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Mary Frankovich

Clemson University, frankovich.maryrose@gmail.com

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“THEY DON’T NEED MEN AND THEY DON’T NEED GOD”: THE LIBERATORY
POSSIBILITIES OF WAYWARDNESS IN TONI MORRISON’S *PARADISE*

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Mary Rose Frankovich
May 2021

Accepted by:
Dr. Rhondda Thomas
Dr. Erin Goss
Dr. Matthew Hooley

ABSTRACT

While Toni Morrison's work is often a topic of critical conversations regarding race and gender in the United States, less attention is paid to her 1997 novel *Paradise*. Morrison's many-layered, multi-voiced work explores the tensions between the rigidly patriarchal, all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the wayward women who live in a nearby mansion known as the Convent. The women create an unlikely community at the Convent, and Ruby's patriarchs are so threatened by them that they murder the women. In this paper, I argue that the women in the Convent community enact alternative ways of being by claiming waywardness as a liberatory subject position. Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* provides definitions of wayward and waywardness from which I contextualize the women's community as well as their relationship to Ruby. Drawing further on Elizabeth Spelman's work in "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," I connect the body/spirit dichotomy engendered by Plato, Christian, and Western philosophies to Ruby's rigid standards of womanhood which the Convent women defy. The body/spirit binary relegates women to the object position of waywardness when they are perceived to be lacking virtue. However, when the Convent women claim waywardness as a liberatory subject position, they reject the body/spirit binary altogether and unite the two through a spirit work ritual in the Convent's cellar. I contend the women's waywardness, the Convent, and their ritual are interlocking facets of their transformation. Waywardness is both the basis of their

community and the social position which allows them to imagine and eventually enact alternative ways of being apart from patriarchal control.

DEDICATION

To my husband Steven, who provided me with unending support throughout my studies and graciously accommodated my schedule and needs as we sheltered in place this past year. Thank you for listening to my trials and triumphs, and for nodding along even when you had no idea what I was talking about. And to Luna, who offered love and support in her own way.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, Saidiya Hartman expounds on the definitions of wayward and waywardness. She states that being wayward is to “inhabit the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable;”¹ waywardness is “an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated.”² Hartman’s scrupulous definitions of waywardness shift the power relations inherent in deeming someone wayward. While the word is often embedded with negative connotations—synonymous with “troublesome, riotous, tumultuous”³—Hartman’s definitions reveal the agency of the wayward individual as they have the opportunity to extricate themselves from hegemonic systems of power to engage in a “*beautiful experiment* in how-to-live.”⁴ The wayward person’s “improvisation with the terms of social existence” can create new ways of being apart from communities invested in preserving patriarchal norms. Using Hartman’s subversive definitions⁵, I will examine the group of wayward women in Toni Morrison’s 1997 novel *Paradise*. Morrison’s many-layered, multi-voiced work explores the tensions between the rigidly patriarchal, all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the wayward women who live in a nearby mansion known as the Convent. The women create an unlikely community at the Convent, and Ruby’s patriarchs are so threatened by them that they murder the women, a scene which takes place in the novel’s opening pages. Perhaps both because and in spite of their deaths, the women’s community presents a rich opportunity for exploring the liberatory possibilities

of waywardness: that women can claim waywardness as a subject position in order to live unencumbered by, or perhaps even apart from, patriarchal control.

Morrison based the novel's precipitating conflict on a story she heard in Brazil that "overwhelmed" her: a group of Black nuns were shot because the locals who lived near their convent believed they were practicing pagan rites.⁶ In Morrison's fiction, however, the mansion was never a convent, and the women are not nuns. Aside from Consolata, the wayward women are running from traumas and conflicts. Mavis leaves home because she is unable to deal with her grief after leaving her twin babies in her locked car, where they suffocated to death. Gigi seeks a purpose and something to replace the image of a little Black boy shot in the Oakland riots. Haunted by her abandonment and sexual abuse in foster homes, Seneca finds the Convent after briefly engaging in sex work. And Pallas, a teenager on the run after her adult boyfriend leaves her for her mother, arrives at the Convent after being sexually assaulted.

Ruby's leaders target the Convent women not only because of their waywardness, but also because their gender and, by extension, reproductive capabilities, pose an implicit threat to the town's racial purity. Morrison inverts the typical "skin privilege"⁷ of colorism by creating an exclusionary dark-skinned community "that refused entry to the mixed race."⁸ Colorism refers to skin tone discrimination and usually indicates prejudice against dark-skinned people within communities of color. Audrey Kerr defines colorism as "the implosion of racism—the internalization of slavery and Jim Crowism."⁹ By replicating antiblack discrimination, colorism reveals the "desire to imagine the success and opportunity afforded to whites."¹⁰ The desire to imagine and achieve white success

appears to animate Fairly, Oklahoma, the light-skinned all-black town which rejected the Old Fathers presumably because they were too poor and too black. As a result of the Disallowing, the Old and New Fathers take defiant pride in their blue-black skin and believe they must maintain racial purity. Morrison avoids racial indicators for the Convent women except for the novel's first line, which reveals one of the four new residents is white. "They shoot the white girl first"¹¹ indicates the rest of the women are not white. As mysterious light-skinned outsiders who are perceived as sexually promiscuous, the wayward Convent women are a threat to Ruby's racially pure bloodlines.

In addition to reversing the typical hierarchy of colorism, Ruby's leaders create their paradise by adapting Western, Christian, and patriarchal power structures which in turn establish gender ideals based on the body/spirit divide present in Christianity. The connection between the town's gender ideals and the body/spirit binary is seen when the Ruby men refer to the Convent women as "bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary."¹² Ruby's patriarchs align with the Christian and Western philosophical traditions which associate women with the body and men with the mind. These structures dictate gender norms as they are designed to preserve and perpetuate male power. The body/spirit binary correlates to the Eve/Mary binary because Eve is associated with physical temptation, while Mary is associated with spiritual virtue. In "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," Elizabeth Spelman elaborates upon somatophobia, a term she coined to describe a fear or resentment of the body which results from viewing the mind, spirit, or soul as superior to the body. Spelman connects somatophobia to

misogynist ideas which stem from Plato and Western philosophy. For Plato, cultivating the mind or spirit is how a person may “have knowledge, be in touch with reality, and lead a life of virtue.”¹³ The body, “with its deceptive senses, keeps us from real knowledge” and “tempts us away from a virtuous life.”¹⁴ In the Western philosophical tradition men are associated with the mind/spirit/soul, while “women’s lives have long been associated with the body and bodily functions.”¹⁵ The link between women and the body means that women are often viewed *as* bodies in patriarchal Western power structures, a view which can lead to objectification and degradation. Furthermore, since the body is a threat to a virtuous life, women are a threat to a virtuous life. In the Christian tradition, women can only subvert their potential role as unvirtuous temptresses by maintaining a Marian purity. Because this Eve/Mary dichotomy is the basis of Christian standards of womanhood, any woman who does not conform to Marian ideals would be considered wayward. Ruby’s patriarchs are not only concerned with protecting the town’s future and reasserting their power, but also preserving their power structures by enforcing strict Christian morals.

Morrison places the wayward women in a space which captures the body/spirit divide that often engenders women’s degradation and objectification. The extravagant mansion was built by an embezzler who dreamed of hosting lavish parties. The Convent is “shaped like a live cartridge” and it “curved to a deadly point at the north end.”¹⁶ While the Convent’s shape is only described in comparison to a bullet, it is notably a phallic shape as well. The embezzler infused the mansion with sexual imagery in which women—or their body parts—are objects designed to fulfill male fantasies of desire and

domination, which reflects and replicates the objectification perpetuated by Western patriarchal thought. Yet despite the overtly violent male gaze of the Convent, it is a place of temporary refuge for the women and eventually the site of their transformation. By presenting women's bodies as they are objectified under Western patriarchal systems of power, the Convent enables the women to recognize the ways in which their lives have been shaped by the body/spirit divide as this binary relegates women to the object position of waywardness when they are perceived to be lacking virtue. The Convent's visual representation of the body/spirit divide forces the women to choose between reconciling this divide within themselves or continuing to run. When the Convent women claim waywardness as a liberatory subject position, they reject the body/spirit binary altogether and unite the two. The women's waywardness, the Convent, and their ritual are interlocking facets of their transformation. Waywardness is both the basis of their community and the social position which allows them to imagine and eventually enact alternative ways of being.

WAYWARDNESS VS. THE PATRIARCHY

The Western, Christian, and patriarchal systems of power around which America is structured also converge in Ruby to dictate social and gender norms. While these systems of power usually benefit cisgender, heterosexual white men, Ruby's leaders adapt these structures in an attempt to ensure the town's success, both economically and socially.¹⁷ Ruby functions as a concentrated microcosm of the larger American social structures and communities in which wayward women are often othered. While

waywardness could be viewed as a benign deviation from social and/or gender norms, Ruby's patriarchs believe waywardness has detrimental consequences. They perpetuate rigid gender roles which are rationalized by concerns over the town's future. Therefore, the wayward Convent women who defy those norms are a threat to the town. While some Ruby women conform to their town's patriarchal order, others feel suffocated by its close-mindedness. Several Ruby women find escape and reprieve at the Convent because they know the wayward women will comfort and assist them without judgment. The gendered division of perceptions of the Convent women is indicative of the town's power structures. Ruby's patriarchs strive to maintain their power by othering the Convent women as wayward, while some Ruby women see the possibility of freedom in the women's waywardness.

For Ruby's patriarchs, a woman is either Eve or Mary, a wanton body or virtuous spirit. The assailants' declaration that the Convent women are "bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary"¹⁸ indicates the dichotomous framework on which the town's gender ideals are based. While Mary represents the impossible ideal of virginity and motherhood, Eve captures the misogyny engendered by somatophobia and the body/spirit divide: she is an evil temptress and a bad mother. As evil temptress Eve seduced Adam into eating the fruit, and as a bad mother she cursed all of God's children with original sin. In the Christian tradition, Eve is the original wayward woman. However, her waywardness stems from her sexuality rather than disobedience in Ruby's patriarchs' point of view. The men's characterization of the women as "bodacious black Eves" is more akin to a Jezebelian figure of sexual temptation. While "bodacious" implies overt

sexuality, it is also worth noting that the unredeemed Eves are Black, while Mary is presumably white, based on the Western and Christian traditions with which Ruby's patriarchs align. This racial difference mapped onto the Eve/Mary binary is a noticeable departure from Ruby's typical colorism, which elevates pure, dark-skinned Black people as superior to anyone mixed race or white. Characterizing the wayward women as "bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary" is an example of Ruby's patriarchs adopting—rather than adapting—a Western framework which hypersexualizes Black women. As I will explore later in this section, Blackness is often associated with sexual immorality in Western culture. Because they subscribe to the Western and Christian body/spirit dichotomy, Ruby's leaders value Marian virtues over Eve desires because they believe the spirit is inherently superior, while the body is a site of temptation and destruction.

Ruby's patriarchs' rigid standards of womanhood—which serve to confirm the Convent women's waywardness and restrict Ruby women—are rooted in purity, reproduction, and obedience. These standards are based upon the Eve/Mary and body/spirit binaries as well as concerns over the town's futurity. Deborah Mix states that in Ruby, "women, as potential 'Eves,' then, must be held to a rigid set of Marian behavioral expectations to ensure the holiness of paradise as well as the purity of the community."¹⁹ The purity of the community is both sexual and racial. In response to the Disallowing, the New Fathers insist on the purity of their "8-rock"²⁰ bloodlines. Sharon Jessee writes that although the Old Fathers had very little after Reconstruction, "they did have pure African American bloodlines. . . . They made of this racial purity a bulwark, a

mark of superiority which was so engrained that even in the 1970s the adult generation still looked down on lighter-skinned blacks.”²¹ The value placed upon “[u]nadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood”²² translates into a responsibility forced upon Ruby women to adhere to the town’s “blood rule”—which “nobody admitted existed”²³—by bearing children for eight-rock men.

Ruby’s patriarchs believe they must regulate women’s behaviors and even their lives in order to protect the community’s racial purity. Deacon Morgan declares, “Women always the key, God bless ’em.”²⁴ Not only are women the keys to Ruby’s success through reproduction, but they are also the potential keys to its destruction. Ruby’s patriarchs control their wives and daughters as heads of the household. In order to discourage Arnette Fleetwood’s relationship with K.D. Morgan, Arnold Fleetwood declares he will “arrange her [Arnette’s] mind.”²⁵ When he makes this declaration—or threat—the women are “nowhere in sight.”²⁶ Instead, they are upstairs taking care of the babies; their footsteps are the only signs of their presence. K.D.’s subsequent fling with Gigi was cause for concern to the Morgan twins because, as an outsider, Gigi could not be “arranged.” While their tumultuous relationship does not affect K.D.’s reputation, it confirms the wayward Convent women’s alleged promiscuity; Deacon asserts that “every brothel don’t have a red light in the window.”²⁷ The women’s actions can only confirm but never refute their waywardness.

Because women are responsible for bearing the town’s future generations, the Disallowing justifies both the value placed on women’s sexual purity and the idea that light-skinned women are a threat. Pat Best believes that by not seeking medical help, the

town leaders allowed her light-skinned mother to die during childbirth in order to eliminate “the first visible glitch”²⁸ in the New Fathers’ quest to replicate Haven. The Old and New Fathers view their racial purity as a mark of superiority in part because it declared that none of their women were raped by white masters; their eight-rock blood was not tainted by whiteness. The Old Fathers were proud their women worked in the fields because “they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility.”²⁹ While this line suggests the Old Fathers believed rape is not the woman’s fault, the conflation of light skin with promiscuity indicates a far more complicated interpretation of what constitutes purity. Candice Jenkins succinctly notes that “skin color concretizes morality in the town.”³⁰ Not only do light-skinned women have the potential to compromise the town’s eight-rock bloodlines, but they are also perceived as inherently promiscuous. Light-skinned Billie Delia is widely known as “the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second”³¹ although Morrison later reveals she is a virgin. Billie Delia even remarks that “no one believed [her virginity] existed.”³² The Convent women are also targeted in part because of their race. Morrison deliberately withholds racial indicators for the women in her cultivation of “race-specific/race-free prose,”³³ yet any way the Convent women’s bodies could be racially marked as “other” confirms their waywardness.

A notable exception to the conflation of lightness with promiscuity or impurity is the Morgan twins’ memory of the “nineteen Negro ladies”³⁴ who embody the standards of womanhood and economic success which the twins try to emulate in Ruby. Deacon recalls the women as “pastel colored and eternal”³⁵ with narrow waists, dresses made

from delicate fabrics, small hats, and thin leather shoes. The women's white dresses and pastel hats bring to mind Easter clothes or wedding dresses, which in turn suggest a holy and pure sexuality. Combined with their "creamy and luminous"³⁶ skin, the women's appearances evoke desire in the twins—a desire that is likely both sexual and aspirational. Not only do their outfits suggest wealth, but the colorism produced by colonialism and slavery dictates that lighter skinned Black people are afforded more social mobility. Kerr notes that colorism stems from the belief that "darker skin meant better labor" so "lighter-skinned blacks were better suited for intelligent tasks."³⁷ The fact that these nineteen light-skinned women live on in the Morgan twins' memory as an ideal of womanhood suggests that, in this moment, the women's markers of wealth and status outweigh their racial impurity. The Morgan twins perhaps consider their sexual desire to be safe also because the women's outfits evoke purity. Furthermore, their appearances indicate they have financially secure husbands who are able to provide for them, another facet of the ideals with which the Morgan twins are aligned.

Ruby's patriarchs—and the Morgan twins in particular—measure success by the safety and domesticity of their wives, standards which become yet another justification for patriarchal control and eventually violence. Shirley Stave examines domestic relationships in *Ruby* by drawing on the ideology of "separate spheres," which "regulat[es] the obligations of men and women and segregat[es] them from each other in their daily lives."³⁸ In Western cultures such as America's, women are tasked with domestic duties within the home as well as raising children. Ruby men work so their wives can remain at home and keep house, yet women have little to no authority within

the home. Stave argues that in Ruby, the men's control is totalizing and women have no "separate sphere" in which to exert control. Before tobacco ruins Steward's taste buds, he routinely criticizes Dovey's cooking. Even on her wedding day, she worries, "I don't expect he'll be satisfied at table. . . He compliments my cooking, then suggests how to improve it next time."³⁹ The women are confined to domestic roles with little else to occupy their time. K.D. observes that Soane "worked thread like a prisoner: daily, methodically, for free, producing more lace than could ever be practical."⁴⁰ Stave expands the narrative of patriarchal control by categorizing the town itself as a woman "over which the men assume authority."⁴¹ As mentioned previously, this authority is believed to be a way of securing the town's future as women are responsible for reproduction. Ruby's leaders believe the ultimate sign of the town's success is that women can walk safely alone at night. As descendants of enslaved African Americans, the townspeople are all too aware of the dangers which could beset their community: "Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled. . . where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead."⁴² Ruby's patriarchs aim to safeguard their town through isolation so no evil can penetrate their community. While women's safety is certainly a noble goal, and the New Fathers' fears are grounded in the legitimate threats of antiblack and gendered violence, Mix states that "it becomes clear that the pressing issue for many of Ruby's patriarchs is ensuring control over their women's bodies and behaviors, a fixation that eventually leads to the assault on the Convent. . . It is by structuring this myth of a 'haven' for black women that the black men of Ruby are able to believe they are never

predators themselves.”⁴³ Morrison concludes her first telling of the Convent attack with the line, “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby.”⁴⁴ This line supports Mix’s observation by showing the men felt the attack was not only justified, but ordained. The nine assailants do not consider themselves predators because they are simply making sure that “nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain.”⁴⁵ The wayward women are not even women; they are infectious others threatening Ruby’s very existence.

Although interactions between Ruby and the wayward Convent women are limited, their appearance and behavior at K.D. and Arnette’s wedding reception solidifies the townspeople’s impressions of them as promiscuous threats. While “[t]he women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot’s perfume,”⁴⁶ the wayward women arrive “looking like go-go girls: pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear, no stockings. Jezebel’s storehouse raided to decorate arms, earlobes, necks, ankles, and even a nostril.”⁴⁷ The narrator’s description of the Convent women in Jezebelian accoutrement reflects the townspeople’s impressions and indicates the disparity between the “bodacious black Eves” and the Marian Ruby women. The wayward women’s casual, “skimpy” clothing contrasts not only the Ruby women’s “still fresh Easter clothes,”⁴⁸ but also the nineteen Negro ladies’ delicate white dresses. In *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*, Tamara Lomax argues that “being imagined as some version of temptress, promiscuous, whore or ho, or just overall unscrupulous, comes with the territory of being both black and female in the United States, even in the Black Church.”⁴⁹ Lomax then

discusses Black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine's assertion that Black women safeguarded their "sexual being" during slavery in an effort to avoid rape, while "[i]n freedom, primacy was placed on safeguarding not only their bodies but also their sexual *image*."⁵⁰ Although women are targeted for reasons outside their control, presenting a pure or chaste sexual image could be an attempt to prevent or discourage accusations that a sexually assaulted woman was "asking for it." Hine's connection between slavery and Black women guarding their sexual image certainly translates to Ruby, wherein racial purity is valued in part because it indicates no women were raped by white men. While Lomax's statement is specifically directed toward Black women, it nonetheless illuminates the mindset among Christian Ruby citizens who would label women in "skimpy tops" and "see-through skirts" as "Jezebels." It is worth noting that the Ruby women were, on the whole, just as alarmed as the men, and possibly even more offended by the wayward women.

Any rumored promiscuity is confirmed by the wayward women's behavior as well as their Jezebelian outfits. They ask "if there was anything other than lemonade and punch to drink,"⁵¹ drown out the hymns with Otis Redding⁵², and dance together by the Oven. The women's performance at the Oven is likely a deeper insult to Ruby's patriarchs than their outfits. For the Morgans and other Ruby leaders, the Oven and its commanding message—"Beware the Furrow of His Brow"—represent Ruby's history, community, and the force of male leadership. The younger generation of Ruby believes the Oven should read "Be the Furrow of His Brow" to reflect the recent civil rights and Black power activism of the 1960s, yet the older generation is predictably resistant to

change. Because the Oven has become a site of contention for the town patriarchs, the women's presence there further insults them. The promiscuously dressed women violate the sacred space with their "rocking bodies"⁵³ as if to flaunt their waywardness. During their invasion of the Convent, one of the Morgan twins thinks, "they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew."⁵⁴

While Ruby men and some of its women view waywardness as a threat and even an insult, for other Ruby women waywardness is, in Hartman's words, "[t]he errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a place better than here."⁵⁵ Multiple Ruby women walk the seventeen-mile path to the Convent in search of a place different—if not better—than their restrictive town. Lone DuPres even notes that women are the only ones who walk the road, "[n]ever men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. . . crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost."⁵⁶ The fact that women have routinely walked seventeen miles to the Convent indicates their desperation and the significance of this act. While the Ruby women are not necessarily wayward, they are weary of the town's controlling norms. Soane Morgan and Arnette Fleetwood each make the journey in search of an abortion. Because women are so valued for their ability to bear children, there is no room in Ruby for those who seek reproductive autonomy. Soane later befriends Consolata and makes frequent visits to the Convent for an unspecified tonic which some critics believe is a form of contraception.⁵⁷ Although she does not want an abortion, Sweetie Fleetwood seeks out a respite from the mental and physical toll of motherhood. She walks to the Convent in a daze, exhausted from constantly watching over her four "broken"⁵⁸ babies. Pat Best speculates the

Fleetwood children's birth defects are the result of a long history of "takeovers": "A young widow might take over a single man's house. A widower might ask a friend or a distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects. . . Or, to put it another way, Billy's mother was wife to her own great-uncle."⁵⁹ This incestuous practice and the birth defects which could result from it were part of the price of maintaining racial purity in both Haven and Ruby. A woman's sexual purity could be sacrificed for the sake of a "takeover," yet she could not claim her own sexual or reproductive autonomy.

Soane, Arnette, and Sweetie desire a way out of or reprieve from motherhood, whereas Billie Delia looks for refuge from her mother and in turn finds a glimpse into the "social otherwise"⁶⁰ of waywardness. She arrives at the Convent after a violent fight with her mother. Although Pat criticizes the town's rigid ways, she succumbs to the narrative that her daughter is "the wild one"⁶¹ and beats her with an iron. Billie Delia is perhaps the most altered by her experience at the Convent; Morrison writes, "What she saw and learned there changed her forever."⁶² What Billie Delia saw or learned is never specified, but I contend it was simply the women's kindness and a glimpse of "the social otherwise"⁶³ of a community not dictated by patriarchal control. After the massacre at the Convent, Billie Delia wonders, "When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town. . . She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors—but *out there*."⁶⁴ Billie Delia imagines the women as warriors who will return ready to fight back—both to

avenge their deaths and liberate Ruby. The space Ruby men believe to be dangerous is a space of promise for Billie Delia because “Out There” lies the hope of the wayward women and their return. Waywardness represents radical possibility: the idea that women can live unencumbered by and perhaps even apart from patriarchal control.

“IN THIS PLACE OF ALL PLACES”: WAYWARD WOMEN IN A PATRIARCHAL SPACE

Upon first consideration, it is perhaps an unexpected choice for Morrison to situate a community of sexually abused women in a phallically shaped mansion which is decorated with erotica and religious iconography. The Convent seems to be split between two poles: lust and piousness, the body and the spirit. The mansion not only captures but also aestheticizes the body/spirit divide perpetuated by Western philosophy and Christianity, a divide which is also at the root of the women’s waywardness. Images that represent women’s objectification as well as the shame directed at women’s bodies confront the Convent’s residents at almost every turn. However, the wayward women exert some power over the space by redefining it to suit their community. And later, the cellar becomes a site of transformation wherein the women claim their waywardness as a liberatory subject position. While the wayward women find some respite at the Convent, the mansion’s visual representations of the body/spirit divide echo their past abuses, forcing the women to choose between confronting or continuing to avoid their traumas.

The mansion’s structure and uses over the years reflect sexual or spiritual desires, which are fulfilled in the space by exerting power over women’s bodies through

objectification or regulation. Shari Evans analyzes the Convent as a programmed space, which refers to a built space imbued with a certain intention—or program—that “controls the way we inhabit”⁶⁵ the space. The Convent was created to fulfill the embezzler’s desires, yet it is “open to interpretive practice”⁶⁶ because its inhabitants are able to redefine the program. Thus, the Convent is a “multiply-programmed space” which has been “revised and re-interpreted in various, conflicting ways.”⁶⁷ As the “embezzler’s folly,”⁶⁸ the Convent embodies the male gaze. The embezzler privileged physical pleasure over spiritual fulfillment, using women as objects to stimulate and satisfy his erotic fantasies. The mansion is infused with sexual imagery, including a chandelier with female torso candleholders, doorknobs with nipples, and bathroom fixtures fashioned to look like male genitalia. Gigi discovers ashtrays shaped like vaginas and imagines “men contentedly knocking their cigars against those ashtrays. Or perhaps just resting them there, knowing without looking that the glowing tip was slowly building a delicate head.”⁶⁹ Morrison’s vivid description shows that women are quite literally objectified in this space.

While the embezzler viewed women only as bodies, the nuns privilege the spirit at the expense of the body. The nuns begin their practice by reversing the embezzler’s program within the space. When they moved in, “Consolata’s first tasks were to smash offending marble figures and tend bonfires of books, crossing herself when naked lovers blew out of the fire and had to be chased back into the flame.”⁷⁰ Mix notes that the nuns’ response to the embezzler’s objectifying and explicit décor could be considered appropriate.⁷¹ However, it was not sufficient for the nuns to simply dispose of the figures

and books; they had to be destroyed. Consolata's dutiful signs of the cross further signify the fear associated with sexuality that is present in Catholicism, and Christianity more broadly. Although she was already destroying the embezzler's artifacts, she also had to bless herself to ward off any curiosity or desire the items may inspire within her. The nuns further implement their program by converting one of the Convent's rooms into a chapel and another into a schoolroom in addition to adding statues, crosses, and other religious iconography. Their focus on the spirit extends to their treatment of the "wicked, *wayward* Indian girls"⁷² who are forced to attend school at the Convent. The Indigenous girls are placed at the Convent to assimilate because their culture is considered inherently inimical to "proper and respectable"⁷³ Western cultures. According to Evans, "the nuns set about the erasure of cultural identity as they 'still' Arapho girls."⁷⁴ Their mission was to "bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption."⁷⁵ While part of the nuns' assimilation process involved prayer and other religious practices, they also regulated the girls' bodies through their food and clothing in an attempt to redeem them from their Godless culture.

Both the nuns' practice of enforcing cultural hegemony and the Ruby men's patriarchal control each stem from somatophobia and the body/spirit divide. Ruby's patriarchs try to control every aspect of women's lives to assure the town's success, just as the nuns tried to control the Indigenous girls' lives to ensure the success of their colonialist missionary work. Sexism and racism are distinct forms of oppression, but they

do overlap in notable ways. Spelman points out the connections between Plato's views on women and his views on animals, children, enslaved people, and "brutes."⁷⁶ The groups are often compared as a means of dehumanization: "women are thought to have slavish or childish appetites, slaves are said to be brutish. . . The members of these groups lack, for all intents and purposes, mind or the power of reason; even the humans among them are not considered fully human."⁷⁷ The white supremacist belief that people of color are less than human and thus more associated with the body has roots in Plato's body/spirit divide, which also informs Western and Christian traditions. Similarly, the nuns' colonialist missionary work in part stems from the association between Indigenous people and the body which can be seen in Plato's aforementioned discussion of "slaves" and "brutes." Therefore, the wayward Indigenous girls must deny their bodies and cultivate their spirits to know God.

The nuns' emphasis on the spirit reflects Catholic teachings which prioritize spiritual needs and revere those who sacrifice their bodies in order to preserve their purity. Consolata states that Mary Magna taught her, "my body is nothing my spirit everything."⁷⁸ However, the nuns' attempts to render a privileging of the spirit are also supported by images of the body. A wall in the game room displays an etching titled "St. Catherine of Siena," which Gigi describes as "the I-give woman serving up her breasts like two baked Alaskas on a platter"⁷⁹ and presenting them "to a lord."⁸⁰ The etching most likely depicts St. Agatha of Sicily⁸¹, an early Christian martyr known for refusing to break her vow of celibacy, which eventually led to her torture and death. St. Agatha's breasts were severed and she is often depicted holding them on a plate.⁸² St. Catherine of

Siena is also known for making a vow of celibacy when she entered into a mystical marriage to Jesus Christ. She is often depicted in her Dominican habit holding a lily to symbolize purity.⁸³ Although the reason for Morrison's likely intentional misnomer is not apparent, the conflation of the two women shows the ubiquity of vows of celibacy within the Catholic tradition as well as the veneration given to women who remain chaste, even at the threat of death. Mix argues the image in the game room represents "[a] cultural ideology that dictates that the female body deserves to be a site of pain."⁸⁴ The nuns' iconography renders pain and sacrifice as a means of rejecting physical pleasure in order to cultivate spirituality. Christian morality places value on a woman's purity, so any woman who is unchaste is viewed as an Eve or a Jezebel, a figure of wanton temptation. These two poles of woman's embodiment—Eve or Mary, whore or virgin—are the very basis of the Convent's structure and imagery. Ruby's patriarchs use the same dichotomous Eve/Mary framework to judge the wayward women as unredeemed whores.

Just as the nuns could not remove all vestiges of the embezzler's desire, the wayward women's escapes to the Convent cannot erase the effects of their sexual assault and objectification. Mix asserts that each woman's sexuality, "which could be a source of physical and even spiritual pleasure, is thoroughly entangled with violence and cruelty."⁸⁵ Furthermore, the women's abuses take place within the home which, according to Ruby's patriarchs, is supposed to be a place of safety. Mavis leaves home in part because of her abusive husband, Frank. She recalls, "When she and Frank married she did like it. Sort of. Then it became required torture, longer but not much different from being slapped out of her chair."⁸⁶ This description of their sexual relationship matches an earlier scene in

which Frank masturbates on Mavis while she is lying in bed. Morrison writes, “She could have been a life-size Raggedy Ann.”⁸⁷ Not unlike the alabaster vagina ashtrays, Mavis is simply a tool for her husband’s sexual gratification rather than an active participant in their lovemaking.⁸⁸ By contrast, Gigi is the most overtly sexual of the group and usually “enjoy[s] the waves of raw horniness”⁸⁹ and attention she receives from men. But after arriving at the Convent, she has a tumultuous relationship with K.D., who “chased her around the house, grabbed her, and smacked her” after she “teased, insulted, or refused him once too often.”⁹⁰ Reflecting on their fling, her lack of education, and her failed efforts to leave the Convent and get “back in the fray,”⁹¹ Gigi fears she has become an “I-give woman” whose only asset is her sexuality. Although Gigi’s story could serve as a cautionary tale encouraging women to remain chaste, Morrison avoids such moral philosophizing. It is not Gigi’s sexuality but rather K.D.’s misogyny which is the problem. Before their fling begins, K.D. blames Gigi’s body for “caus[ing] all the trouble”⁹² when he slapped Arnette during an argument about her pregnancy: “Suppose she [Gigi] hadn’t been there. Suppose her navel had not peeked over the waist of her jeans or her breasts had just hushed, hushed for a few seconds till they could figure out how to act—what attitude to strike.”⁹³ Gigi is objectified by K.D.’s lust and his anger; she is both an object of desire and a scapegoat. While Gigi still seems to be empowered by her sexuality despite her relationship with K.D., Seneca is haunted by past abuse. She was first sexually assaulted in a foster home at a young age and continues to receive unwanted attention and advances from men. Seneca believes “there [i]s something inside her that made boys snatch her and men flash her.”⁹⁴ Seneca’s self-harm began after the

first time she was abused, and she continues the practice to keep herself from crying. She takes pride in the surgical precision of her cuts and is both “thrilled” and “steadied” by “this under garment life.”⁹⁵ Seneca finds release in this act because she is in control of the harm inflicted upon her body.

While the women’s experiences with abuse expose the naivete of believing the home is a protected space, Morrison similarly demonstrates that women can also abuse women. Before arriving at the Convent, Seneca engages in sex work for Norma Fox. It is unclear whether there are any other participants, but Seneca and Norma are the only two named. Morrison writes, “Seneca spent the following three weeks in gorgeous rooms, with gorgeous Norma and food too pretty to eat. Norma called her many sweet things but not once asked what her name was.”⁹⁶ It is evident that the women spend time together, and Norma hires Seneca in part for her own wishes and desires. However, Norma treating her as an object haunts Seneca more than the actual sex work. Seneca feels “like a pet you wanted to play with for a while—a little while—but not keep. Not love.”⁹⁷ During her three weeks with Norma, Seneca “mov[ed] from peacock feathers to abject humiliation; from coddling to playful abuse...But the pain framed the pleasure, gave it edge.”⁹⁸ Morrison’s description makes it unclear whose pleasure is framed by pain, but the conflation of the two is similarly echoed in the mansion’s weaponized shape and sexual decor.⁹⁹ Not unlike the rejection Seneca feels after her work with Norma, Pallas is deeply hurt when her mother begins a sexual relationship with her boyfriend. For Pallas, the trauma of her rape is linked to her mother’s betrayal. She leaves her mother’s house in a rush after discovering Dee Dee and Carlos together and is attacked and raped during

her hasty departure. Although “[t]he nightmare event. . . had displaced for a while the betrayal, the hurt, that had driven her from her mother’s house,”¹⁰⁰ the two traumas are nonetheless connected. Morrison’s language describing the assault remains obfuscated throughout the novel, but readers can surmise there are multiple assailants and Pallas escapes “the nightmare event”¹⁰¹ by hiding in a lake, where she nearly drowns. Each of the women’s pasts is reflected in the Convent’s very structure and décor. The wayward women cannot forget their traumas in a space which so objectifies women’s bodies, but the Convent is also a place of refuge for them.

The mansion’s unique construction makes it impossible to fully purge the male gaze, yet like the nuns, the women exert power by reinterpreting the space. When the Ruby men carefully search the Convent during their hunt for the women, they discover name cards taped to each bedroom door, dirty dishes, a teething ring, and other signs of life. The chapel the nuns created within the mansion is also repurposed. The missing cross and recently burnt votive candles suggest the women used the chapel to pray to other, non-Christian deities.¹⁰² While the kitchen door is the mansion’s “only vulnerability,”¹⁰³ it is also where the vulnerable enter the Convent. Stave notes that despite their arguments, the Convent women frequently gather in the kitchen to share meals.¹⁰⁴ Prior to the Ruby men’s attack, the Convent is a safe space for the women apart from patriarchal control and abuse. It is “permeated with a blessed malelessness,”¹⁰⁵ which creates a feeling of safety for the Ruby women and wayward runaways who seek refuge there. Pallas observes that the Convent feels “like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here—an unbridled, authentic

self. . .”¹⁰⁶ As I will explore in the next section, the women do meet their authentic selves at the Convent through a transformative ritual.

Even before their transformation, the women experience small changes which result from living in “blessed malelessness.” Mavis senses Merle and Pearl’s presence in the mansion shortly after arriving, and the twins “changed and grew”¹⁰⁷ during her time at the Convent. Mavis “felt their flutter in every room of the Convent”¹⁰⁸ and buys them toys and sweets. She begins to reconcile some of her grief by raising her ghost children and also learning to cook. A trip to purchase hot dogs for dinner led to her twins’ death, but she “now created crepe-like delicacies without shopping every day.”¹⁰⁹ She even tentatively embraces her sexuality by welcoming her “night visitor,”¹¹⁰ a spectral form Consolata deems an incubus.¹¹¹ While Mavis comes to anticipate her night visits, Gigi explores her own desires away from the pressures and attention she normally receives from men. When Seneca arrives at the Convent, “she spit out that K.D. person like a grape seed.”¹¹² Although there is no explicit mention of an intimate relationship between the women, Morrison indicates Gigi’s desire for Seneca. During a bath, Gigi thinks about “Seneca’s nose, the way her nostrils moved when she slept. Of the tilt of her lips whether smiling or not; her thick, perfectly winged eyebrows. And her voice—soft, mildly hungry. Like a kiss.”¹¹³ The text does not explicitly indicate desire on Seneca’s part, but the two spend time together and have a close relationship; romantic feelings are not ruled out. In addition to her friendship with Gigi, Seneca finds a kind of family at the Convent. After being abandoned by her mother (who she believes is her sister), experiencing abuse in foster homes, and being exploited by Norma Fox, Seneca finally finds a community

she can call her own. She feels safe away from men who might “snatch” or “flash”¹¹⁴ her. Pallas also finds shelter within her new community as the Convent provides a reprieve from her classmates’ judgment and her father’s incessant questioning about her assault. She cannot come to terms with her rape or her mother’s betrayal, yet she finds the strength to raise her baby in the secluded Convent.

Despite the progress they make toward healing, the women try to avoid the root of their problems by indulging in “foolish babygirl wishes.”¹¹⁵ Consolata reflects that “their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and . . . drift. The three *d*’s that paved the road to perdition, and the greatest of these was drift.”¹¹⁶ Here she echoes the well-known line from I Corinthians 13¹¹⁷, which states that love (or charity) is the greatest spiritual gift. Love is the path to God and salvation, while drift is the path to perdition. Consolata uses an allusion to St. Paul’s discussion of cultivating spiritual gifts to criticize the women’s lack of direction. She says the wayward women “do nothing except the absolutely necessary.”¹¹⁸ Mavis bounces from business plan to business plan. Gigi hopes the box under the bathtub will contain a fortune, but instead it houses the embezzler’s documents. Seneca retreats further into her vice and dreams of becoming “the queen of scars.”¹¹⁹ And Pallas wants to sing sorrowful songs in a cabaret. The wayward women’s community provides them with the refuge to begin thinking of what may come next, yet Consolata knows they cannot heal without addressing the root of their traumas, which she later discovers is the body/spirit divide. Because the Convent both aestheticizes the body/spirit divide and is blessedly maleless, it is the perfect space for the women to

confront and work through their traumas. “In this place of all places,”¹²⁰ the women initiate a transformation.

REALIZING THE “*BEAUTIFUL EXPERIMENT*” OF WAYWARDNESS

Prior to their transformation, the wayward Convent women are caught between letting go of their traumas and claiming the power of waywardness. They find some respite at the Convent, but their traumas still hold power over their present lives. While Consolata is frustrated with the women’s “foolish babygirl wishes,”¹²¹ she is also “repelled by her sluglike existence”¹²² after years of drunken grief following Mary Magna’s¹²³ death. Consolata devotes herself to either the body or spirit up until her personal transformation. The totality of her devotion results in various losses, including loss of vision. However, Consolata draws upon her experiences to realize the damaging effects of the body/spirit divide and to dissolve the boundary between the two. Her personal transformation begins with a spiritual apparition which embodies her losses and comes to fruition when she claims her “in sight,” the spiritual vision she develops after losing her eyesight. By dissolving the body/spirit divide, Consolata claims her own identity as a wayward woman. Her transformation provides the template from which she creates a ritual for the rest of the Convent women. By giving voice to their traumas and drawing their bodies on the cellar floor, the women collectively work through their pasts to dissolve their own body/spirit divides. The women come together to reconcile their object positions as wayward women and in turn embrace the subject position and power of waywardness.

Severed from her homeland at nine years old, Consolata spent her life cultivating either the spirit or the body in an attempt to reconnect with the idea of home. Consolata's life is dictated by concerns of the body or spirit until she unites the two. When Mary Magna found Consolata on the streets of Brazil, the nun's generosity saved Consolata's body from abuse. One of the reasons she accepted Mary Magna's offer was to escape "the dirty pokings her ninth year subjected her to."¹²⁴ In addition to rape, Consolata's young body was vulnerable to disease from living in poverty. Mary Magna's kidnapping—or rescue—shows Consolata a love and care she had not experienced for some time, or perhaps at all. However, the rescue which saves her body also leads to its surrender to God. Once she joins the nuns, Consolata is taught to embrace Catholicism and forget her pagan home, not unlike the "stilled Arapho girls" who "learned to forget"¹²⁵ at the Convent. Consolata devotes herself to "becom[ing] and remain[ing] Mary Magna's pride"¹²⁶ by "offer[ing] her body and her soul to God's Son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself."¹²⁷ In this process of offering, she loses "the rudiments of her first language,"¹²⁸ one of her only ties to her homeland. In its place she learns Latin, "the gorgeous language made especially for talking to heaven."¹²⁹ Rather than praise God in her own tongue, she must learn a new language to conform to the Catholic tradition. As Consolata loses touch with her homeland and grows closer to Mary Magna, the Mother Superior becomes a stand-in for her motherland. The spiritual home she finds in Mary Magna and Catholicism replaces the physical connection she had with her home country of Brazil, and Consolata does not reconnect to her body until her affair with Deacon Morgan.

While Consolata lost her native language when she committed to Catholicism and spiritual needs, her surrender to physical desires during her affair with Deacon comes at the expense of her spirit and therefore necessitates a loss. Their relationship begins in part because Consolata finds in Deacon an unexpected connection to her homeland. The first time she sees him, Consolata hears the rhythm “Sha sha sha” and recalls “just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets to music beating like an infuriated heart.”¹³⁰ The language Consolata recalls is a rhythm, and her memory of heartbeat-like music and dancing has a physical quality. Consolata’s recollection exemplifies the connections to her body and homeland which she unknowingly gave up by conforming to the nuns’ ways of life. She then connects to her body and the idea of home through her affair with Deacon. But just as her Catholic faith precluded a connection to the body, her affair consumes her and “she lost her mind. Completely.”¹³¹ Her spiritual language is subsumed by the physical language of lovemaking, which is “un-memorable, -controllable or -translatable.”¹³² Morrison writes that “being love-struck after thirty celibate years took on an edible quality” which comes to a head when, in a moment of passion, Consolata bites Deacon’s lip and licks the resulting drop of blood. This expression of “gobble-gobble love”¹³³ shows Deacon that he, too, is in danger of over-privileging the body. Mix states that “Deacon flinches at the tenuousness of the line dividing self from other, body from spirit. . . his status as a patriarch rests on that line’s stability.”¹³⁴ Deacon sees Consolata as an Eve figure who has the potential to ruin his claims to Eden (Ruby). Any guilt he may feel about breaking the seventh commandment is displaced into feelings of revulsion toward Consolata, and he breaks off their affair.

After losing the “living man,”¹³⁵ Consolata “crawled back”¹³⁶ to the perceived safety of privileging the spiritual over the physical. With a “Sh sh sh,”¹³⁷ Mary Magna once again guides Consolata to devote her whole self to her spiritual needs. While she lost her native tongue the first time she gave her body over to God, this time Consolata loses “the ability to bear light”¹³⁸ when a sunbeam pierces one of her green eyes and turns it white. The extreme totality of Consolata’s dedication to either body or spirit necessitates loss. The body and spirit are not meant to be divided, so she suffers the consequences of “separat[ing] God from His elements.”¹³⁹

Consolata’s final and most devastating loss occurs with Mary Magna’s death, when she loses the person who has become her home and spiritual connection. Consolata’s grief is so absolute that she is disconnected from both her body and spirit. As Consolata’s mother figure and spiritual counsel, Mary Magna was a substitute for her motherland because Consolata’s connection to her body and Brazil was already severed. Without Mary Magna, Consolata is “orphaned in a way she was not as a street baby and was never as a servant.”¹⁴⁰ The years of drinking which follow Mary Magna’s death are an attempt to assuage her grief over loss of family, homeland, and spiritual advisor. She also struggles to reconcile her guilt over using her “in sight” to keep Mary Magna alive for so long, yet part of the reason Consolata could not bear to let her die is because Mary Magna had become her only home. Consolata “fe[els] like a curl of paper—nothing written on it”¹⁴¹ because she lost her spiritual connection with Mary Magna’s death and has not yet reestablished a connection to her body or spirit on her own terms. Severed

from body and spirit, Consolata is unmoored. However, it is within this place of detachment that she encounters the apparition which guides her to transformation.

The apparition initiates Consolata's personal transformation because it embodies her losses, forcing her to recognize that the body/spirit divide is the root of those losses. The apparition is a man of "[m]edium height, light step" with mirrored sunglasses and a "cowboy hat that hid his features."¹⁴² When Consolata asks who he is, the apparition replies, "Come on, girl. You know me."¹⁴³ The apparition takes off his sunglasses and hat to reveal his "tea-colored hair" which "cascade[es] over his shoulders" and his eyes, which are "round and green as new apples."¹⁴⁴ Morrison also describes Consolata's hair as tea-colored, and her eyes used to be bright green. When Deacon once marveled at Consolata's beauty he asked her, "Have you looked at yourself?" to which she replied, "I'm looking now."¹⁴⁵ Consolata saw herself in Deacon because he reminded her of her homeland, and she also sees herself in this apparition. The only specific physical features she discerns match her own. With his "flirtatious"¹⁴⁶ mannerisms, the apparition also embodies the physical love she lost when her affair ended. Although Consolata sees a glittering effect rather than herself in the apparition's mirrored sunglasses, the apparition himself reflects the losses she endured in her efforts to sustain either body or spirit. Gurleen Grewal writes, "She discovers that he [the apparition] and she *are* indeed the same; in his presence she experiences what she had longed for with Deacon: a coming home to herself."¹⁴⁷ For Consolata, "coming home to herself" involves uniting body and spirit to claim her identity. While her extreme devotion to body or spirit resulted in losses, the path to wholeness lies in uniting the two.

Consolata dissolves her body/spirit divide by harnessing her “in sight” to unite the distinct and sometimes opposing parts of her identity. “Seeing in” allows Consolata to visualize and come to terms with the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical. Although she inhabits the natural, physical world, “in sight” allows her to not only see but also engage with the spiritual forms of things. Her spiritual vision is both passive and active. It enhances her perception, but she can also use this vision to revive—or possibly take away—life. She is first reluctant to utilize her gift because she associates it with witchcraft and the occult, which are condemned in the Catholic church. But by naming her spiritual vision “in sight,” Consolata realizes her gift is “[s]omething God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it”¹⁴⁸ rather than another part of herself she must reject. “Seeing in” involves manipulating “the pinpoint of light”¹⁴⁹ inside a person. Consolata uses her “in sight” to revive Scout Morgan and keep Mary Magna alive, and she seems to tap into that pinpoint within herself when she undergoes her own transformation. Consolata is “repelled by her sluglike existence”¹⁵⁰ during her time in the cellar, but after she transforms, the wayward women notice an immediate change in appearance. They muse, “She has the features of dear Connie, but they are sculpted somehow—higher cheekbones, stronger chin. Had her eyebrows always been that thick, her teeth that pearly white? Her hair shows no gray. Her skin is smooth as a peach.”¹⁵¹ In addition to her enhanced appearance, Consolata claims her name to signify her renewal. Instead of “dear Connie,” she now calls herself by her given name—Consolata Sosa—a direct tie to her homeland and native tongue. She wears Mary Magna’s shoes and a blue dress from

Soane Morgan, matching both Mary Magna's habit and the manifestation of Piedade which appears at the end of the novel.

Although "uniting the body and spirit" could take on many meanings, I argue it refers to recognizing the body and spirit as one cohesive entity rather than disparate or even related yet separate parts. Mix states that Consolata and the women desire "a resolution to the division of body from spirit that underpins. . . misogyny."¹⁵² Consolata's ontology of embodiment is the antithesis of the idea that one *is* a soul and simply *has* a body, which is put forth by Plato and Western philosophy as well as Christianity. Rather than deny one part of herself to satisfy another, Consolata finds the space to hold the separate pieces of her identity together and create a unified whole. In doing so she is ready to embrace her role as a "secular Mother Superior"¹⁵³ and lead the women's transformation.

Morrison sets the stage for the women's transformation by foregrounding the body/spirit divide through a shift in narrative structure as well as Consolata's address to the women. Morrison first signals the impending transformation by inserting scenes of Consolata preparing food in between scenes illustrating the women's present states. During her time in the cellar she did not cook and disliked the food Mavis prepared, but after dissolving her body/spirit divide, she prepares an elaborate meal for herself and the women. Consolata's cooking signals the reconnection to her physical body while her careful food preparation evokes a kind of ritual. She cleans freshly killed hens, roasts potatoes, and prepares stuffed apples. While Consolata carefully prepares food to nourish her body, the women are consumed by concerns which stem from their past traumas.

Mavis is concerned she can't keep up with Merle and Pearl's aging ghosts. Gigi chastises herself for her lack of commitment and "staying power."¹⁵⁴ Seneca cuts intricate lines into her thighs. Pallas anxiously realizes she is pregnant. The text's sharp turn from Consolata's methodical, even erotic, food preparation to the women's anxieties emphasizes the disconnect between their bodies and spirits. When she finally addresses the women, Consolata defines the body/spirit divide using the Eve/Mary dichotomy. She states, "So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. . . Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve."¹⁵⁵ As I explored in the previous sections, each woman was viewed and treated as a body by Ruby men who implemented patriarchal power structures which value the spirit over the body. Consolata's speech at once rejects the dichotomous thinking in which misogyny is grounded while also establishing the unified framework through which the women will claim their waywardness.

The women work together to resolve their pasts and dissolve the body/spirit divide, and in doing so begin their "*beautiful experiment* in how-to-live"¹⁵⁶ through a transformative ritual. Before they can claim waywardness as a liberatory subject position, the women must first reconcile their object positions as wayward women by working through their past traumas. They engage in "loud dreaming" to resolve their pasts, a practice in which "[h]alf-*tales* and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles."¹⁵⁷ While "loud dreaming" is not necessarily meditative, it does evoke aspects of Buddhist meditation practices. Buddhism emphasizes working through,

rather than defending against, that which is painful because “[o]therwise courage and real acceptance do not develop, and the goals we reach turn out to be unliberating.”¹⁵⁸

Although the women find some respite at the Convent, it is not fully liberating because their present lives are still controlled by past traumas. The women must work through their traumas and dissolve their body/spirit divides in order to find real acceptance.

Vipassana, or insight, practice seeks to balance the “urge to know” with “the acknowledgment of uncertainty” in order to gain insight into one’s inner life “without being afraid of our [one’s] subjectivity.”¹⁵⁹ The women simultaneously voice their haunts, entering each other’s tales to experience and observe their collective traumas first-hand. The observers share their insights, which allows the women to gain perspective and view their experiences objectively rather than be dictated by them.

Seneca realizes she was abandoned by her mother, not her sister; Pallas begins to process her mother’s betrayal, although she still cannot (or will not) name her baby’s father.

Morrison writes that “it was never important to know who said the dream”¹⁶⁰ because the women recognize the commonality of their experiences, regardless of the details.

While “loud dreaming” enables the women to heal and reconnect with their spirits, the cellar floor drawings allow them to connect to their bodies in new ways. Because the Convent aestheticizes the body/spirit binary, it provides a space where the women can enact resistance to the systems of power which perpetuate that binary while also uniting their bodies and spirits. Melanie Anderson describes the Convent as a “spectral space” where the women “can turn their ghosted and powerless social positions into positions of healing and growth.”¹⁶¹ Consolata paints outlines of their bodies on the

cellar floor, representing the “ghosted and powerless social positions” which they transform into positions of power by claiming waywardness as a liberatory subject position. Pallas suggests they buy paints and chalk, and the women “understood and began to begin”¹⁶² reconnecting with their bodies by adding to the drawings. “Life, real and intense, shifted to down there”¹⁶³ as the women fill their outlines with pictures, first anatomical features and then images which depict their traumas and desires. Just as Consolata saw her losses reflected in the apparition, the women give shape and form to their traumas through the painting ritual. The drawings visualize both the women’s physical forms as well as their haunts and dreams, signifying a dissolution of the body/spirit divide. Through “loud dreaming” and painting, the women embrace their bodies and spirits as interconnected rather than disparate parts.

The transformative ritual both heals and emboldens the women, providing them with the strength to fight back against the Ruby men and later transcend death. It culminates in a dance in the rain where they let go of the last of their haunts. Morrison writes that the rain was “like lotion on their fingers” and “like balm on their shaved heads;” it was “irresistible” and “erotic.”¹⁶⁴ Drawing parallels between the women’s transformation and the mystical Islamic theosophy of Sufism, Majda R. Atieh reads the rain dance as a sacred ritual which turns the women into whirling dervishes. For Atieh the drawings on the cellar floor represent a “lifting of all veils and past traumas,”¹⁶⁵ and the dance “expresses the longing to stretch beyond one’s limitations”¹⁶⁶ by transcending death and “[t]ransforming their bodies into sites of resistance.”¹⁶⁷ The dance provides a sensation which is both physical and spiritual, turning the wayward women’s bodies into

“sites of resistance” to the body/spirit divide. It is no coincidence that the Ruby men arrive not long after this dance. The women fight their assailants using available materials, including the ashtrays and picture of St. Catherine of Siena. Evans states that through these acts, “the ‘I-give-up’ woman disappears” and “the women become the players rather than the playthings.”¹⁶⁸ Despite their spirited defense, the Ruby assailants gun¹⁶⁹ them down. Critics are divided on what happens during the attack. Some believe the gunshots were not fatal, so Consolata is able to revive the women using her “in sight.” Others contend the women did die, and their spirits return to visit family members at the end of the novel. I argue the women die and transcend to a new, liminal state after their murder. Rather than existing as spirits or ghosts, the women still inhabit their physical bodies as suggested by Mavis eating lunch with her daughter and Seneca bleeding from broken glass. Because the women’s bodies fused with their spirits during the transformation ritual, they could revive their physical forms by tapping into their own “in sight.” Seongho Yoon argues the Convent is “not an endpoint but a place of departure since the Convent itself becomes a part of migration.”¹⁷⁰ As the site of their transformation, the Convent is merely a stop along their journey.

Claiming their wayward subject positions opens up liberatory possibilities for the women as they find their home and purpose, and the influence of their community reverberates in Ruby. Liberated from the patriarchal power structures which oppressed them, the wayward women finally find home. Morrison closes the novel with Consolata lying in the arms of a figure called Piedade. Grewal draws a connection between Piedade and the Yoruba deity Yemanja, bringing together multiple religious traditions. In

Paradise, “[t]he African orisha fuses with the Virgin Mary, Stella Maris, Our Lady, Star of the Sea, as a guide and protector of seafarers.”¹⁷¹ Piedade is also a representation of Consolata’s true home. The figure is described as having a black face framed in cerulean blue. Piedade’s complexion matches the dancing men and women from Consolata’s memory, while the cerulean blue matches Mary Magna’s habit. After fusing her body and spirit and transcending to a liminal state, Consolata finally returns home. Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas visit family members before embarking together in Mavis’s Cadillac; their true home is their wayward community. The visits provide the closure the women need in order to prepare them for “shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise.”¹⁷² Morrison does not describe the women’s “endless work,” and the location of “Paradise” is not defined. However, Billie Delia’s reflection after the women’s murder provides a hint at what that “endless work” might be. She wonders, “When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town.”¹⁷³ Despite this war-like fantasy, Morrison concludes Ruby’s story by hinting at changes within the community. Deacon Morgan seeks out Richard Misner for counsel, the twins who fought over Billie Delia reconcile, and Misner—a force of change within the town—decides to stay. Billie Delia hopes the women will return to upend Ruby’s patriarchal power structure and perhaps avenge their deaths. Yet if the women’s brief visits with family members are any indication of their future interactions with the physical world, it is unlikely they will return to Ruby for battle. Rather, the radical possibility their community embodies lives on in their wake.

CONCLUSION

The women's journeys illustrate the power shifts in moving from waywardness as object position to waywardness as subject position. Ruby's patriarchs othered the women as wayward objects because they did not fit into the town's rigid constructions of womanhood. The town leaders adapted Western, Christian, and patriarchal systems of power to ensure economic and social success and maintain racial purity. As light-skinned outsiders believed to be sexually promiscuous, the Convent women posed a threat to Ruby's future which the patriarchs tried to eliminate. The women's waywardness was further rooted in the body/spirit divide, a binary which also influences Christian gender ideals, as reflected in the Eve/Mary dichotomy. Ruby's patriarchs viewed the wayward Convent women as unredeemed Eves who could ruin their own Eden (Ruby). The wayward women, however, were simply trying to find refuge at the Convent, a space which reflected the body/spirit divide through its décor and uses through the years. The patriarchal space featured women quite literally depicted as objects for sexual pleasure, while religious iconography represented women's bodies as sites of pain.¹⁷⁴ Yet it is within this unlikely space that the women transformed by dissolving the body/spirit divide to claim their wayward subject positions. Consolata's personal transformation provided the basis from which she developed the women's ritual, which included healing their spirits by voicing their traumas and connecting to their bodies through paintings on the cellar floor. The women's ritual then enabled them to transcend death after the Ruby men's attack. When *Paradise* concludes, the wayward women live on even though they were not meant to survive the Ruby men's assault. That the women continue to be is

perhaps the ultimate mark of waywardness. Not only are they free from patriarchal control, but their liminal state eludes the terms of corporeal existence altogether. The women can continue their beautiful experiment, and their waywardness inspires change within Ruby.

Hartman concludes her definitions of wayward and waywardness by stating, “It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive.”¹⁷⁵ While this line applies to the Convent community, it also pertains to Ruby and others throughout Morrison’s oeuvre who continue to live although they were not meant to survive within American power structures. What sets the wayward Convent women apart, perhaps, are the possibilities open to them at the novel’s end. As fully realized wayward women existing in a liminal state, they can continue the “endless work they were created to do”¹⁷⁶ in paradise, wherever that may be.

NOTES

1. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 227.
2. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 228.
3. *Ibid.*, 227.
4. *Ibid.*, 228.
5. Related to Hartman’s work in *Wayward Lives*, a discussion of slavery’s influence on gender roles in African American communities can be found in Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

6. Sharon Jessee, "The Contrapuntal Historiography of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Unpacking the Legacies of the Kansas and Oklahoma All-Black Towns," *American Studies* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 87.
7. Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), xiii.
8. Morrison, *Paradise*, xiii.
9. Audrey Kerr, "The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism," *Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 469 (2005): 273, doi:10.1353/jaf.2005.0031.
10. Kerr, "The Paper Bag Principle," 276.
11. Morrison, *Paradise*, 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 18.
13. Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 111.
14. Spelman, "Woman as Body," 111.
15. *Ibid.*, 110.
16. Morrison, *Paradise*, 71.
17. For a discussion of how the Old and New Fathers adopt Western power structures to confirm their masculinity, see Andrew Read, "'As if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man': Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* 39, no. 4 (2005): 527–40.
18. Morrison, *Paradise*, 18.
19. Deborah M. Mix, "Enspirited Bodies and Embodied Spirits in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Studies in the Humanities* 41, no. 1–2 (March 2015): 167.
20. Eight-rock refers to a "deep level in the coal mines," reflected in the townspeople's blue-black skin. See Morrison, *Paradise*, 193.
21. Jessee, "The Contrapuntal Historiography," 96.
22. Morrison, *Paradise*, 217.
23. *Ibid.*, 195.

24. Ibid., 61.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 114.
28. Ibid., 196.
29. Ibid., 99.
30. Candice M. Jenkins, "Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intra-racial Politics in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 2 (2006): 280, doi:10.1353/mfs.2006.0049.
31. Morrison, *Paradise*, 59.
32. Ibid., 152.
33. Ibid., xv.
34. Ibid, 109.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Kerr, "The Paper Bag Principle," 273.
38. Shirley A. Stave, "Separate Spheres? The Appropriation of Female Space in *Paradise*," in *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*, ed. Lucille P. Fultz and Sarah Graham (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 23.
39. Morrison, *Paradise*, 82.
40. Ibid., 53.
41. Stave, "Separate Spheres," 26.
42. Morrison, *Paradise*, 16.
43. Mix, "Enspirited Bodies," 172–3.

44. Morrison, *Paradise*, 18.
45. Ibid., 5.
46. Ibid., 143.
47. Ibid., 156–7.
48. Ibid., 156.
49. Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), xi.
50. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, xi.
51. Morrison, *Paradise*, 157.
52. Redding is known for soulful, romantic ballads such as “Try a Little Tenderness” and “These Arms of Mine.” One of his albums is even titled *Love Man*.
53. Morrison, *Paradise*, 157.
54. Ibid., 8.
55. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 227.
56. Morrison, *Paradise*, 270.
57. See Noelle Morrissette, “‘Both the Law and Its Transgression’: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and ‘Post’-Black Feminism,” in *Cultural Sites of Critical Insight: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and African American and Native American Women’s Writings*, ed. Angela L. Cotten and Christa Davis Acampora (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 145; and Sarah Appleton Aguiar, “‘Passing On’ Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” *African American Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 515. It is also worth noting that the tonic could be something to help with symptoms of menstruation or early menopause, similar to what Lone prepared for Consolata. See Morrison, *Paradise*, 243.
58. Morrison, *Paradise*, 142.
59. Ibid., 196.
60. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 227.

61. Morrison, *Paradise*, 151.
62. *Ibid.*, 152.
63. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 227.
64. Morrison, *Paradise*, 308, my emphasis.
65. Shari Evans, "Programmed Space, Themed Space, and the Ethics of Home in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* 46, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2013): 381.
66. Evans, "Programmed Space," 391.
67. *Ibid.*, 382.
68. Morrison, *Paradise*, 3.
69. *Ibid.*, 72.
70. *Ibid.*, 225.
71. Mix, "Enspirited Bodies," 169.
72. Morrison, *Paradise*, 227, my emphasis.
73. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 227.
74. Evans, "Programmed Space," 392.
75. Morrison, *Paradise*, 227.
76. Spelman, "Woman as Body," 115.
77. *Ibid.*, 120.
78. Morrison, *Paradise*, 263.
79. *Ibid.*, 73.
80. *Ibid.*, 74.
81. For more on the misnamed etching see Mix, "Enspirited Bodies," 169; and Stave, "Separate Spheres," 35.

82. “St. Agatha,” Catholic Online, Your Catholic Voice Foundation, accessed March 16, 2021, https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=14.
83. “St. Catherine of Siena,” Catholic Online, Your Catholic Voice Foundation, accessed March 16, 2021, https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=9.
84. Mix, “Enspirited Bodies,” 169.
85. Ibid., 170.
86. Morrison, *Paradise*, 171.
87. Ibid., 26.
88. Mix, “Enspirited Bodies,” 170.
89. Morrison, *Paradise*, 67.
90. Ibid., 256.
91. Ibid., 257.
92. Ibid., 53.
93. Ibid., 54.
94. Ibid., 261.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid., 137.
97. Ibid., 138.
98. Ibid., 137.
99. Evans, “Programmed Space,” 391.
100. Morrison, *Paradise*, 179.
101. Ibid.
102. Various critics have pointed out the ties to Candomblé—a Brazilian syncretic religion—within the text. Candomblé and Catholicism are sometimes practiced together

in Brazil. The women could have been praying to the deities which corresponded to the saints depicted in the chapel's statues. For more on Candomblé in *Paradise*, see Jennifer Terry, "A New World Religion? Creolisation and Candomblé in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," in *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*, ed. Shirley A. Stave (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 192–214, and Gurleen Grewal, "The Working Through of the Disconsolate: Transformative Spirituality in *Paradise*," in *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*, ed. Lucille P. Fultz and Sarah Graham (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 40–54. For more on the intersections of Candomblé and Catholicism, see Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine, and Religion in Brazil* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 59–63.

103. Morrison, *Paradise*, 71.

104. Stave, "Separate Spheres," 28.

105. Morrison, *Paradise*, 177.

106. *Ibid.*

107. *Ibid.*, 258.

108. *Ibid.*, 171.

109. *Ibid.*

110. *Ibid.*, 260.

111. *Ibid.*, 171. An incubus is a "demon in male form that seeks to have sexual intercourse with sleeping women." See "Incubus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/incubus>.

112. Morrison, *Paradise*, 259.

113. *Ibid.*, 171.

114. *Ibid.*, 261.

115. *Ibid.*, 222.

116. *Ibid.*, 221–2.

117. "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." 1 Cor. 13:13, KJV.

118. Morrison, *Paradise*, 222.

119. Ibid.

120. Ibid., 8.

121. Ibid., 222.

122. Ibid., 221.

123. Mary Magna's name combines both Mary, mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, a fallen woman in the Bible who becomes one of Jesus' close followers. "Mary" evokes purity, while "Magna" evokes sin or, possibly, redemption. Mary Magna is portrayed as a devout Catholic committed to her order. However, it is worth noting that she likely broke a rule (and the law) when she took in Consolata and two other children living on the street. She sent the other children to an orphanage, but kept Consolata to be her ward. See Morrison, *Paradise*, 223.

124. Ibid., 228.

125. Ibid., 4.

126. Ibid., 224.

127. Ibid., 225.

128. Ibid., 228.

129. Ibid., 224–5.

130. Ibid., 226. Consolata's memory could be related to a variety of celebrations, but due to the other ties to Candomblé in the novel, I believe Morrison is evoking Bahian *carnaval*. The Brazilian state's annual *carnaval* incorporates clothing and music associated with Candomblé and has been referred to as "Candomblé in the streets." For more, see Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 57, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.clemson.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzQ2Mjk1X19BTg2?sid=028539bf-15dc-48aa-a0f8-61acc772e2b2@pdc-v-sessmgr03&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

131. Morrison, *Paradise*, 228.

132. Ibid., 229.

133. Ibid., 240.
134. Mix, “Enspirited Bodies,” 178.
135. Morrison, *Paradise*,” 242.
136. Ibid., 240.
137. Ibid., 241.
138. Ibid., 242.
139. Ibid., 244.
140. Ibid., 247.
141. Ibid., 248.
142. Ibid., 251.
143. Ibid., 252.
144. Ibid.
145. Ibid., 231.
146. Ibid., 252.
147. Gurleen Grewal, “The Working Through of the Disconsolate: Transformative Spirituality in *Paradise*,” in *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*, ed. Lucille P. Fultz and Sarah Graham (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 49.
148. Morrison, *Paradise*, 247.
149. Ibid.
150. Ibid., 221.
151. Ibid., 262.
152. Mix, “Enspirited Bodies,” 179.
153. Ibid., 170.

154. Morrison, *Paradise*, 257.
155. Ibid., 263.
156. Ibid., 228.
157. Ibid., 264.
158. V. R. Dhiravamsa, *The Way of Non-Attachment: The Practice of Insight Meditation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 2.
159. Dhiravamsa, *The Way of Non-Attachment*, 2.
160. Morrison, *Paradise*, 264.
161. Melanie R. Anderson, ““What would be on the other side?”: Spectrality and Spirit Work in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” *African American Review* 42, no. 2 (2008): 309.
162. Morrison, *Paradise*, 265.
163. Ibid., 264.
164. Ibid., 283.
165. Majda R. Atieh, “The Revelation of the Veiled in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*: The Whirling Dervishes in the Harem of the Convent,” *MELUS* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 99.
166. Atieh, “The Revelation of the Veiled,” 101.
167. Ibid., 103.
168. Evans, “Programmed Space,” 392.
169. Like the Convent, the Ruby men’s guns are another phallic shape which further empowers the women.
170. Seongho Yoon, “Home for the Outdoored: Geographies of Exclusion, Gendered Space, and Postethnicity in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” *CEA Critic* 67, no. 3 (Spring and Summer 2005): 78.
171. Grewal, “The Working Through,” 54.
172. Morrison, *Paradise*, 318.

173. Ibid., 308.
174. Mix, “Enspirited Bodies,” 169.
175. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 228.
176. Morrison, *Paradise*, 318.

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