentialist ulterior motive.

When discussing *Paradise*, Zauditu-Selassie declares that Morrison “acquaints her readers with those spiritual principles that have endured despite disruptions along the way” (120). I detect a clear essentialist undertone in Zauditu-Selassie’s analysis of Morrison and *Paradise*, as she hints at spiritual principles being an essence of the black experience and identity that has sustained temporal and spatial changes. This first section of my chapter on *Paradise* has shown that the same exclusive and inaccessible symbols and metaphors taken from specific African traditions as I found in *Beloved*, is present in this novel as well. Similarly, these symbols are not explained for “outsiders,” who will probably miss most of these specific meanings. Morrison’s way of narrating particular religious and spiritual rituals and happenings in *Paradise* is thus equal to the implicit essentialism in *Beloved*. I do not find her essentialism to pose a complete blockage to the interpretation, as I have indicated so far, and this opinion is also what I will continue to demonstrate in the proceeding discussion.

Paradise is pervaded by Morrison’s usual tendency to withhold information and her use of challenging narrative techniques, but in this novel “Morrison ups the ante” (Page 637). I agree with Zauditu-Selassie’s suggestion that in order to enter the literary experience of *Paradise*, “readers must not suspend disbelief; they must have the willingness to suspend their beliefs and to freely imagine,” and they must also “be capable of encountering meaning in the indeterminate space between the realms and consider alternate ways of believing and being” (121). Connie’s transformation provides a metaphor for how readers should try to suspend their beliefs, as we witness her leave the safe preconceptions of her lifelong faith behind and “learns to accept the different modes of traversing reality – different ways to perceive the power of the self” (Zauditu-Selassie 133). What will complicate this act for most readers is that the epistemic constructions we are introduced to in *Paradise* “are culturally defined and expand time beyond the European delineation of a three-dimensional structure” (133).

Disconsolate Readers Doing the Endless Work

In “Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for *Paradise* on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*,” Timothy Aubry provides informative and clarifying perspectives of the novel’s “otherness” and Morrison’s habit of openly discussing it in public. He argues that readers might experience *Paradise* as a particularly difficult novel to read because of how it demands substantial work from the readers themselves, even after they have finished reading. Aubry explains how Morrison intended this sort of work itself to be the point: “a gift just as desirable as whatever ends the work might have been thought to achieve” (351). Through his discussion of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*’s book club episode concerning *Paradise*, which took the unusual shape of a seminar lead by the author herself at Princeton University for the occasion, Aubry demonstrates several obstacles that readers come across in the text, making his article an apt contribution to my claim of how Morrison includes essentialist attitudes in this novel. He highlights significant problems regarding essentialism because he discusses to what extent a racial identity contributes in the interpretation of the novel.

Aubry’s discussion of race and racial identification in relation to *Paradise* offers a good context for my further analysis of essentialist attitudes in the novel, and my attempt to raise the reputation of such attitudes. He writes that Morrison “works to thwart race-based identification by deliberately refusing to reveal the race of most of her characters” (361). As seen in various interviews, this refusal to include racial features has been something Morrison has always wanted to do, and in *Paradise* she reaches this personal goal. In 1989, two years after *Beloved* was published, Morrison expresses this wish in an interview with Bill Moyers, in which race features as a main subject. Moyers asks her if it is conceivable that she could write a novel in which blacks are not center stage, to which she answers “absolutely,” and she quickly adds: “but I won’t identify them as such. That’s the difference” (265). She continues to explain how she tried to do this twice in *Beloved* by not explicitly revealing if the character is black or white, but instead relying solely on how other black characters act around this person, and thereby indicating race without using the traditional language of stereotype (265).

When expressing her goal for future writing, Morrison says: “[w]hat I really want to do, and expect to do, is not identify my characters by race. But I won’t be writing about white people. I’ll be writing about black people. It will be part of my job to make sure my readers aren’t confused” (Moyers 266). Stated about a decade prior to the publication of *Paradise*, her view has noticeably changed and developed, revealed through the intentional confusion she presents from the very first sentence in this novel. Her intention is both to confuse and to make her readers consider and evaluate the need for racial signifiers in order to know the

characters as individuals. My question in regards to this confusion, which she obviously intends to occur in the reader, is if she anticipates more confusion from a white reader than a black reader, as we know that she writes both for and about black people in all of her novels.

Even though Morrison wants to “signal race instantly and [then] reduce it to nothing” (Aubry 361), she acknowledges that the United States is nowhere near becoming a post-race society, which makes it “very hard to write race and unwrite it at the same time” (362). She continues to explain how she has to withhold information to do so, but that means that some readers will be “deeply occupied with finding out which was the single one, who was white” (362). Aubry interprets the effect of this to be that readers “do not encounter the characters of the convent as de-racialized, but rather as characters whose race is profoundly unknowable and yet profoundly important” (363). Thus, readers must recognize that the meaning of whiteness and blackness defies a full comprehension. In *Paradise*, race emerges as a serious epistemological problem and complicates most people’s superficial knowledge of race (363).

A recurring explanation for “the white girl” among scholars is that she might be the one in the Convent who, in some way, *resembles* a white girl. In fact, there might not be a girl with white skin color, but the men of Ruby “seek to destroy whiteness by eradicating the presence of a body onto which they have mapped whiteness” (Schur 294). Two possible explanations for how one of the girls might be viewed as “whiteness idealized” are: first, that she might have a very light skin color compared to the darkest skinned blacks in Ruby, “the 8-rocks,” hence resembling Billie Delia’s light skin color which is considered a sign of “damaged goods;” and second, also related to a “polluted” blackness, she might be considered the one with the most sexual relations (Jenkins 278-79). The men in Ruby wrongfully describe Billie Delia, who is a virgin, as “the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second” (59) simply due to her light skin. There might also be something in the girl’s cultural practices and identifications that resemble whiteness (Schur 295).

The confusion experienced by the reader in regards to the race of the women could be explained by Morrison’s hidden essentialism. Morrison clearly states, on several occasions, that she did not include any ethnic or racial identifiers of the women in the Convent, except for Consolata, which would entail that finding out who is white is an impossible task. Yet, in the taped conversation with Claudia Brodsky, Morrison says that many black girls have told her that they “know who it is,” and she does not in any way deny their claim, which seems to me a contradiction with her other statements. Because she does not dismiss their “certainty” as mere guessing, I interpret this part of the conversation to express an essentialist attitude

towards black people being able to comprehend and unlock more hidden truths in her novels than non-blacks do (Morrison “Language, Evil and ‘the White Gaze’”).

What is interesting to see, then, in Aubry’s discussion, is that being black does not necessarily secure a full understanding of Morrison’s complex narration. As mentioned in the first chapter, Morrison’s essentialism could in fact be seen as undermining itself due to how white or non-black readers can accumulate knowledge of pan-African spirituality, for instance by growing up in an otherwise African American neighborhood or originating from other cultural backgrounds in which similar types of spiritual beliefs and practices are represented. Furthermore, her essentialist perspectives might also be seen as deconstructing themselves because even though she anticipates black readers to be able to fill the gaps, many of them will not manage to do so. These “weaknesses” in Morrison’s essentialist attitude towards black readers inherent spirituality point to an essentialism with less negative implications.

Aubry’s point of departure when discussing certain challenging and “other” aspects of *Paradise* is the Oprah book club episode dedicated to the novel, and his focus is subsequently on readers constituting a “middlebrow” audience. He is well aware of the generalizations and problems inherent in a term like middlebrow, but he uses it as a way to describe the usual mode of reading in contemporary books clubs, rather than presenting it as a fixed identity (353). A middlebrow person can be described as “a person who is only moderately intellectual or who has average or limited cultural interests” (OED “Middlebrow”), and Aubry uses middlebrow to explain the general approach to literature that can be seen in the audience of Oprah’s book club. They tend to approach literature in the same way as they approach self-help books: “in search of practical guidance on how to manage various social and psychological challenges, and in search of strategies of self-improvement” (Aubry 353). As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Morrison does not want to be the kind of author that writes “how-to” books, because she is not interested in presenting an easy and disengaged experience available to whoever reads it (Davis 233).

Related to a middlebrow mode of reading is the frequent desire to “get” literature, and Aubry states that an articulated plea to “get it” immediately marks the speaker as middlebrow. Many readers who are highly intellectual and possess cultural capital also fail to “get” literature on a regular basis, but the difference is, according to Aubry, that they remain silent about it (354). Aubry could be suggesting that class matters more than race when trying to make sense of Morrison’s *Paradise*, seeing as this articulation of not getting it is connected to the amount of education one has had access to. In *The Trouble with Diversity*, Walter Benn Michaels is mostly concerned with proving how class should matter more than race when

discussing social problems, and finds it problematic that “we would much rather celebrate cultural diversity than seek to establish economic equality” (12). Although Michaels and Aubry’s ideas of class do not entirely coincide, higher education is linked to wealth. Michaels writes that the class everyone favors “is the middle class” (6), and what Aubry dares to do in his article is what Michaels claims most Americans are reluctant to do, namely to “identify [himself] as belonging to the upper class” (6), consequently situating himself above this middlebrow audience with limited cultural capital.

Aubry refers to a question during the discussion posed by Winfrey’s good friend Gayle King, who asks Morrison if they are supposed to get it at the first read. She tells of how she had to call Oprah and say “please ‘splain it to me” (354). Aubry interprets this “comical slip into black English” to be both self-mocking and an a method of self-authentication: “a mark of pride in her own cultural identity, an identity that demands respect especially insofar as it keeps her at a distance from the realm of high culture, represented, ironically in this case, by Toni Morrison” (354). King and Winfrey’s urge to “get it” seems to entail “a disturbing desire for mastery, for possession, rooted in class-climbing pretensions, as if the comprehension of literary works were simply another form of acquisition, capable of procuring for the consumer higher status within a class hierarchy” (354). Both of these strong African American women struggled greatly to interpret and comprehend this narrative, which proves how Morrison’s essentialism, based on withholding of important information, is deconstructed when black readers fail to provide such missing information on their own.

Another typical middlebrow expression used by Winfrey to explain *Paradise* is “over our heads” (355). Aubry recognizes this expression to be in direct opposition with Morrison’s central project of constructing new utopian models based on the conciliation between herself and the reader, because even though this is a difficult and seemingly endless task, it is not impossible. Morrison positions paradise “down here” and not “up there” in an unreachable realm (355). In *Paradise*, “Morrison offers readers a text designed to make them struggle and feel challenged, but also designed to make that struggle enjoyable” (355). Even though the reading experience and the search for meaning are supposed to be enjoyable and achievable, Aubry states that Morrison aims to validate the audience’s confusion by reassuring them that, in the end, they are not supposed to “get it” (356). That is, this should not feature as a main focus in their reading process, because it would lead them even further from realization.

Similar to earlier novels, one of the most problematic qualities of *Paradise* is Morrison’s deliberate failure to “provide the background information necessary to decipher what is happening” (Aubry 356). Morrison remarks the correlation between how she draws

the reader into an experience of the unfamiliar with the familiar experience of walking into a new town or neighborhood. To reduce and clarify the alienation effect many readers encounter, she asks them: “[w]hen you walk into a neighborhood, you don’t know anybody. Do you really just want to know the one person who seems to know everything about the neighborhood?” (Aubry 357). With this information, it is easier to understand why Morrison built her narrative the way she did. Even though readers might not agree with her in using this as narration, they are nonetheless able to relate to this type of estrangement and isolation.

At one point in the book club discussion, Morrison addresses what she believes is the best method for unraveling the seemingly unrealistic and supernatural happenings in the novel. The necessary approach, or mode of reading, that she suggests is to “suspend disbelief of everything that might not be possible in the material world” (Aubry 357). Her best suggestion to readers having a difficult time understanding certain parts of *Paradise*, and the rest of her novels, is clearly similar to how I suggested magical realism could be of great help in the last chapter. To reach as close to a full understanding as one possibly can, it is obvious that a willingness to accept the specific and otherworldly reality presented in Morrison’s novels is vital. Again, this is related to how well the reader is able to recognize the otherness in the text. If one does not experience any supernatural and unexplainable elements in novels like *Beloved* and *Paradise*, and simply provide rational explanations for what goes on, one moves in the opposite direction of comprehension. Like Segalen suggests, if one rather comes across aspects that do not make sense and are able to realize that there are culturally specific occurrences not necessarily rooted in a real and familiar world, one is essentially heading in direction of greater insight and understanding.

Aubry claims that *Paradise* “runs the risk of denying readers access” because of how “its difficulty constitutes a daunting admissions process” (367). Comparable to Zauditu-Selassie and her use of the word “initiated” to describe the readers who are willing to acknowledge the culturally specific ideas concerning spirituality and religion, Aubry seems to indicate that only selected people embodying the right mindset and mode of reading will be able to get through the admissions process. At this point, it is important to keep in mind my definition of essentialism stating that it is a belief or a perception of a shared identity with a cultural essence in common, and that such a perception is based on self-identification. “All of the challenges *Paradise* offers function as lessons in how to approach otherness” (Aubry 367), which means that if readers do not find themselves “belonging” to a black community, they are still, with the right mindset, able to detect the culturally challenging and “other” aspects in this novel. Morrison’s essentialism is thus not an obstacle for the readers who are

prepared to do the hard work, whites and blacks alike, or for non-black readers causing it to undermine itself by having first hand knowledge despite of their racial identity.

Wolfgang Iser confirms Segalen's attitude towards other cultures, and also the kind of reading that my thesis supports, when he states that "it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences" (295). He believes that the "efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar" (295). When reading *Paradise*, it is likely that "we may be confronted by narrative techniques that establish links between things we find difficult to connect, so that we are forced to reconsider data we at first held to be perfectly straightforward" (294). As an example, there are several instances where one has to look back and forth in the novel to make sense of what really takes place in the Convent when the women is allegedly massacred. Initial information given on the very first page proves to be problematic at a later stage in the narrative, and, likewise, subsequent information proves to dislocate the opening evidence. In the beginning of *Paradise*, we are told that the men attacking the Convent "are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill..." (3), which is a problematic statement when we are informed that there are five women living in the Convent. Because nine is not over twice the number of five, this sentence could possibly indicate "that at least some of the women are dead long before the Ruby posse attacks" (Aguiar 515).

The account of how there were no bodies to be found when Ruby inhabitants returned to the Convent after the massacre further complicates the whole incident. Roger Best drives the ambulance to the scene of the crime, and he was told that there would be three women down in the grass, one in the kitchen, and another one across the hall – which would equal five bodies (*Paradise* 292). After having carefully searched everywhere, he concludes that there are "[n]o bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone" (292). If some, or all, of the women are in fact dead before the massacre, or if they do not actually die at all, remains an unsolved mystery in this novel. Morrison challenges every perception of reality there is – of life on earth, the afterlife, and everything in between – which is why *Paradise* is a particularly demanding novel for readers to relate to.

The raid of the Convent is undoubtedly the most open-ended and complex event in *Paradise*. In the same manner as *Beloved*, and other novels, *Paradise* also starts with "the bare and disturbing facts of the novel's central, violent event" (Page 640). Morrison calls attention to the multiplicity of the episode by narrating it twice. First, she narrates it without any names and leaves out important details as to why and how it happens. Later on, she retells

the story of the raid with names and more details, but she still fails to provide the closure most readers will expect, and numerous questions are left unanswered (Page 640). The two different narrations of the event can be compared to the proliferating mottos on the Oven in Ruby, since “no single text, version, or interpretation is adequate, the novel opens up the actuality and the potentiality for multiple perspectives of author, characters, and Morrison assumes, readers” (Page 640).

Following the second narration, and the actual occurrence of the raid, the inhabitants of Ruby begin their endless process of interpreting the event. Most of them make up stories of what happened at the Convent in order to make themselves look good and, incidentally, with no responsibility or fault in the matter. Richard Misner, since he was out of town at the time of the raid, has to be filled in on the details of what really happened – like the reader – making him a sort of spokesperson on our behalf (Page 640). Richard Misner had returned to Ruby “two days after the assault on the Convent women, and it took four days for him to learn what had happened. Pat gave him two editions of the official story...” (*Paradise* 296). Misner did not believe “either of the stories rapidly becoming gospel,” and no one he spoke to was able to fully clarify the tale for him, because everybody had a hard time deciding “on the meaning of the ending” (297). Both Misner and the readers are therefore left to themselves in making sense of the outcome of the raid, which ultimately can be interpreted in many different directions depending on the willingness to stretch what constitutes reality.

Explicit Essentialism in *Paradise*

In *Paradise*, I have traced the same essentialist attitudes as I did in *Beloved*. These are attitudes implicitly embedded in Morrison’s way of withholding particular information regarding religious practices and beliefs – aspects that she can be said to regard as an essence of “the black experience,” based on several statements in non-fiction and interviews. Moreover, in *Paradise*, Morrison employs a more didactic and instructive voice as to whose reality and way of life is the “correct” one, shown through the progression of the last four chapters. The connection between the chapters “Patricia” and “Consolata” is especially significant in this respect, and I would claim that the didactic voice in Patricia’s chapter is Morrison at her most essentialist in my total analysis of both novels in this thesis.

In 1998, a reviewer in the *New York Times* writes that although *Paradise* “employs familiar Morrison techniques – cutting back and forth from one character’s point of view to another, back and forth from the past to the present – the novel’s language feels closer to the

hectoring, didactic voice that warped her 1992 essay ‘Playing in the Dark’” (Kakutani). Kakutani is evidently not interested in reading Morrison when she engages with an instructive tone in her writing, as she pronounces that this way of writing damaged Morrison’s prominent work *Playing in the Dark*. Aubry also recognizes Morrison’s didactic tone in *Paradise*, as he states that its rhetoric “often assumes a piously didactic tone like the inscription on the oven” (366). He does not, however, see it as her purpose to “impose an unambiguous moral or message on the reader, [nor] to silence doubt or division” since it is, in her view “only through an inclusive, pluralistic dialogue that paradise can be re-imagined” (366). I interpret her use of the didactic voice in the last chapters of *Paradise* to convey a more explicit essentialism than what I have argued for so far in my thesis. Both the implicit essentialism and the more explicit one are closely interconnected, though, due to how they emerge through an idea of pan-African spirituality, in a combination of cosmology and Christianity.

In “Reclaiming the Presence of the Marginalized: Silence, Violence, and Nature in *Paradise*”, Aoi Mori writes that *Paradise* “directly critiques the manipulative creation and use of history in the narrative of schoolteacher Patricia Best, who laboriously tries to document the genealogy of Haven and Ruby” (58-59). Patricia ends up burning all of her charts and notes concerning the relationships among Ruby inhabitants, because she “accumulates more questions than answers and concludes that she can’t figure it out” (Page 641). Philip Page suggests that despite Patricia’s role “as model for author and reader, her methods do not receive authorial privilege” (641). However good her intentions are, Patricia ultimately fails her grand project, and Morrison lets Richard Misner be the one to inform her of her lacks. In the conversation between Pat and Richard during the Christmas play, her shortages become evident. The two of them seem to disagree on many levels, and they have particularly different opinions of what to teach the younger generation. Pat asks him if he does not think what she teaches them in school is good enough, and he – with a feeling that she has read his mind – answers: “[o]f course it’s good. It’s just not enough. The world is big, and we’re part of that bigness. They want to know about Africa – ” (*Paradise* 209). She cuts him off saying: “[o]h, please, Reverend. Don’t go sentimental on me,” to which he replies: “[i]f you cut yourself off from the roots, you’ll wither” (209).

Richard tells Pat that he experiences her as sad and cold because of how Africa does not mean anything to her, and, after a short break of watching the play, they continue their conversation opening with her saying: “[t]hat was not a nice thing to say to me, Richard” (210). He explains that he meant that her charts were sad and cold, not her directly, because through them, she limits her faith to molecules and fragments. Pat states that she does not

limit anything: “I just don’t believe some stupid devotion to a foreign country – and Africa is a foreign country, in fact it’s fifty foreign countries – is a solution for these kids” (210). Richard is clear in his speech saying that Africa is their true home, whether Pat likes it or not, and that there was a whole life before slavery. Pat seems unable to move forward when she says that slavery *is* their past, whereas Richard looks to the future – a future possible only through letting go of the kind of separation and isolation that Ruby clutches on to (210). He is able to move forward because he has the correct relationship and connection with his past.

What Morrison seems to suggest, through Richard Misner, is that Patricia’s project is based on a quest for facts and closed answers, and she thus “seeks the kind of deterministic answers that Morrison withholds” (Page 641). I agree with Page when he interprets Patricia’s shortage, that something that she has missed, to be that which her rationalistic methodology ignores: “the deeper, holistic, transcendent perspective” (641). A possible interpretation of Pat and Richard’s conversation is that Morrison to some extent punishes Pat with failure for not being in touch with her African heritage – her true home and “essence.” Morrison clearly demonstrates the dichotomy between rationality and spirituality with this conversation and the subsequent chapters, and when interpreting the ultimate fate of the characters, it is fairly evident which side she favors of the two. The alternative approach to Patricia’s is revealed through the chapters “Consolata” and “Lone.” Page explains that these two women “interpret and learn in intuitive, holistic, and open-ended ways, ways that provide a deeper understanding than do Patricia’s charts and notes” (641).

It is remarkable that Consolata’s chapter, and then Lone’s, follow immediately after Patricia’s. Pat apparently suffers from lacks in her approach, but it is not evident as to what they really are until we are introduced to Lone and the new and improved Consolata Sosa in the subsequent chapter. Page provides a brief summary of the two women’s abilities when he writes that they “have access to non-rational, mystical ways of knowing, interpreting, and healing, ways that allow them, like the novel itself, to transcend binary logic” (641). Lone teaches Consolata to get in touch with her latent powers – “[y]ou gifted. I knew it from the start” (*Paradise* 245) – and she shows her that these powers should not be feared or repulsed. “Let your mind grow long and use what God gives you” (246), Lone tells Consolata, and thus expresses her own fusion of beliefs and practices taken from traditional African religions and the Christian faith. Lone strongly believes that God has given her the task, and that he specifically wanted her to “hear the men gathered at the Oven to decide and figure out how to run the Convent women off...” (273). She is under the impression that everybody has the ability to know what other people are thinking, but that most people just avoid the obvious.

We are told that Lone, however, knows “something more profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best’s history book,” because she knows “what neither memory nor history can say or record: the ‘trick’ of life and its ‘reason’” (272). In this respect, I find it remarkable that Lone is an experienced midwife, because she thus mirrors Morrison’s own great-grandmother who was “a midwife, and people from all over the state came to her for advice and for her to deliver babies” (McKay 141). To me, this connection further secures Lone as someone Morrison has allowed great insight and wisdom in *Paradise*.

The specific practice that Lone teaches Consolata is what she calls “stepping in” (*Paradise* 247). It is described as a way of either bringing someone seemingly dead back to life, or prolonging the life of someone very fragile and fading: “[s]tepping in to find the pinpoint of light. Manipulating it, widening it, strengthening it” (247). The two of them explain the practice – the gift of “insight” – in different ways: Lone calls it “stepping in,” whereas Consolata experiences it as “seeing in.” Either way, it is something “God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it” (247). Their actions are concerned with spiritually pulling someone back to life, and they can therefore be said to “engage in acts of extreme self-projection, of ultimate empathy, of total transfer of the self to the other” (Page 641). Lone and Consolata consequently represent a sort of unattainable position, and with their “complete identification with the other comes complete understanding” (641). I interpret these two women to express an extreme in the opposition between rationality and spirituality, and I understand Richard Misner as someone who has found a “perfect” balance.

Page does not mention essentialism in his article, but all of his interpretations of how Morrison approves some understandings of reality and life over others are applicable to my global claim, and especially my sub-claim that *Paradise* embodies essentialist attitudes in a more explicit way than *Beloved* does. Reverend Misner’s reminiscence of a common African heritage and a real home – “past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge” (213) – is openly essentialist. His advice to Pat is for her to not cut herself off from her roots, as he experiences her being too cold and rational when she, according to him, ignores a vital part of her identity. Even though he is a Baptist minister, and not at all engaged in the kind of work or practice that Consolata and Lone are, he supports Lone’s notion of how sometimes folks need more. Apart from Lone, he is the character with the most insight and knowledge throughout the whole novel, which is an interesting observation, seeing as he is “an outsider with a critical perspective on the town” (Page 644).

Also, Richard is a male, which in my opinion can be seen as countering much of the criticism towards *Paradise* being only feminist and with no sympathy towards men. This type

of claim about the novel is expressed in another review of *Paradise* in the *New York Times*: “[t]he male-female dichotomy, for example, with the male represented as rigid and legalistic, the female as mysterious and ‘other’, irrationally threatening to the male, is a contemporary cliché [sic], and Morrison plays it too heavily” (Allen). As mentioned earlier, Morrison is not concerned with much feminist thought, and she has stated that: “[c]ontemporary hostility to men is bothersome to me” (Koenen 73), which I believe justifies my reading of Misner. The negative review also states, wrongfully in my opinion, that Richard Misner “is little more than a mouthpiece for the views espoused by young liberals in the 60’s” (Allen). This interpretation of Misner lacks insight, seeing as he is one of the most significant characters in the novel; an illustration of the difficulty experienced by many readers and also the guide for them to overcome it.

When Misner is having trouble understanding why there are only seven families represented in the Christmas play, he asks for help from an uncooperative Pat: “[w]ell help me figure this place out. I know I’m an outsider, but I’m not an enemy” (212). Even though he does not receive any complete recollection of what happened in the Convent, or of the town’s unwritten blood rules, he is able to gather information on his own through the bits and pieces he picks up from different people. Therefore, he parallels the likely position of many readers, and he shows that at the same time as one passes judgment on the town and the men, one must also stay there with them and give them a chance, because it will be worth the struggle in the end. Richard’s position in the town is consequently an apt metaphor for how readers should not give up on the novel, or judge it too quickly, but rather keep going till the very end where something rewarding might await.

I find it fascinating that, even though he is a Reverend, Richard Misner is a spiritually hybrid character, who represents a clear essentialist attitude with his stories of Africa, and he is also the one providing hope for readers feeling like outsiders due to the particular aspects that is withheld from them. His versatile character helps supporting my interpretation of how Morrison’s essentialist perspectives do not fade or weaken the overall reading experience. Instead, she provides a space for her readers to dive further into the culture and experience something unfamiliar and intriguing. Paradoxically, in this complex novel, the character representing the most explicit essentialism is also the one who guides readers in the right direction. Morrison’s didactic voice in the middle of all the difficulty is a way of reaching out to readers; telling them that they are able to gain an almost full understanding, like Richard Misner, but there is no getting around the fact that it will be extremely hard work. Morrison rewards the readers who are willing to put down the effort. Also, the way her essentialism

undermines itself opens up for non-black readers to have the same starting point as those Morrison most likely intended for to have an advantage in filling the gaps.

Through the character Patricia Best, Morrison implicitly shows the readers what *not* to do in the interpretation of her novels. Even though it is tempting to want to gather up every piece of information there is, like Pat attempts in her project, this is an insufficient approach focused on a narrow pursuit of facts. Page claims that instead of Patricia's approach, Morrison "suggests that readers use their whole selves, pass beyond the merely rational, and truly become co-creators rather than merely passive respondents" (642). That is, readers should imitate practices like "stepping in" and "loud dreaming," and through such identification with the fictional world – and the concomitant disposal of personal preconceptions – they will be able to experience the cultural elements up close.

Towards the end of the narrative, Richard Misner once again functions as a role model for readers trying to make sense of what happens. He and Anna Flood, the woman he is romantically involved with, go to the Convent as soon as they get back from their trip, because they "doubted the convenient mass disappearance of the victims" (303). At the edge of the Convent garden, they simultaneously experience something they have a hard time putting into words. In the narrative it says: "they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see" (305). Anna says she saw or sensed a door, while Richard experienced it as a window. They laugh and try to figure out what a door or a window could mean, focused "on the sign rather than the event; excited by the invitation rather than the party" (305). They use laughter and humor as defense against the mysterious and startling experience:

Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (305).

Speaking at the funeral of little Save-Marie, Richard sees the window for a second time: "when he bowed his head and gazed at the coffin lid he saw the window in the garden, felt it beckon toward another place – neither life nor death – but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had" (307). To me, there seems to be some essentialist attitudes embedded in Morrison's narration of this other, hidden place. I recall her elaboration of the expression "Quiet is as kept" in the interview with LeClair when I try to figure out what would be on the other side. I suspect that there might be, in this instance as well, "a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language" (LeClair 124). Most readers are left to guess, but this expression could be a piece of information that means more to black people, since it is related to spirituality, and perhaps black people will chuckle

– like Morrison reveals that they will do when reading “Quiet is as kept.” Philip Page interprets the window and the door to have these implications: “[t]he closed door that Anna senses suggests that one phase, one life, is over, but simultaneously the open window that Richard senses suggests a new chance and new life” (644).

After Save-Marie’s funeral follows an account of what seems like the women of the Convent resurrected to life. These pages are, of course, difficult to place chronologically, and we are left unsure of when it occurs, and in what “realm” it occurs. Manley Gibson, Gigi’s father, sees her sitting on the grass inside the prison walls, but no one else “gave sign that they saw her” (309). Instances where Mavis, Pallas and Seneca encounter former family members and acquaintances follow Gigi’s, and all of the encounters are wrapped in a mysterious feeling, suggesting that what is happening could perhaps not be real. If the women are truly dead, have they passed into this other side that Anna and Richard caught a glimpse of? Is this place the beach where Consolata is reunited with Piedade, narrated in the very last paragraph of the novel? There is a large amount of questions left unanswered after finishing *Paradise*, and to be able to make some sense of it, one obviously has to stretch the imagination to new lengths, and leave rational preconceptions behind. Only by realizing one’s own cultural shortcomings can one hope to come as close to an understanding of the unfamiliar as possible.

The explicit essentialism in Richard Misner’s statements about black people’s true home and roots in Africa, and of how they will wither if they do not hold on to this essence, is related to the implicit essentialism in Morrison’s general narration of religion and spirituality. The reason why they are seen connected is how Morrison suggests an alternative and “correct” approach to Patricia Best’s inadequate one. The correct approach is indicated in the subsequent chapters, wherein we are introduced to Consolata and Lone and their holistic, metaphysical way of living and experiencing reality. This section of the novel can be seen as demonstrating how Morrison prefers the supernatural and spiritual reality, which is grounded in a connection with her African heritage and presumably an essence of “the black experience.” In *Paradise*, I believe it is clear that Toni Morrison has included essentialist attitudes towards spirituality that she considers reasonable, and that this aspect of the novel is approachable for readers with the right mode of reading and the right attitude.

CONCLUSION:

“The Ease of Coming Back to Love Begun”

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise.

Paradise (318)

When discussing the opening sentence of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison reveals the reasoning behind starting her novels with simple, uncomplicated sentences. Her hope is that the simplicity is not experienced as simpleminded, but rather as “devious, even loaded” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 20). The intimacy she was aiming for in this novel is similar to how she inaugurates the narrative in *Beloved* and *Paradise* as well, and, in a relatively essentialist way, she explains how “the intimacy between the reader and the page, could start up immediately because the secret is being shared, at best, and eavesdropped upon, at the least” (21). The effect of such sentences – like the first two in *Beloved*: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom,” and the first in *Paradise*: “They shoot the white girl first” – is that the reader is “protected from a confrontation too soon with the painful details, while simultaneously provoked into a desire to know them” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 22).

A reader’s desire to know the details will only continue to grow throughout the reading process, and, without the right awareness, culminate into an interpretive chaos and utter confusion. As I have demonstrated in my thesis, the subject position of readers is paramount to the creation of meaning in Morrison’s novels, and their chosen mode of reading is equally paramount to how well they are able to fill the significant gaps Morrison has left open, which eventually determines if they will be able to make sense of the novel as a whole. Essentialism complicates the withholding of information, because it entails that Morrison has made it more challenging for some than others to fill the gaps. In fact, those who are not usually “the other” are now positioned on the outside. The essentialist perspectives that I have traced in the two novels pose a challenge to the readers lacking knowledge supposedly held by the ones belonging to “the black community.” Morrison is heavily involved with portraying the history of African Americans in her work, and essentialism, as a concept, clearly denotes racial definitions. Before reviewing my process and findings, then, I will briefly return to central issues concerning race and racial identity with a few, final reflections related to essentialist attitudes.

In *The Shape of the Signifier*, Walter Benn Michaels argues that the soul cannot be a metaphor for the thing that “unites black people today with black people long ago, since if we believe in the biology of race, that thing is the very opposite of the soul – it’s the body – and if we don’t believe in the biology of race, we need the soul itself to be real, since there’s nothing for it to be a metaphor for” (160). My reading of this argument is that the soul in fact is what unites them, and not just as a metaphor. That is, the unifying factor could be seen as revolving around certain parts of their souls that are linked with spirituality – claimed in this thesis to be an essence of “the black experience.” Morrison could be essentialist in her writing in order to hold up the possibility of a unity among black people – a unity that will make the burdens more manageable because the load is shared collectively through spiritual practices. As my definition states, this sense of group identity is based on one’s own perception of racial heritage, not anyone else’s, which makes it apt for activism and other situations that might demand a strategic form of racial essentialism. Baby Suggs’s declaration of how “nobody could make it alone” is clearly supported by Morrison, as both these novels testify to the importance of the community and the collective in order to fully heal and to live completely.

Going into this study, I was fairly certain that I would be able to detect implicit essentialist perspectives and attitudes in the two novels. With the help of Morrison’s essentialist statements in her non-fiction and in various interviews, coupled with the comprehensive religious research done by Jennings and Zauditu-Selassie in Morrison’s novels in general, one can easily find, in close reading of specific events, the same hidden essentialism in her fiction. I have been particularly concerned with the religious and spiritual aspects in the narratives, because Morrison evidently treats such issues as a core to the black experience. The incorporation of the Yowa cosmogram represents an essentialist attitude in itself, if we are to believe Jennings:

Morrison’s substructural projection in her fiction of the ancestral sign of the Kongo Yowa preserved in Haiti’s Voudoun, the most discernible African survival in the Western hemisphere, attempts to stem the encroaching extinction of a Black social, political, and religious consciousness in the American diaspora by bringing the African past forward to the American present (136).

My estimation is that the same tracing of essentialist attitudes that I have done in this thesis can be conducted in relation to her other novels as well. Other fictional characters throughout her work that are considered ancestral presences based on Jennings’s definition are: M’Dear and Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye*; Pilate Dead and Circe in *Song of Solomon*; and Mary Thérèse Foucault in *Tar Baby*. Surrounding these characters, then, the usual withholding of

information concerning religion and spirituality is most likely colored by the same essentialist attitudes as in *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

During the first stages of this process, I only expected to uncover evidence towards an implicit essentialism. What revealed itself, however, in my second, close reading of *Paradise* – after having written the first chapter and then the introduction – was a considerable *explicit* portrayal of essentialist values. Richard Misner’s quote – “If you cut yourself off from the roots, you’ll wither” – is what I would call the epiphany of my project. In contrast to my first reading of *Paradise*, my second reading was to a far greater extent focused on essentialism, which is why I re-discovered the possible content inherent in this sentence at a late stage in my process. As demonstrated on the final pages of the second chapter, the function of Richard Misner in the narrative of *Paradise* is, overall, my most substantial finding in this thesis, and my opinion is that he contributes greatly to a re-evaluation of essentialism.

Whereas the rest of my textual findings prove that Morrison has narrated the religious and spiritual aspects of these novels in an essentialist manner, Richard Misner eloquently proves that essentialism does not have to be a solely bad aspect in relation to racial identity or something that blocks the admissions process for readers lacking the correct cultural knowledge. Morrison has revealed, at several different occasions, that she writes in order to “enlighten black people, not from a need to explain to the others...” (Gilroy *Small Acts* 177). In this same conversation with Paul Gilroy, Morrison explains that her writing is “about me and you. When I write a book I don’t have those people in my mind. I write what I think is of interest to black people” (177). Many readers will therefore have to work extremely hard to understand certain parts of her books, and Richard Misner functions as an ideal reader. Even though this is what Morrison intends, I have also shown that her essentialism is not all that bad since it both undermines itself (white readers can also have a cultural advantage) and deconstructs itself (black readers might not be able to “get it”). In fact, if some black readers would have to learn in order to understand, it opens up the possibility for all other readers also to be able to learn, which undermines the essentialism even further and in a good way.

I believe that Richard Misner represents Morrison’s own views and values, because of how she has allowed him to illuminate the most significant truths in the narrative world of *Paradise*. Misner is a representative of racial essentialism since he believes that African Americans should stay in contact with their true home and heritage, their African roots, to be able to live complete lives. The way Morrison clearly favors him by bestowing upon him great insight, knowledge, compassion and open-mindedness, shows that essentialism is acceptable and that she gives her consent to his view – which would indicate that Morrison

crosses over to the essentialist side on the axis. Her didactic voice is easily detectable in the narration surrounding Misner, and his character expresses in plain words how one should encounter information that is ambiguous and mostly withheld, and how one should not lose faith in the middle of hardship and confusion:

Suddenly Richard Misner knew he would stay. Not only because Anna wanted to, or because Deek Morgan had sought him out for a confession of sorts, but also because there was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people. Besides, mortality may be new to them but birth was not. The future panted at the gate (306).

When Morrison makes her readers feel off-balance, like she does in *Beloved*, “she highlights many of that world’s particular ground rules, including some that not all of her readers will share: in this world, ghosts are not only present but taken for granted; in this world, the past coexist with the future” (Phelan 230). The particular ground rules governing Morrison’s fictional universe will not be shared by all readers. If lacking the spirituality or correct knowledge of the specific cultural context – which can be both white and black readers – they will either detect the obstacles caused by essentialism or not. I genuinely believe that, to reach a decent understanding of her work, one has to be willing to stretch the imagination and be open to a reality that goes beyond the physical realm. The awareness of cultural obstacles should in no way indicate a wrongful approach, but should rather be viewed as an invitation to descend even further into this particular world. In the end, one is never closer to another culture than when one fails to understand it. Yet, the right mode of reading demands that the reader has to be willing to continue the search for meaning and not give up on the text, even if it is experienced as an arduous struggle along the way. One might also find oneself in the position of looking back on the challenging process realizing that the struggle with reading *Paradise* in fact was the best part – at least that is what Morrison would want us to realize.

Related to the reading approaches suggested by Segalen and Iser, Aubry mentions another scholar in his article that deals with Oprah Winfrey’s book club, who finds it odd how Winfrey insists on “teaching novels as springboards for self-reflection,” because he is under the impression that novels are about “stepping outside of one’s experience” (360). Aubry continues to explain that identification “requires commonalities between self and other, but it also requires alterity”, because the insights about oneself originate in the kind of rewarding clash between sameness and otherness that readers will experience when reading novels like *Beloved* and *Paradise* (360). Also, the way Morrison’s essentialism can be seen to undermine itself, due to how some non-black readers can have first hand knowledge of the spiritual

beliefs and practices through a connection with African American communities, makes her essentialism more including even though she might not have intended for it to happen.

After *Paradise* was published, and Morrison had begun notes for the next book, she had a disquieting sense that she had not quite finished with *Paradise*, and she was mad because of something she had forgot to do. In an interview she revealed that the last word in the book, which is “Paradise,” should have been written with a lower case “p,” because the whole point is “to get paradise off its pedestal, as a place for anyone, to open it up for passengers and crew. I want all the readers to put a lowercase mark on that ‘p’” (Smith). This statement shows how *Paradise* continues to haunt not only the readers, but also Toni Morrison herself. In addition, it eloquently sums up one of the core meanings in the novel and serves as a metaphor for how everyone is able to understand and participate in something seemingly exclusionary and complex – if they open themselves up to new and mysterious experiences and reconsider previous preconceptions.

Without deliberate intention, I have ironically ended up with what resembles two “how-to” chapters, in direct opposition to what Morrison wants her novels to function as. What I have offered in my thesis is a possible approach to deal with some of the most particular and challenging elements in *Beloved* and *Paradise*, with a strong focus on how readers themselves must put in the hard work. Even though I have focused specifically on how to interpret the novels, I have hopefully made it clear that I do not encourage “easy, passive, uninvolved and disengaged experiences” either. Closing off my journey through various realms, my advice is to step through the open door or the beckoning window that might unveil itself, because there could be some truly worthwhile experiences on the other side. In contrast to Richard Misner and Anna Flood, I have been equally excited with the invitation as with the party, having encountered these novels without any defense. And, Toni Morrison – you have definitely made my world larger.

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