THE HOLY OVEN: OPPRESSIVE HERMENEUTICS IN TONI MORRISON’S *PARADISE*

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, DC
April 13, 2015
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Abstract

This paper will examine the communal edifice known as “the Oven” in Toni Morrison’s Paradise (1997) as a symbol of The Holy Bible. It will investigate both historically and literarily the authoritative role interpretations of the Bible have played in the formation of black womanhood and black town ethics and morality. This thesis will use Paradise as a primary text to expose the fluidity of biblical interpretation and reveal the Bible’s use as a Blood Book. Defining this term as any text that documents and/or permits assault against persons whose behavior is contrary to the identity prescribed by the dominant culture’s interpretation of sacred text, this thesis asserts both the Oven and the Bible as Blood Books. Identifying the literary shift of the Bible’s use as a tool of racial oppression to a tool of gender oppression, I assert the Oven as a sacred-authoritative text the Rubians interpreted to justify violence against the women in the Convent. Exploring the Westward Migration and the construction of all-black towns as an entry point to the construction of misogynist culture, I argue black men rechanneled their abuse from white supremacy into an abuse of black women to establish a place of superiority for themselves in their new “paradise.” To maintain their power, black men attempted to construct a black womanhood that restricted black women to domestic spaces, silence, and sexually purity. They constructed this black womanhood by interpreting the Bible with the end of controlling women in mind. Paradise depicted this interpretive practice through the Ruby men’s interpretation of the Oven as a means to “deal with” the women in the Convent. I aim to meditate on the following questions: what are some of the complications that generate biased readings of the Bible that legitimize violence and murder? Is the message of a text subject to the understanding of the reader, or is the reader subject to a universal understanding of a text? My study aims to provide a literary, biblical, and cultural interrogation of the social and political significance of biblical interpretation in 20th century African American women’s fiction, particularly within the writings of Toni Morrison.
To the Father of Wisdom, the Son of Truth, and the Holy Spirit of Heavenly thought I praise You for showing me Your mysteries and giving me purpose. To my parents for supporting me, my brother for pushing me, Dr. Angelyn Mitchell for showing me the Bible in Toni Morrison, Dr. Gay Cima for committing to teach me clear and polished writing, and last but not least Dr. Robert Patterson for challenging me to raise my research and writing skills to unknown levels of professionalism.

Many thanks,
Claudia M. Allen

“My heart is overflowing with a good theme;
I recite my composition concerning the King;
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.”
Psalm 45:1 NKJV
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INTRODUCTION

TONI MORRISON AND BIBLCAL INTERPRETATION

Historically, the Bible was used to authorize genocide, support society’s notion that women were inferior, and subjugate African people through slavery. The word “use” draws attention to how the Bible, like any other text, is interpreted by readers who have biases. Toni Morison in her 7th novel *Paradise* (1997) used fiction to show how black men’s biases towards white people and women affected their interpretation of the Bible. *Paradise* depicted this symbolically through the rebuilt Oven of the novel’s town, Ruby.

Originally built to be a communal kitchen for the Ruby women, the Oven became a “shrine” the Ruby men revered for its illegible yet prescriptive sign (Morrison 103). Although the Oven was built for the entire town of Ruby, women were excluded from the building process. Illustrating how the women were kept from participating in the construction of a building that was designed to benefit them, *Paradise* revealed how men kept women away from studying and interpreting the Bible even though it was a text created to benefit them. Such exclusion allowed men to create interpretations from the Bible that limited and controlled women.

Narratively, the men viewed Ruby as paradise because they believed they effectively controlled the women through the restricting expectations they constructed and interpreted from the Oven. Paradise was threatened when five women refused to live by the Ruby men’s standards of black womanhood. The defiant actions of the women in the Convent walking, talking, and dressing contrary to what the Ruby men determined was appropriate, generated a debate about the Oven’s sign between the old and young men. Agreed that something must be done about the women in the Convent, both generations of men vehemently sought to understand the Oven’s inscription. The clarification of the Oven’s sign became essential because the men needed to
know if they were to watch God execute His own justice or if they were to execute it on His behalf. When the practices of the women in the Convent became deplorable the men sieged the Convent and violently assaulted the women. After this, the people of Ruby met at the Oven and the young men scratched, “We Are the Furrow of His Brow” into the edifice. The assault of the women in the Convent gave a new and clear meaning to the sign: Man was to partner with God to perform His will with Him. This illustrated how many times implementation precedes interpretation, exposing how readers create meaning to justify their own purposes rather than find it to establish objective truths.

Evolving from “Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” to “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” to “We Are the Furrow of His Brow,” the Oven in Paradise revealed the fluidity of biblical interpretation; or how culture and the political agendas of a reader leave the meaning he or she extracts from a text open to multiple readings. This symbolic representation influenced this thesis to present Paradise as a narrative portrayal of the gender exclusive and gender oppressive practices of hermeneutics. Investigating the cultural and political biases that impact reading, this thesis reveals how black town culture was misogynist and therefore read the inferiority of women into and out of the Bible. Known for being a time when black men elevated themselves to positions in government, education, and religion, the Westward migration, all-black towns, the Civil Rights, and Black Power movements exposed how black men maintained their leadership positions by restricting black women to roles of domesticity, silence, and propriety. Oftentimes, the Bible determined this man-made womanhood. Privileging such formal leadership roles within Scripture as Moses the Prophet or Aaron the High Priest, men ignored the formal leadership roles of women like Deborah\(^1\) the Old Testament Prophetess and Judge or Anna\(^2\) the

\(^1\) Judges 4:4-5
New Testament Prophetess. This overlooking of women who held spiritual leadership positions in the Bible was done in an attempt to make women believe holding a leadership position was not appropriate womanhood. Evidenced in the demise of the women in the Convent, when women functioned outside of this man-made womanhood they were socially and physically punished.

To critique patriarchal interpretive practices that restricted women to man-made identities and socially inferior roles, Paradise asserted that black womanhood couldn’t be defined because it was a universal experience that was individually manifested. The experience was universal because each woman was both black and female and had to exist within a world that saw those two attributes as making them less than human, but the manifestation was individual because the personality, values, and experiences of each woman shaped how they lived within that world. Recreating this individuality within fictional depictions of black womanhood has always been difficult for writers. Toni Morrison took up this challenge and committed herself to writing texts that gave an “in-depth portrait” of black womanhood embedded within debates about Scriptural interpretation (Morrison 102). Paradise was the epitome of such a text.

A narrative illustrating the lives of several different black women who varied in age, class, skin color, and religious affiliation, Paradise displayed the diversity of black women to show how male-privileged interpretations of the Bible limited black womanhood and confined the women to roles within society that did not threaten male-headship. Women who refused to function within these limiting roles were killed; socially killed because they were ostracized, economically killed because they were not employed, spiritually killed because they were disfellowshiped from the Church, or physically killed by murder. The same can be said for the

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2 Luke 2:36-38
women in the Convent. Behaving contrary to the cultural expectations determined by the Ruby men, socially, the women were ostracized to the Convent; economically, the Rubians frowned upon buying their produce; spiritually, the women were not welcome within the Christian faith communities practiced in Ruby; and when such social, financial, and spiritual killing did not cause the women’s behavior to change, the men broke into the Convent to execute them. With their punishment sanctioned by the Oven, Paradise both illustrated and interrogated African American women’s experiences with patriarchal oppression sanctioned by the Bible. For this reason my thesis concludes that Paradise revealed the Bible as a Blood Book, or any text that permits the eradication of any person or group or people whose behavior is contrary to the beliefs and expectations determined by the dominant culture’s reading of sacred text. Such a claim is significant as it reveals humanity’s attempt at preserving cultures, pushing political agendas, and killing or assaulting individuals based on biased readings of the Bible.

Toni Morrison was not the first writer to show how people have historically extracted oppressive interpretations from the Bible to control others. For centuries, African American authors depicted the racist readings of Scripture practiced during American slavery. Used to sanction the physical abuse that tried to convince African Americans of their inferiority, Allen Dwight Callahan chronicled how the Bible was used as a tool of racial oppression in his study, The Talking Book: African Americans and The Bible. Identifying the contradictory experiences enslaved Africans had with the Bible as “Talking Book” and “Poison Book,” Callahan remarked how the Bible as written text was silent because of the slave’s illiteracy but when read aloud its narratives spoke of liberation making it a “Talking Book” (Callahan 13). The Bible was also a “Poison Book” because slave masters used it to make slaves believe the Bible cursed them into inferiority and slavery (Callahan 26). Consequently, “American slaves and their descendants
have taken the texts of the Bible in every sense of the word: embraced them, endured them, seized them, stolen them, and captured them” to establish community with one another, construct an identity removed from white supremacy, and produce a literature that depicted both the constructive and destructive power of biblical interpretation (Callahan xi).

Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, is the most famous and greatest autobiographical depiction of how the Bible was used to condone racial oppression during American slavery. In his appendix, Douglass responded to why his autobiography seemed to focus on pointing out the flaws of American Christianity. Establishing a difference between American Christianity and the Christianity of Christ, Douglass exposed how slavery and racism shaped American men’s reading of the Bible. In the eyes of Douglass, these white-male privileged readings formed a religion that did not coincide with the principles and precepts expressed within the Bible. Rather than reading the biblical text for its holistic message of freedom, grace, love, and mercy, white men extracted texts from the Bible to sanction slavery, rape, theft, and violence. It was the practice of the latter identified as Christianity that caused Douglass to assert this distinction:

> Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognized the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land (Douglass 100).

This excerpt reveals how the oppressive interpretative practices of whites during American slavery legitimized violence and abuse like “slaveholding, women-whipping, [and] cradle-plundering.” More interestingly, this excerpt reveals mainstream religion as a social construction. Just as biblical interpretation is shaped by the biases readers bring to the text, the religions
affiliated with the Bible are ultimately shaped and founded upon these same biases and oppressive interpretations.

This is only one example of a literary text interrogating the constructive and destructive power of biblical interpretation during slavery. The 19th century marked a time when several of the writings of African American men focused on the biblically sanctioned abuse of African Americans based on race. It was also an era that marked a literary shift, as women writers began exposing the biblically sanctioned abuse of African American women based on both race and gender. More specifically, the writings and sermons of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw revealed how the Bible was used to prohibit women from preaching and restrict them to domestic spaces. Douglass revealed biblical readings of Scripture that favored racial oppression, but he did not address the interpretations of the Bible that oppressed black women based on gender. Lee and Elaw recognized this, so they preached sermons and wrote essays that revealed how the Bible was used to permit both racial and gender oppression. This conversational shift affected how black women writers interrogated and illustrated the biblical text up into the 20th century.

Morrison’s Paradise is situated in this conversational shift.

Being suspicious of the cultural values and practices that influenced the original writing and later reading of the Bible, Morrison applied a feminist lens to Scripture that exposed the patriarchal ways the Bible was and continues to be used. Other black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker also used fiction to reveal and combat the patriarchal expectations of a woman’s silence and submission. Analyzing the social and spiritual experiences of black women, theologians like Renita Weems and Kelly Brown Douglas unveiled

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4 Ibid., p. 166
the social and political involvement of women in the Old Testament, while arguing the New Testament ministry of Jesus Christ as anti-misogyny. Finding and creating interpretations of the Bible that favored women, these novelists, literary critics, and theologians shifted the Bible’s use from a tool of racial oppression and gender suppression to a tool of racial and gender empowerment.

Delores S. Williams, one of the most influential womanist theologians to redefine black womanhood in relation to the Bible, also engaged the Bible’s use as a tool to oppress women based on both race and gender. In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams argued the need for a holistic look at both history and language when interpreting and appropriating biblical narratives. Using the story of Abraham and Sarah’s Egyptian slave Hagar as the entry point to interrogate racist and patriarchal interpretations of the Bible, Williams asserted that black women of the North American Diaspora had a similar social and spiritual experience. Just as Hagar was forced to marry Abraham and produce a male child due to Sarah’s barrenness, black women were also viewed as property and thus emotionally exploited as domestics; sexually exploited as mistresses and breeders; and spiritually exploited because their experiences were never articulated within a religious context. Calling attention to Hagar’s nationality as an Egyptian and her position within Abraham’s camp as a slave, Williams showed how black women were barred to the periphery within Scripture which aided in their marginalization in contemporary culture by Scripture. Highlighting the narrative of a biblical woman who is often overlooked, Williams exemplified how biblical women should be examined. Demonstrating how the experiences of black women should be brought to the forefront, Williams exposed the racist and patriarchal power structures that work to socially, economically, spiritually, and physically kill black women.
Paradise pulled the narratives of biblical and black women from the margin by assigning its black female characters names from the Bible. With characters named Miss Esther, Grace, and Divine, Paradise employed biblical typology, or “the hermeneutic tradition that links biblical types or figures to postbiblical persons, places, and events” (Smith 55). This exposed the discrimination inherent within hermeneutics. For centuries men ignored the narratives that favored women in the Bible because they were seeking to oppress women with the Bible. By placing the stories of black women called by Bible names at the center, Paradise challenged the oppression and suppression biblical women and black women experienced because of biblical interpretations that favored men.

Womanist Theologian Katie Cannon affirmed the use of biblical typology by black women writers in her book Black Womanist Ethics. She called writers like Toni Morrison “creators of literature,” and although they were not “formally historians, sociologists, nor theologians…the patterns and themes in their writings [were] reflective of historical facts, sociological realities and religious convictions that lie behind the ethos of the black community” (Cannon 78). In essence, black women writers used fiction to illustrate and interrogate their image and peripheral placement within theology, society, and politics. These writers rewrote their social and historical experiences and religious and theological beliefs within scholarship, autobiography, and fiction to complicate their own identity. This made black women authors’ feminist Bible readers, or critics who refuted popularized white supremacist and patriarchal expectations supported by oppressive biblical hermeneutics. Authors like Morrison accomplished this by using narrative to expose the biblical readings that induced black women’s emotional repression, encouraged their sexual exploitation, and permitted their spiritual marginalization.
Paradise was not Morrison’s first work to illustrate and interrogate, reveal and reject, confirm and critique oppressive biblical hermeneutics and misogynist expectations. The thematic thread running through Toni Morrison’s literary canon testifies of how interpretation of sacred text influences people’s behavior, but also shows how behavior shapes people’s interpretation of sacred text. Depicting the diverse experiences black women had with biblical interpretation, Paradise engaged “revolutionary feminist theology.” A term coined by Sallie McFague in her book Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language, revolutionary feminist theology privileged the narratives of women (McFague 165). Calling attention to the marginalization of both women’s bodies and narratives, revolutionary feminist theology posited that in Christ patriarchy died and misogyny was rejected. Through this theological framework that liberated women from the expectations men extracted from and found within the Bible, authors composed stories that illustrated women’s lives and their relationships with self, one another, men, and God. By circulating these narratives the aim was to expose how men used the Bible to restrict women to domestic roles, silence, and propriety by privileging particular biblical narratives and ignoring others.

While there is no evidence to support that Toni Morrison was aware of McFague’s work or her notion of revolutionary feminist theology, the privileging of women’s narratives argued in McFague’s work is illustrated within Morrison’s fiction and non-fiction. In fact, Morrison was so frustrated with how Portraits in Fact and Fiction (1971) simply confirmed society’s views of black women as inferior she wrote this statement in a book review for The New York Times: “in spite of the inclusion of a few splendid pieces, no recognizable human being emerge[d]. What [did] emerge [was] an oppressed but sexy, sexy but emasculating, bitch” (Morrison 101). Morrison found this to be problematic because such a construction only reified the destructive
stereotypes about black women as “Mammies,” “Sapphires,” and “Jezebels.” It also painted the picture that black women’s lives were solely concerned with responding to their trauma and misfortune. Such an image assumed that black women’s identities were formed primarily from their oppression by whites and black men. This simple, non-resistant depiction of black womanhood caused Morrison to have a fictional black woman ask this myth of an image: “When I was brave, was it only because I was masculine? When I was human, was it only because I was passive? When I survived, was it only because my man was dead? And when shiploads of slaves became a race of thirty million, was that only because I was fecund” (Morrison 102).

While asking these very questions Morrison composed a narrative illustrating the complexities of black girlhood in her first novel The Bluest Eye (1970). This novel chronicled the story of a black girl named Pecola Breedlove who saw her dark skin as a curse and desired nothing more than to have blue eyes like Shirley Temple, even greater “the bluest eyes.” Morrison’s work depicted the emotional, physical, and spiritual lengths Pecola went to on her quest for beauty and acceptance. While Christianity was misinterpreting the image of Christ by painting him as blond haired and blue eyed, Morrison wrote The Bluest Eye to question society’s standards of beauty, its constructions of race, and how these constructions affect the black girl psyche. Morrison challenged her reader to see how “a little girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (Morrison 204). This “evil…fulfillment” of white female identity within black female bodies is a “horror” because such disintegration leads to America’s greatest nightmare – a narrative without black women. By attempting to live and see the world through the blue eyes of white women, the unique perspective of black women’s black or brown eyes is never seen and she along with society eventually becomes blinded to the diversity within her narrative.
This text marked the beginning of Morrison’s long and dedicated career of depicting “what moves at the margin” (Morrison 206). A phrase spoken as she received the Nobel Prize for Literature, Morrison asserted the importance of language and its illustration of those narratives that have been ignored, forgotten, and marginalized like the human experiences they spoke to. Morrison spent the following 26 years showcasing black women and biblical interpretation as central to African American narrative and African American life in *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992). Shirley A Stave confirmed the argument that Morrison’s works illustrated a correlation between the persons, places, ideas, and experiences of the Bible and the experiences of black women in her book *Toni Morrison and The Bible: Contested Intertextualities*. She concludes

Morrison’s articulation of such theological concepts as salvation, transformation, and the afterlife reveals the development of those concepts in African American thought…From *The Bluest Eye* through *Love*, Morrison has clearly maintained an ongoing dialogue with religion, understanding its vital role in African American consciousness, but approaching it warily: alternately suspicious, respectful, and antagonistic. She requires her readers to push back the parameters of received knowledge and tread on holy ground not merely with reverence, but also with a fully engaged political and critical consciousness (Stave 4,7).

In essence, Stave believed Morrison’s literary depictions of theological beliefs and her rewriting of biblical narrative was done not simply to affirm such religious beliefs as salvation, religious practices like possession, or religious language like love, but to challenge those very same notions “reverently” or with the utmost respect to question how such religious beliefs, practices, and language both builds and destroys society.

*Paradise* depicted the effect religious beliefs, practices, and language had on all-black towns Haven and Ruby. Journeying through Reconstruction into the post-Civil Rights era of the early 1970s, *Paradise* built upon *The Bluest Eye* to reveal how patriarchy does not simply blind society to African American women’s experiences, but shows how, even with blue eyes, black
women project a black experience through their body (hair, walk, dress, etc.). Spotlighting a body narrative outside the Ruby men’s confines of acceptable womanhood, Morrison complicated the reader’s understanding of black female identity while simultaneously interrogating the role biblical interpretation played in the formation or deformation of that identity.

Morrison’s *Paradise* added to the conversation of revolutionary feminist theology by constructing one narrative that compared multiple black women’s narratives in relation to the interpretation of sacred text. These black female narratives complicated black womanhood by depicting the complexities of notions like motherhood and abandonment, love and lust, religiosity and spirituality. Depicting a black womanhood that did not find domesticity, silence, or propriety as misogynist expectations juxtaposed with a black womanhood that refused those same practices, *Paradise* revealed that black womanhood was diverse and specific to each woman making the very process of defining it restricting and discriminatory. A definition of black womanhood is restricting because it confines black women to embodying and behaving in particular ways that are determined as appropriate characteristics of black womanhood. This inevitably becomes discriminatory because black women who do not fit within the neat box of determined black womanhood are excluded from the classification and ‘othered.’ *Paradise* critiqued this practice of ‘othering’ black women by narrating both Ruby womanhood and Convent womanhood as black womanhood.

*Paradise* illustrated the openness of black womanhood through an intermingled tale of five women who lived within the matriarchal utopia known as “the Convent.” This space combated the patriarchal utopia within mainstream Ruby to reveal the oppressive nature and the oppressive hermeneutic of the language on the Oven’s sign. By giving voice to these women and
their experiences, particularly juxtaposed against a patriarchal system of Ruby men who sought to silence the women of the Convent with death, Morrison concerned herself “with the search for self-identity – the becoming of women – and for movement from nonbeing within the patriarchal model to a new naming of the self and the divine” (McFague 155). A key element of revolutionary feminist theology, this quotation confirms *Paradise* conversed with revolutionary feminist theology through its illustration of varying women’s narratives and their quest for selfhood in relation to the interpretative noise surrounding the Oven.

The presence of this symbolic interrogation of interpretation within *Paradise*, invites a greater understanding of how interpretive communities apply oppressive hermeneutics to sacred texts like the Bible and construct the behavioral, ethical and moral codes that men and women of a given community are expected to follow. “The Holy Oven: Oppressive Hermeneutics in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” reveals the significance of biblical interpretation to the African American experience holistically, but particularly for African American women. “Toni Morrison and Biblical Interpretation” reveals how African American women shifted the Bible’s use from a tool for racial and gender oppression to a tool for racial and gender empowerment through constructions of complex black women characters named after women in the Bible.

The study of black womanhood being formed or deformed by men’s interpretations of the Bible is engaged in the first chapter entitled, “The Holy Oven: A Monument of Patriarchal Oppression.” It focuses on the historic all-black town practice of using the Bible to construct an identity, ethics, and morality that suppressed women. Looking at the Oven as monumentalizing the past and present patriarchal culture of Haven and Ruby, this edifice constructed an identity, ethics, and morality that sought to silence and suppress the women of the convent with murder.
Revealing the similarities between the Israelite migration and the African American Westward migration, *Paradise* illustrated how the Bible was tied to the African American experience. This chapter cites Norman Crockett’s *The Black Towns*, Nell Irvine Painter’s *Exodusters*, and William Loren Katz’s *The Black West* to assist in the factual documentation of how all-black towns were constructed, reporting on the values they esteemed, and the role of religion and the Bible in town naming, culture, and politics.

Chapter two “Havenly Hermeneutics vs. Ruby Righteousness: The Interpretation and Implementation of Scripture” defines hermeneutics to clarify the activity the Ruby men engaged with the Oven. Applying Stanley Fish’s theory of “interpretive communities” to *Paradise*, this chapter identifies the Rubians as an interpretive community that created meaning from their text—the Oven. Looking at the evolution of the Oven’s sign, *Paradise* revealed the creation and subsequent fluidity of interpretation. This chapter exposes how people create meaning, or extract desired interpretations from a text to permit otherwise immoral or unethical behavior. *Paradise* depicted this in the attempted murder of the women in the Convent. By ultimately scratching on the sign “We Are the Furrow of His Brow,” the men identified themselves as partners with God and justified their violence through a belief that “God [was] at their side” (Morrison 18).

This revelation of the Bible or the Oven’s use as a tool to oppress women during the post-Civil Rights era, illustrated the dangerous presence of misogynist interpretations of scripture even in the 20th century. These male-privileged readings of the Bible were so dangerous they permitted the Ruby men to kill a group of black women simply because they embodied and practiced a black womanhood contrary to their beliefs and expectations. The Ruby men’s decision to kill the women led me to entitle this project’s concluding chapter “Revealing the Blood Book.” Defining “Blood Book” as any text that sanctions the violence, murder, and
genocide of any person or group of people in opposition to it, the Bible and Paradise’s Oven displayed humanity’s practice of killing people whose behavior was contrary to the beliefs and expectations of the dominant culture. By narrating African American women’s experience with patriarchal oppression sanctioned by the Bible, Paradise revealed the Bible as “Blood Book.” Looking at the unspoken sermon of Reverend Misner, this chapter identifies the crucifixion of Jesus as the ultimate example of the use of sacred text as “Blood Book.” This chapter concludes that the death of Christ was because of His insistence on performing Messianic practices that were outside of what the Jewish leaders expected and determined as appropriate behavior for their Messiah. Asserting both His actions and teachings were blasphemous, the Jewish leaders justified their crucifixion of Christ by identifying him as a threat to both God and Rome. His social and spiritual actions were viewed as treason of the highest degree permitting him to die the death of a criminal.

This symbolic revelation of the “Blood Book” within Paradise exposed how the Bible is a text that documents humanity’s practice of killing those who attempt to live outside of the agreed upon beliefs and expectations established for them by a person or group’s previous interpretation of sacred text. By revealing the Bible and “The Holy Oven” as such the reader is given two interpretative choices: 1) Read the text to reveal a God who favors violence as a means to enforce the cultural beliefs and expectations of the dominant culture; or 2) Read the text as illuminating man’s interpretive practice of sanctioning violence by attributing it to the will of God. Regardless of how one reads the Bible it is a “Blood Book.” The only difference is if one sees it as documenting past bloodshed to sanction present and future bloodshed, or it’s documenting past bloodshed to discourage present and future bloodshed. The power of interpretation is given to the reader.
CHAPTER 1

THE HOLY OVEN: A MONUMENT OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

“The story of Ruby provides the occasion for a critique of exclusionary practices of patriarchy, race, and misogyny.”

- Valerie Smith, Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination

Standing in the furnace of Reconstruction’s injustice, African Americans clung to the same promises of their enslaved forbearers. Though nominally free, African Americans remained under the conditions of American racism. Restricted to field or domestic labor many African Americans were unable to obtain gainful employment. Such financial distress coupled with their fear of lynchings motivated those of the South to relocate to a land where White Supremacy was not Pharaoh. African Americans yearned for a land where they could be free from the reigning ideology of white skin privilege and the violent terrorist attacks that maintained that hegemony. This aroused most to join the “Exodusters” of the Westward Migration. The absence of white people in the unsettled Indian Territory of what is now considered Oklahoma was appealing to African Americans and soon became a “Promised Land” they walked and traveled to by wagon.

Paradise depicted this westward exodus by chronicling the migration to and the manufacturing of “this new Eden” (Crockett 42). Historically, the Westward Migration was a time African American men were intentional about creating communities that rejected white people, restrained black women, and revered black men. During this time African American men established a black town culture that reconstructed paradise by protecting it from the perceived

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5 “Originally, Indian Territory included most of modern Oklahoma. By 1890, however, the United States government had reduced Indian Territory to the eastern half of the region and opened the western half to American settlers. In 1907, Congress combined both halves to create Oklahoma, the forty-sixth state.” Christina M. Dickerson “The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories, 1893-1907” (The AME Church Review ProQuest, 2007), p. 28
destructive power of women. *Paradise* showed the distrust African American men had of African American women, showing how this distrust caused the Ruby men to try to determine black womanhood. Having the power to name society and the women who inhabit it, the Ruby men constructed the Oven to limit the behavior and social engagement of black women. This attempt at defining black womanhood restricted the Ruby women to a specific look and social position. Fashion statements or a woman’s presentation became a major concern because, based on the edenic model, nakedness was the consequence of a destroyed paradise.

Linking the dress of the Convent women to morality, *Paradise* contrasted the gender role expectations of man-made Ruby womanhood against the socially defiant woman-made Convent womanhood to challenge the limitations that definitions of gender and racial identity present. By connecting the formation or deformation of black female identity to a man-made “cook oven,” *Paradise* went a step further and symbolized how the Bible was used as a tool that favored male chauvinism. Narrating how men excluded women from the construction of the Oven, *Paradise* illustrated how women’s exclusion from biblical interpretation encouraged men to create gender role expectations that empowered men and limited women. This symbolism concludes that the rebuilt Oven of Ruby represented patriarchal oppression because it monumentalized women’s exclusion from the construction and naming involved in the building of society. Holding true to the parallelism, the Oven revealed how the Bible also monumentalized patriarchal oppression because its gender exclusive narratives ever remind the reader of women’s social limitations.

This chapter looks at *Paradise* as an illustration of how gender role expectations shaped black-town culture into a misogynist community that sanctioned the sexist practices of men through misinterpretations of the Bible. *Paradise* portrayed how the Ruby men created a utopia that refused the input of women for fear it destroyed paradise. Through the exclusionary
practices of Zechariah Morgan and later his grandsons Deacon and Steward Morgan, *Paradise* illustrated how misogynist culture within black towns excluded women from the construction of society and biblical interpretation. The absence of women from the construction of Ruby allowed the Ruby men to create a black town culture that privileged men and oppressed women. This text was given reverence and authority becoming a “Holy Oven” the Ruby men read to determine an appropriate womanhood that made Ruby a haven for the Ruby men and women and a hell for the Convent women.

**CAANAN LAND: HAVEN OR HELL?**

In the spirit of the Israelite spies, many African Americans travelled into Indian Territory between 1870 and 1915 to see if “Canaan Land” truly “floweth with milk and honey.”⁶ Historically, African Americans migrated throughout the Indian Territory under the leadership of various Joshuas. Isaiah T. Montgomery led many to found Mound Bayou, Mississippi, while W.R. Hill led others to found Nicodemus, Kansas (Crockett 4). Disappointed with the agricultural conditions of Kansas, African Americans migrated again when Oklahoma Territory opened on March 22, 1889 (Crockett 3). This new land allowed them to start new black towns like Boley and Langston.

Like the gender exclusive investigation of the Westward Migration, the exodus of *Paradise* mirrored the biblical narrative of the Israelites spying out Canaan Land. Similar to the Israelite spies led by Caleb and Joshua in the Bible, Zechariah Morgan, his son Elder and brother Pryor wanted to insure that Oklahoma was indeed a Promised Land. So, they went to “see the land...and the people that dwell therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they

⁶ Numbers 13:27 KJV (King James Version)
dwell in, whether in tents, or in strong holds” (Numbers 13:18-19). *Paradise* exemplified this scripture by describing how the Morgan men sought to “examine, review and judge other Colored towns.” They were checking to see if “the print shops,” “elocution classes,” “irrigation methods,” and “church services” were successful and could produce a town they would call “Haven” if implemented (Morrison 108). To acquire their data, they, like their biblical predecessors, investigated Canaan Land – all-black towns in Oklahoma Territory. Their fictional venture included the historic towns of “Boley, Langston City, Rentiesville, Taft, [and] Clearview,” as well as the respective Mississippi and Kansas towns of “Mound Bayou and Nicodemus” (Morrison 108). With the founding of Haven reflecting historic all-black towns and biblical Canaan Land, *Paradise* valorized the representations and characterizations of this fictional all-black town. The reader is led to believe there was an authenticity to Haven because of the similarities in its initiation and the founding to that of historic all-black towns and the investigation of Canaan Land.

Through the town name “Haven,” *Paradise* shed light on how, historically, African Americans viewed Oklahoma Territory as a “haven.” William Loren Katz spoke to the formation of this viewpoint in *The Black West* stating, “to the oppressed, Oklahoma offered hope and a haven” (Katz 225). Norman Crockett seconded this notion in his influential work *The Black Towns*, reporting how many migrating African Americans believed Langston (Oklahoma) would serve as a “haven from discrimination and [be] the black cultural center of the Southwest” (Crockett 26). Crockett’s research further suggested many African Americans believed their economic, political, and racial disenfranchisement would be solved through the construction of black towns. This caused the people of Boley to compose a song in celebration of their new town. Singing “be courageous, brother, and forget the past – the great and mighty problem of
race has been solved at last,” African Americans believed black towns would be a haven from white terror and a haven for black success (Crockett 40).

Similar to historic towns Nicodemus, Kansas or Boley, Oklahoma, the “Haven” of Paradise functioned as a haven or safe place from the “threat of white immigrants…and the violence of whites” (Morrison 108). With the bombing of Tulsa in 1921 and the destruction of other black towns reported in Paradise, “haven” was used as a double entendre to spotlight how African Americans believed these segregated spaces protected them from white supremacist racism and violence (Morrison 108). Historically, the advertisements sent through the black town presses spoke directly to African American mistreatment, using the racial slurs of the time to encourage “the abused to move to a black town where people enjoyed the full benefits of political freedom and economic security” (Crockett 40). The Herald stated in an 1894 issue that “Langston City [was] the negro’s refuge from lynching, burning at the stake and other lawlessness,”7 while an 1888 issue in the Nicodemus Cyclone focused their attention on the economic inequalities of African Americans, headlining an advertisement for Nicodemus, Kansas as “[The] Poor Man’s Paradise!”

This mingling of fact and fiction confirmed the feminist critique of black town sexism within Paradise. The absence of women from this fictional migration story illuminated their absence from the historical and biblical investigation. Paradise further confirmed the absence of women from colored town excursions through Deacon Morgan’s memory. He recalled a time he “wave[d] goodbye to his mother and baby sister Ruby” before heading out on another trip to visit colored towns with his twin brother Steward, his older brother Elder, uncle Pryor, and “Big Daddy” Zechariah (Morrison 108). Not only were the women excluded from the initial trip that

only included Zechariah, Pryor, and Elder, they were also excluded from “The Last Grand Tour” (Morrison 108). This practice of leaving the women behind revealed that black women’s exclusion from black town inquiry and initiation was not only necessary but also expected.

Not given enough narrative to express any emotion about the leaving of their men or their inability to travel with them, the lack of dialogue suggested their exclusion was normal and their contestation would have been abnormal. This image of black womanhood in compliance with the patriarchal expectation of silence was necessary in order for Paradise to present a diverse black womanhood. In order to present and “in-depth portrait” of black womanhood, Paradise had to exemplify black women who willingly operated within their restrictions and did not see the need for social or behavioral resistance. By displaying compliance in Ruby womanhood, Paradise did not box black womanhood into manifestations of angst towards domesticity, silence, or propriety but rather showed the power and importance attached to domestic responsibility and silence for the uplift of black town life.

This exclusive excursion also revealed how biblical narrative informed Paradise. By engaging the narrative of Caleb, Joshua and the Israelite spies, Paradise revealed how men have excluded women from the inquiry and acquisition of lands for centuries. Since the demise of Eden men have distrusted women with any involvement in lands viewed as “paradise” or “promised.” Paradise participated in feminist biblical interpretation by exposing fictional, historical and biblical examples of women’s inability to participate in nation building. Attempting to protect themselves and their families from the destructive power of white supremacy, the Ruby men confined their women to domestic spaces. Not realizing they were channeling the racial abuse they experienced from whites and projecting it on to women through
gender oppression, the Ruby men established a culture of patriarchal oppression in Haven and Ruby that made these black towns a living hell for black women.

Interrogating the biblical hermeneutics and politics surrounding men’s attempt at controlling female sexuality, *Paradise* depicted for the reader a culture that believed a woman’s nakedness prophesied a society’s demise. In her first chapter named after the town “Ruby,” *Paradise* connected the women in the Convent to Eve in the Bible. Identified as “Bodacious black Eves, unredeemed by Mary...God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby,” the Convent women threatened paradise (Morrison 18). Asserting “God [was] at their side,” *Paradise* showed how the Ruby men believed that God supported a male-privileged ruling order that sanctioned whatever actions were necessary to maintain that order. Immediately, the reader understood that the God of the Ruby men was against the women in the Convent. This partnership between the men and the divine presupposed that God was in favor of patriarchy, even when it resulted in the death of women.

Narrating the story of a woman who caused her and her husband to lose the gift of immortality and be locked out of paradise because of disobedience, the story of Eve in the Bible became the example men used to justify women’s exclusion from the construction of society. If the mother of all living could not handle the responsibility of naming the first society without bringing on its destruction, her descendants were also unfit. What is interesting about the biblical narrative is that when Eve disobeyed the first consequence was that her naked body was exposed. Ever since, humanity has attempted to cover the nakedness of the first woman’s disobedience with everything from fig leaves to cotton. It is no coincidence that men attempting to recreate utopian spaces of prosperity and security frowned upon the immodest exposure of the female body as it harked of the destruction of paradise.
Historically, black towns used their presses as a medium to promote particular Christian principles that favored their cultural and ethical values. The principle of modesty was depicted in an 1888 issue of a Kansas black town newspaper called the *Nicodemus Cyclone*. The sermon of Rev. Dr. T. Dewitt Talmage of Brooklyn, NY entitled “Good and Bad Fashions” was archived in this issue in its entirety for the Kansas reader. Taken out of his series “Sermons to the Women of America, with ImportantHints to Men,” Rev. Dr. Talmage came out of Deuteronomy to assert what was appropriate attire for women. Linking dress to morality this preacher stated “show me the fashion plates of any century from the time of the deluge to this, and I will tell you the exact state of public morals…[As] devotion to wrong fashion is productive of physical disease, mental imbecility and spiritual withering.” This historic sermon about the need for women of black-towns to adorn in modest dress, displayed the belief that the modesty or immodesty of a black-town woman had the power to uplift or destroy a black-town. This consequently identified nakedness and immodesty as the prophetic sign for the end of paradise.

This belief of social uplift or destruction based on the repression of female sexuality through modest dress was practiced in Ruby. “Gigi,” birth name Grace, was introduced in the chapter named after her by the effect her dress, shape, and movement had on one of the young men named K.D. Described as, “either the pavement was burning or she had sapphires hidden in her shoes…pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forgot to laugh at her hair,” Gigi’s appearance was arousing (Morrison 53). In fact, it was her revealing dress and “walk” that “caused all the trouble” (Morrison 53). This judgment asserted that inappropriate sexual arousal, or that which occurred outside of marriage, was “trouble” for a utopian community. Immediately, Gigi’s body was viewed as oppositional to the cultural expectations of respectability and modesty. The tone of the omniscient narrator through his or her articulation
that a walk caused “trouble,” harked back to the beliefs of the historic, all-black town of Nicodemus. This notion of female sexuality or immodest dress as the reason for moral decay and “spiritual withering” allowed K.D. and the other men of the town to use the women as scapegoats. Because the men found the women attractive and had been engaging in inappropriate sexual affairs with them they blamed them for the disunity and moral decline of Ruby. By exposing men’s practice of blaming women and ignoring their power of choice, *Paradise* provided a feminist reading of Genesis 3. Revealing how patriarchy controlled the appearance and behavior of women to remove moral responsibility from men, *Paradise* revealed the belief men held that if women were not restrained they would convince men to act in ways contrary to what they believed were moral or ethical.

Within the biblical narrative this was the interpretation that favored Eve convincing Adam to eat the fruit. Similarly, within *Paradise* Gigi enjoyed the tempting process. The narrator described how “Gigi watched him battle his stare and lose every time. He said his name was K.D. and tried hard to enjoy her face as much as her cleavage while he talked. It was a struggle she expected, rose to and took pleasure in” (Morrison 73). With the destructive fruit of a black town being sexual immorality or sexual impurity, Gigi’s body became the apple of disobedience. If K.D. ate the apple or gave into his sexual attraction to Gigi moral decay was birthed within Ruby and this edenic space ceased to be paradise. This was already a concern as K.D. Morgan had gotten Ruby town girl Arnette Fleetwood pregnant out of wedlock. It was in the midst of Arnette’s father’s argument about K.D. ’s moral responsibility to marry his daughter that *Paradise* illustrated the silent noise made by Ruby women. “[After] that awkward silence they could hear above their heads the light click of heels: the women pacing, servicing, fetching, feeding – whatever it took to save the children who could not save themselves” (Morrison 60).
Exemplifying the movements of a black womanhood that took motherhood seriously, *Paradise* showcased the patriarchal expectation that women be unseen domestic help leaving the debates of moral responsibility to men. Not privileging or condemning the Convent womanhood depicted in Gigi’s immodesty or loose sexual behavior, *Paradise* compared this Convent womanhood to the Ruby womanhood that willingly worked within the asexual domestic role. This contrast exposed how patriarchy attempted to limit women, but also gave black women a choice in how they responded to or lived within this male dominant society. According to the narrative a woman could find duty and power in motherhood, but she could also find freedom and power through sexual expression. These differing images asserted that both Ruby womanhood and Convent womanhood were black womanhood, not one over the other.

In addition, *Paradise* showed that men were not only working to protect their paradise from moral decay, but they were also attempting to hide their lack of self-control. When K.D. was aroused by Gigi’s nakedness, his struggle to control his sexual desire was exposed. Because women have such a powerful affect on men both emotionally and physiologically, to maintain power men blamed their arousal on women. This allowed men to divorce themselves of moral responsibility. Sexual impurity became the fault of “the woman whom you gave to be with me.”

*Paradise* exposed the vilification and exploitation of black female sexuality by revealing how Ruby men engaged sexually and then blamed and punished the Convent women for arousing them. This haven from racial violence became a hell for the Convent women because their bodies were taken advantage of, condemned, and physically punished.

Gigi was constantly judged and frowned upon for her nudity, glamorous appearance, flirtatious body language, and sexual accessibility. Gigi’s body was not the only Convent woman

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8 Genesis 3:12 ESV (English Standard Version)
Deacon exploited Constance or Connie for a short-lived affair. After the siege of the Convent he reminisced on how “he had used; how he had turned up his nose at her because her loose and easy ways gave him the license to drop and despise her” (Morrison 302). Deacon exemplified what it looked like to eat the fruit of sexual impurity and not take moral responsibility, blaming his liaisons on Connie. The sexual encounters and subsequent judgment these Convent women had with these two Morgan men exemplified some of the hell black women experienced under a misogynist black town culture. Paradise showed how Deacon and K.D. used Connie and Gigi’s bodies for sexual gain and upon feeling shameful about the deed blamed these women to justify their violence against them.

Sex was the trouble Ruby needed protection from. Sex was the reason the Ruby men had to control the women’s behavior. Sex was the reason the Convent women had to be punished. Because of the perceived inappropriate behavior and immorality of the Convent women as a unit, the Ruby men legitimized their attempted murder. Such a threat forced the people of Ruby to discuss what action should be taken. The Oven’s inscription became the authoritative text that revealed their relationship with God and one another. The very edifice the women were excluded from building and naming soon became the monument that sanctioned their murder.

THE HOLY OVEN: A MONUMENT OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

Originally etched by Zechariah Morgan in Haven, the wording of the Oven was of such importance “he sacrificed his treasure of three-inch and four, bent and straight, to say something important that would last” (Morrison 14). He sacrificed these nails to construct a message he believed was inspired by God. He chose these tools because he believed with them he could pin a caption that would stand throughout the test of time. Though the sentiment of the inscription’s
importance would last, its legibility would not leaving Zechariah’s decedents to quarrel over the wording and meaning in their new town Ruby. Inscribed either “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” or “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” the Oven ignited a generational debate between the Ruby men. Both the Ruby old men and the Ruby young men could agree upon only one thing, and that was the influence the inscription had in giving them spiritual and political direction on the type of action necessary in dealing with the women in the Convent.

Mirroring the biblical narratives of Origins, Exodus, and Canaan Land, Paradise led the reader to a realization of the Oven as sacred-authoritative text. The identification of the Oven as sacred-authoritative text drew attention to the reverence the Rubians showed the Oven and the power they gave the Oven to influence their behavior. Shirley A. Stave argued the reverence and careful construction and reconstruction of the Oven was “link[ed] [to] the Ark of the Covenant” (Stave 218). An incredibly thorough and plausible reading, the Oven as the Ark of the Covenant focused on the identity the Rubians found within the object but failed to consider the significance of the language printed or nailed on the Oven’s inscription. “Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them,” revealed the Oven’s inscription as affecting the people of Ruby the same way the words within the Bible affected African Americans (Morrison 7). While the Bible encouraged their liberation it also sanctioned their bondage (Callahan 13). Similarly, the Oven liberated the Ruby women from racial violence, but sanctioned their bondage to such patriarchal expectations as domesticity, silence, and purity of dress and conduct.

Representing the Ruby women’s voicelessness and the Convent women’s damnation, the Oven became a monument of patriarchal oppression. When read as a symbol of the Bible, the Oven exposed the historical, biblical, and fictional voicelessness and damnation of women. The Oven illustrated this oppressive experience of silence and contempt by being a text the women of
Ruby and the Convent were marginalized within, excluded from interpreting, and whose physical abuse was sanctioned by it precepts. Built to remove women from the “brutal work” of field labor and protect them from the sexual abuse of white supervisors, the Oven became a space that restricted women to domesticity. Confined within the Oven, working in this “agreeable” space – a kitchen, the Ruby women could now occupy their rightful place of domesticity without fear of rape or molestation by white men (Morrison 99).

The Oven further illuminated the voicelessness of women by depicting their absence in building its structure and composing its inscription. Just as women were, and often still are, excluded from the construction of meaning from the Bible, women were excluded from the building and naming of the Oven in both Haven and Ruby. In “The State of the Discipline: Sacred Texts in the United States,” Paul Gutjahr asserted “the Bible as a complex cultural artifact” that needed deconstruction itself if the cultural artifacts it invariably influenced were to be understood. The researcher must query externally “how and why a given sacred text was published and by whom, the motives and choices behind its translation or rephrasing, the material forms in which it appeared, the methods and people involved in its distribution, and the settings in which it was received” (Gutjahr 336). The Oven’s physical construction, the people involved or restricted from the building process, “the motives and choices behind [the inscription’s] translation or rephrasing,” and the town’s reception is important in understanding the cultural impact the Oven had on Ruby.

First taking a quick look at the physical structure, Paradise described the Oven “when it was finished – [as] each pale brick [being] perfectly pitched; the chimney wide, lofty; the pegs and grill secure; the draft pulling steadily from the tail hole; the fire door plumb (Morrison 7). These components seem at first insignificant, but they factor in to the Ruby men’s reverence for
the edifice. Describing the bricks as “pale” and “perfectly pitched” denoted the intentionality of color and placement. Ruby being a town that prided itself on its racial purity, it is no coincidence the bricks of the Oven were also one color bound together. This edifice was to do more than simply cook them food, it was to also be a reflection of their united character and values. Racial uniformity was a central Rubian value that was maintained in the pitching of “each pale brick.” Further more, the secured “pegs and grill” worked to evidence the stability of the edifice and subsequently the town. By going in great detail to describe what the Oven was made of, Paradise revealed how the same intentionality placed within this edifice was placed in the values of Ruby. This is why the reverence of the Ruby men is so important. They did not simply see this as a cook oven, but as a “Holy Oven.” The sacred-authoritative nature of this text found its reverence and authority in the hands that built it and the materials they used. This inevitably caused the construction history of the Oven to become linked to the inscription. The Ruby men could not separate the history of the Oven from the meaning of the Oven because in their mind the structure was a physical representation of their beliefs and values.

Paradise wasted no time establishing the tie between the construction of the Oven and the construction of Rubian values. Embedded in the language of the chapter entitled “Ruby,” Paradise described the history of the “grandfathers” or “the Old Fathers” as a generation the “new fathers” were indebted to (Morrison 6). Privileging the past, these introductory thoughts of Paradise laid the groundwork for why the Ruby men were so protective of the Oven. Providing the setting of Ruby by articulating the history of the Oven, Paradise warned, “if it hurt – pulling asunder what their grandfathers had put together – it was nothing compared to what they had endured and what they might become if they did not begin anew” (Morrison 6). Here was discussed the importance of rebuilding the Oven in Ruby. If this man-made structure was not
rebuilt it was believed the destruction of their town was probable. This edifice was essential to the preservation of their values. In this sense, to the Ruby men the Oven represented their history and their standards. They believed if the history and values of Haven were not preserved there would be a decline in the ethics and morality of present and future Ruby. This made the Oven and its sign a sacred-authoritative text because the Ruby men looked to them to establish Rubian culture.

The Oven projected such social influence because the people of Ruby viewed it as having authority. Just as the Bible was a text various readers associated with having definitive messages, the illegible inscription needed to be clarified so Ruby male conduct could be clearly sanctioned. There are various components that make a text authoritative. Moshe Halbertal in his book *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* claimed,

A text can be authoritative because it claims origin from a unique source such as God, the king, or an expert in the field. Sometimes the authority of texts may be independent of the superior will that instituted them…The authority of a text can also derive from its unique intrinsic merit, like that of a great book (Moshe 5).

In essence the authority of a text is determined by the superiority of the originator or the moral or artistic superiority of the content. In the case of *Paradise* the authority of the Oven was derived from the Rubian’s belief in the superiority of Zechariah Morgan. Because he founded Haven, constructed the Oven, and “fashioned an iron plate five feet by two and set it at the base of the Oven’s mouth,” his legacy as a black man constructing utopian spaces became the authority the Rubians respected and turned to for knowledge on how to preserve and protect paradise (Morrison 7).

Deacon Morgan, Zechariah Morgan’s grandson, argued for the authority and reverence of the Oven based on the legacy of the men that partnered with his “Big Daddy” to build it. In a debate with a young man named Royal “Roy” Beauchamp, Deacon stated,
Now, you all listen to me. Real close. Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built. They made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands…They dug the clay – not you. They carried the ho[d] – not you…They mixed the mortar – not a one of you. They made good strong brick for that oven when their own shelter was sticks and sod…Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men – men, hear me? Not slaves, ex or otherwise – the bricks those men made (Morrison 85).

This monologue revealed that the persons and materials that built the Oven, Ruby history through their mother town Haven, and the subsequent values constructed all played a role in the reverence and authority of the Oven. Making any change to the edifice would inevitably change the history and ideals associated because the two could not be separated. Exalting the history of the “Old Fathers,” Deacon rebutted Roy’s argument for an updated Oven by asserting that when the Oven was originally built it was built to perfection. Embedded in this monologue is the reason why Zechariah Morgan’s legacy remained authoritative for the people of Ruby. Deek Morgan asserted the authority of the Oven being rooted in his image of his grandfather as symbolic of God during Creation.

Creating as Supreme Being, having all authority, God spoke and formed everything into existence; allegedly reaching into the “dust of the ground” to “form man.” It is His work at Creation that confirmed His authority within the Bible because He was the ultimate originator. Because Zechariah Morgan was the originator of the Oven he became the authority on all things related to it. Deacon painstakingly asserted the sovereignty of the founders like his father by affiliating them with the initiation of the building of the Oven out of nothingness: “they made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands.” As God was alleged to have created the world ex nihilo so too “Big Papa,” the Father, built the bricks used to build the Oven. In this

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9 “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Genesis 2:7
God-like parallelism, Deacon asserted the authority of his father by exalting his creation as being the very expression of God and therefore perfect and in need of no altering.

Establishing the Oven’s authority based on who built the edifice and what it was built with supports Gutjahr’s premise that authoritative relevance is first determined by factors surrounding the text in question. Paradise articulated the construction history of the Oven and the reverence the Rubians associated with the object to give credence to the cultural impact the edifice had in shaping the Ruby men’s behavior. Paradise continued to engage a feminist reading of the Bible by not only exposing a biblically sanctioned patriarchal framework, or illustrating an in-depth narrative of compliant and contesting women who abided within that framework, but it also revealed how interpretation was an exclusive activity. More specifically, biblical interpretation was an activity that restricted women from participating with the hopes of confining them to domesticity, silence, and sexual repression. Paradise revealed the tension within biblical interpretation through the debate the Ruby men engaged surrounding the illegible inscription. Through this debate Paradise exemplified that with every textual interpretation there is a social implementation. The need for a clear reading of the inscription was necessary in order for the Ruby men know how to “deal with” the women in the Convent. The women’s attempted murder was permitted based on the biased reading the Ruby men extracted from the Oven’s inscription.

This harmful reading was extracted from the Oven because women were excluded from the building and naming of the Oven. The narrative of Paradise repeatedly included masculine pronouns in affiliation with the constructing of the Oven and excluded female persons and pronouns. This revealed the voicelessness and absence of women from the entire construction. Paradise illustrated how the men “put most of their strength into constructing the huge,
flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done” (Morrison 6-7). Nourishing them physically through its function as a kitchen, the Oven monumentalized the social belief that men construct societies for women to work in that ultimately meet the desires of men. Symbolizing their cultural practice of excluding women from the construction of black town culture, the Oven served as a physical reminder that patriarchy determined Rubian ethics and morality. It also symbolized the Bible because it served as a sacred-authoritative text the men constructed meaning from to sanction violence against the women in the Convent. Usually deemed within society as unethical, murder became a plausible option because the constructors of the text were also the readers of the text. Their biased desires to eliminate the sexual threat of the Convent women overruled the ethical or moral code that frowned upon killing.

By revealing the exclusion of the female voice along with the vilification and exploitation of the female body, *Paradise* exposed how men worked to dominate women and interpret texts they considered to be sacred and authoritative to maintain their superior position. *Paradise* illustrated how the racial abuse experienced by black men was rechanneled into gender abuse against black women. Showing how the construction of black town culture was about the black man’s protection from racial violence and his elevation to a similar station like his oppressor, the Westward Migration was not simply a quest for a safe “haven” but also for a paradise where the black man was in a position of superiority. This made black women the victims of gender oppression as black men proceeded to create societies that restricted, vilified, and exploited them. The black man’s haven was the black woman’s hell.

The following chapter will evidence how this Holy Oven not only represented patriarchal oppression by monumentalizing the exclusion of women, but also legitimized the murder of any
woman who did not adhere to the behavioral expectations of misogynist black town culture through its inscription. By looking at the art of interpretation, the following chapter looks deeper into “the motives and choices behind translation or rephrasing,” specifically looking at the debate between the Ruby young men and the Ruby old men.
CHAPTER 2

HAVENLEY HERMENEUTICS V.S. RUBY RIGHTEOUSNESS:
THE IMPLEMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

“One thing, for sure: they could see the Oven; they couldn’t misread or misspeak that, so they had better hurry up and fix its slide before it was too late – which it might already be, for the young people had changed its words again. No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffiti on the hood of the Oven now was, We Are the Furrow of His Brow.”

- Toni Morrison, *Paradise*

Applying various hermeneutics to the nailed pericope on the Oven, the people of Ruby attempted to interpret the sign’s ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ to solidify their theological teachings, moral maxims, and political practices. The Convent women’s resistance to Ruby’s patriarchal expectations of domesticity, silence, and sexual repression garnered them the death penalty. Concerned about their inability to control the women in the Convent, the Ruby men determined murder as the only viable option. The Ruby men vehemently worked to interpret their Holy Oven to determine if they were to execute justice themselves or watch God enact it without them. Still functioning as a symbol for the Bible, the Oven was treated as a text with the sacred-authoritative influence to shape lawful deeds by sanctioning unlawful conduct. Looking at the evolution of the inscription: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” and “We Are the Furrow of His Brow,” this chapter interrogates the biases and agendas that affect the construction of meaning. More specifically, this chapter calls attention to how the Ruby men’s biased reading permitted the attempted murder of unarmed women to maintain their male-privileged space.

Through an identification of Ruby as an ‘interpretive community’ this chapter purports the Ruby men create meaning rather than find it. Suggesting that contemporary concerns and cultural context influence how a text is interpreted, this chapter questions if an author’s original
intention for a text can be found once they are removed from the text by time and space. This chapter defines hermeneutics to show the role of the reader in distinguishing meaning from significance. This chapter illustrates this by focusing on how *Paradise* exposed men’s practice of creating meaning and significance from the biblical text to protect man-made utopias that revere black men and restrict black women.

HAVENLY HERMENEUTICS: THE COMPLICATIONS OF INTERPRETATION

Considered the father of general hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher was the first to submit that meaning or understanding could be found or created within a text through the reader’s application of various systematic approaches to interpretation. A German philosopher and liberal Protestant theologian, Schleiermacher primarily spoke of the need for hermeneutics in relation to the exegesis of the canonical Christian Bible, or The Old and New Testament. Philosophers, theologians and literary critics expounded upon this approach, asserting that secular texts as well as objects needed interpretation. This encouraged many to understand hermeneutics as “the study of the activity of interpretation” (Brown 20). This allowed Paul Ricoeur to investigate Heidegger’s notion that meaning or the interpretation of the whole was found in the meaning or interpretation of the parts of that whole. Classified by philosophers and literary critics alike as the “hermeneutic circle,” this systematic approach to interpretation allowed for what Ricoeur called “double meaning” or “multiple meaning” (Ihde 19). By attempting to understand the whole based on its individual parts, one could contrive a different meaning for the whole if one privileged the meaning found in one of its individual parts. If several meanings of the whole were found or constructed one’s hermeneutical approach produced “double” or “multiple meaning.” Ricoeur asserted that a “symbol” also produced
“double meaning” because it complicated the hermeneutical attempt of discovering universal meaning. Tensions of the sort were produced because the essence of a symbol was “any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designate[d], in addition, another meaning which [wa]s indirect, second and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (Ihde 12-13). Such fluidity or “openness” within interpretation permitted the reader to construct meaning by simply assigning a given text a figurative or alternate identity, particularly one that was in alignment with the presuppositions brought to the text by the reader.

Using symbols to represent language confirmed Ricoeur’s theory of “double meaning,” but it also allowed for “words [to] not always mean, or not only mean, what they appear to mean at first hearing” (Bryan 23). Defined as “the hermeneutic of suspicion” by Christopher Bryan in his book *Listening to the Bible: The Art of Faithful Biblical Interpretation*, Bryan asserted this interpretive approach caused those studying interpretation to become weary of a given understanding because the hermeneutic of suspicion took into consideration “the extent to which biases…have been able to infiltrate our culture and so lend a measure of (alleged) legitimacy to such aspects of our history as anti-Semitism and the abuse of women” (Bryan 26). It was in this very explanation that Bryan revealed the pros and cons of the hermeneutic of suspicion. While allowing for an openness and a fluidity within interpretation, this approach simultaneously allowed such oppressive systems like racism and sexism to penetrate the fabric of human society, producing a language that both constructed and described a human existence based on the superiority of one and the inferiority of another.

Illuminating the influence a reader’s ethics or moral code impact the determination of meaning, Bryan inferred that interpretation, whether for the enslavement or emancipation of a people, was not done in isolation. Jeannine K. Brown supported this notion in her book *Scripture*
as Communication where she submitted “we read in community by default, since our interpretive location has been formed by all sorts of communities: church communities (both present and historical), our families, and other groups, such as our educational communities” (Brown 133). Under her subject heading “No Reader Is an Island,” Brown revisited Stanley Fish’s theory of “interpretive communities.” Defined as “communities…made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions,” Fish asserted that interpretation was constructed by determining an author’s intended meaning through an employment of various experiential factors that could be based on culture, history, religion, education, etc (Leitch 1990-91). Interpretive communities presented the notion that the entire experience of articulation, whether spoken, written, or read was a communal one, which suggested that what one spoke, wrote, or read had been formulated by the collective experiences of the speaker, writer, or reader.

Paradise depicted the oppressive consequences that resulted from the hermeneutic of suspicion by illustrating the complications within the readings of the interpretive community known as the Ruby men. A text exposing patriarchal readings of the Bible and illustrating a feminist reading of the Bible, Paradise exposed the differing agendas of the Ruby men to show the reader how interpretation is the act of creating meaning a community can agree upon. While the motive to “deal with” the women in the Convent was agreed upon the method was not. This invariably revealed the suspicion behind the Ruby men’s interpretation of the Oven because it showed how the different experiences of the Ruby old men and the Ruby young men produced different readings of the Oven. Since an agreed upon meaning could not be found the men created one.
A controversial message articulated with religious language, the illegible inscription on the rebuilt Oven’s mouth took precedence over the monument itself. With the legible portion reading “…the Furrow of His Brow,” the “Ruby grownfolk” believed the first part read “Beware” because that was what an Elder named Miss Esther remembered it saying in Haven. The Ruby men did not dispute her recollection but rather trusted it wholeheartedly. Such blind trust of Miss Esther’s recollection of the Oven’s name revealed the men’s trust in the power of patriarchy to brainwash women of their inferiority. Zechariah Morgan established a black town culture that restricted women to domestic spaces, silence, and sexual repression therefore causing them to “Beware” if they attempted to move outside of this position. It is no coincidence that this Ruby mother would project a patriarchal reading of the Oven onto the women in the Convent because she was compliant within this framework. Based on her conditioning the women in the Convent were threats to paradise because their behavior contested the black womanhood established by the Ruby men. For this reason they should, like the Ruby women, “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (Morrison 93).

In this moment a woman was allowed to name the Oven. What is interesting is that her participation was permitted because she was a representation of the Ruby past by way of Haven’s black town culture. Because she was a member of the original town and asserted a reading of the Oven that favored that history and experience, the men did not find her participation to be a threat. Her opinion and very life embodied the preservation of ‘havenly hermeneutics,’ or interpretations of the Oven that point to and preserve the culture and values of Haven.

Committed to the ideals of the past, the Ruby grownfolk refused to remove Haven’s history from their reading of the Oven’s sign. This havenly hermeneutic troubled Roy. He felt
that “Beware” was a problematic reading because it was an incorrect remembrance of their ancestors’ experience as slaves. Roy believed “No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To ‘beware’ God. To always be ducking and diving, trying to look out every minute in case He’s getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down” (Morrison 84). The very classification “ex-slave” denoted a lack of fear and possession of power to enact freedom and justice in one’s own life. Deacon Morgan strongly disagreed with Roy. He defended the significance of Haven’s history based on a reading of the men that removed them from the shame of slavery and racial oppression. Constantly referring to his ancestors as “men” and refusing to accept they were “ex-slaves,” Deacon’s Haven history was based on a man he did not identify as an ex-slave, but as “an ex-lieutenant governor, an ex-banker, an ex-deacon” (Morrison 84). By ignoring the moment in history when the men were viewed as inferior, Deacon privileged a culture and value system without taking into account the abuse that produced it. He was unwilling to look past Haven. In his mind “‘The Oven already has a history. It doesn’t need you to fix it’” (Morrison 86). Meaning the Oven’s history started after slavery and therefore didn’t need to hark back to slavery to find meaning. It is only the history of Haven that the rebuilt Oven of Ruby needed to look back to.

McFague dealt with the difficulty people have when religious wording is changed. She argued in her book *Metaphorical Theology* that because humanity constructed their reality with language it was only natural that these realities over time become idolized and subsequently protected because “any threat to them [wa]s a threat to our very being” (McFague 6). Deek protected the Oven and its history because an attack on it or its words was an attack on him. To change the Oven’s words was an attempt to change him, his identity, his being. He interpreted the young people’s “renewal of [the] language” on the Oven as their belief that the current or
past message was “some sort of failure…some break in communication” (Wilder 132). This offended Deek because to assert the Oven and its inscription as incomplete or flawed was to say that he, his parents, and his grandparents were flawed.

In spite of the historical and personal significance of the Oven’s inscription, the notion of an oppressive God was problematic for the young men. Taking into consideration the time they grew up in, Roy and his colleagues were shaped by the civil rights movement and were living during the initiation of the “Black Power” movement. These young men were invested in the idea of a liberating God that partnered with humanity to enact justice. This liberating historical context shaped Destry’s reading of the Oven’s sign. Through this “Black Power” lens he read the missing slate as saying “Be,” asking his elders, “What’s so wrong about…’Be the Furrow of His Brow’” (Morrison 87)? Similar to the premise of social and racial responsibility inherent to the Black Power movement, Destry’s reading of the Oven favored a reading of human and divine responsibility. While the old men were content with letting “God’s justice [be] His alone,” the young men believed they were to be “His instrument, His justice. As a race” (Morrison 87).

This debate between “Beware” and “Be” exemplified the hermeneutic of suspicion by illustrating how different experiences influence how a text is read. By ignoring slavery, and how the Bible sanctioned such oppression, the men perpetuated the notion that superior beings were to be feared. This conditioned them to believe God was to be feared like their white oppressors. Contrastingly, the various historical movements like the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement of the 1950s and 60s demonstrated a partnership between the human and the divine to enact the will of God as one. This empowered Destry to explain how “Be[ing]” the hand of God was about “follow[ing] His commandments…be[ing] His voice, His retribution” (Morrison 87). Their experience with liberation culture shed a new perspective on their
community’s history. They saw Zechariah Morgan as an agent working with God. They saw him as “mak[ing] his own way, build[ing] a town out of nothing.” They saw him as liberating his people from racial oppression and protecting his people from white supremacist terror.

The construction of this debate supports the rebuilt Oven of 1951 as a symbol of the Bible because it reflected the hermeneutical discord amongst theologians and literary critics concerning the interpretation of the biblical text. By revealing the urgency to create an agreed upon meaning for the sign on the Oven, *Paradise* exposed how men create agreed upon meanings for the Bible to determine what their relationship is to God and how they should interact with one another and confine women. There are several factors that affect the act of reading and the agreed upon meaning constructed.

History is not the only thing that shapes a reader’s biases. Culture and the passing of time serve as fundamental complications to the act of hermeneutics because “once an author finishes writing a text, it is released from his control, a fact that is magnified with the passage of time” (McLean 237). This was true of Zechariah Morgan’s text as well as the Bible. Because years had passed since each original text was written they endured the journey of translation and rewriting. Each contemporary culture interpreted the text based on new ideals that had been presented. Illustrating the shift of the Ruby people from post-slavery to Civil Rights, *Paradise* showed how various events in history and the presentation of new ideals shaped how a text was interpreted and subsequently rewritten. While the Ruby men were one interpretive community each generation’s worldview was formed by different local and national events. This caused a division between the Ruby old men and the Ruby young men that created two interpretative communities and interpretive discord. Amos N. Wilder addressed the disharmony of people groups attempting to interpret language in his book *The New Voice: Religion, Literature, Hermeneutics*. He argued,
the transmission of language in all these aspects (vocabulary, names, images, fables, myths) is not a smooth, uninterrupted process. The language world can be disordered as a given society is disordered. This can come about in relation to cultural changes in human groups, or for the sake of our study, various interpretive communities (Wilder 128).

The debate concerning the Oven’s inscription exemplified the discord within language as well as the discord within interpretive communities that try to extract a textual meaning that can be agreed upon by the community at large.

Paradise illustrated how even though the town of Ruby, with its shared familial, racial, social, and religious history, could not agree on the meaning or intent of a text written two generations before. This depiction challenges the theologian and the literary critic to understand how time and culture complicate contemporary interpretations of the canonized text we call the Bible. B. H. McLean articulated this argument in his book Biblical Interpretation & Philosophical Hermeneutics. While recognizing Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer as “Anti-Intentionalists” or philosophers that asserted the biblical text as authority irrespective of its historical authors’ intentions, he established how time complicates interpretation:

With the passage of time, the historically and contextually situated texts of the Bible…become monumentalized by their inclusion in a canon and, as a result, are read, and reread, by each new generation of Christians. The end result is that the present sense-event of these monumentalized texts always escapes the finite contexts and intentions of their historical authors (McLean 238).

Under the assumption that the biblical reader was seeking an objective interpretation, such complications presented the activity of hermeneutics as futile. One then must ask, whether or not the meaning derived is in alignment with the historical author’s intentions, why does society stress the importance of finding meaning in spoken or written word in the first place?

Paradise depicted a community of people invested in the discovery and creation of meaning because of their subconscious belief that behavior was manifested from language. The Oven served as the authoritative text the Ruby men sought meaning from to permit the attempted
murder of the women in the Convent. In this sense their “beliefs and behavior…[was] bound to be determined proportionately to the authority [the Oven] enjoyed” (Strickland 100). Because the Oven was viewed as sacred based on its construction history and authoritative because of the definitive power of its creator, it enjoyed a level of authority within the community of Ruby that could not be removed from Rubian behavior. This was why the determining of the Oven’s sign was so important. They had to agree upon an inscription because that inscription carried the authority to influence their actions.

Whether “Beware” or “Be” the young and old men agreed on one thing: the women in the Convent contested their patriarchal construction of black womanhood and thus posed a threat to the misogynist culture of Ruby. “There were irreconcilable differences among the congregations in town, but members from all of them merged on this necessity: Do what you have to. Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue” (Morrison 9-10). Their presence, even at the town’s boarders, and unbridled sexuality was to blame for the recent “catastrophes” in Ruby. All the men agreed they had to understand the nature of God and His instruction to them from the Holy Oven in order to keep from losing Eden because of the immoral advances of these “bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (Morrison 18).

Illuminating the complications an interpretive community experiences due to the various biases and agendas readers bring to a text, *Paradise* revealed how the cultural biases men bring to sacred text perpetuate male-privileged societies. By applying the hermeneutic of suspicion to the Oven the Ruby men sanctioned the attempted murder of the women in the Convent. By illustrating the hermeneutic of suspicion within fiction, *Paradise* exposed the oppressive and violent consequences that result from this interpretive approach. This showed how hermeneutics were behavior driven because they examined language to determine social and political action.
RUBY RIGHTEOUSNESS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF IMPLEMENTATION

With the power to build civilizations, add structure to societies, and create purpose for its reader, the Bible also had the power to destroy those very civilizations, present confusion to those societies, and hide purpose from the very same reader. Just as the Bible was a “Talking Book” to educate and emancipate African Americans in slavery, it was also a “Poison Book” that enslaved and eradicated their history. *Paradise* depicted this practice using the Holy Oven as a symbol for the Bible. A monument created to protect and extol the sexuality of black women’s bodies; the religious language nailed to the Oven’s inscription became a weapon used to control those bodies. When those bodies disobeyed the same inscription called for the death of the offender.

Jennifer Terry argued in her essay “A New World Religion?: Creolisation and Candomble in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, that the people’s focus on protecting Ruby from outsiders and their need to come to an agreement concerning the inscription on the Oven, led “to an aggressive attack on [defenseless] women, the very figures the founders had wanted to prevent from falling prey to white men” (Stave 194-95). Once again the shift from protecting black women from white men to oppressing black women by black men is pointed out and linked back to the Oven. This edifice truly symbolized black town culture in that it exemplified black ingenuity and freedom from white supremacy, but it also represented the rechanneled racial oppression these abused black men turned into gender oppression. The Ruby men needed to ensure that their new superior position was maintained. This caused them to construct a black town culture that restricted black women to domestic spaces, silenced them, and forced them to repress their sexuality with clothing and a refraining from salacious behavior.
Threatened by the Convent women’s refusal to adopt their construction of black womanhood, the Ruby men sieged the Convent and “[shot] the white girl first” (Morrison 3). The opening words of *Paradise*, this simple sentence asserted the threat whites and women brought to a black town. The race and gender of this woman was in direct opposition to Ruby womanhood. Her body was the strongest form of resistance to black town misogynist culture so she had to die first. The subsequent hand-to-hand combat described between the black women and the black men depicted the resistance the Ruby men and the Convent women had been engaging for so long. The Convent black women could not be killed, they could only be challenged and subsequently run off.

This murderous attack revealed *Paradise* as a text concerned with the righteousness of the Ruby men, or the behavior the Ruby men engaged based on their belief they were enacting justice on behalf of their town – “For Ruby” (Morrison18). This Ruby righteousness was based off of an interpretation of the Oven the men finally agreed upon. By highlighting the necessity of agreed upon meaning for interpretive communities, *Paradise* illustrated the fluidity of interpretation. Showing how personal experiences and biased social and political agendas shape meaning, the actions of the Ruby men, and their changing the Oven’s sign after the assault, revealed how people construct meaning within sacred texts to justify behavior.

Beginning with the narrative of Mavis Albright, a woman who abandoned her living children because she was a suspect in the death of her two infant children who suffocated in the car while she was in the supermarket buying meat for her husband, *Paradise* spotlighted the emotional and psychological condition of a woman who only knows abandonment as normative behavior. Socially no longer accepted within her community Mavis found herself in an all-female environment of young women from different social backgrounds who were abandoned by
their mothers. Grace “Gigi” Gibson, a young woman whose sex appeal created discord among the Rubians because she seduced K.D., was the embodiment of unbridled sexuality, causing the Rubians to emphasize the importance of modest or unrevealing attire. With the narratives of three more women named Seneca, Pallas “Divine” Truelove, and Connie, threaded throughout the novel, Morrison depicted a contrasting paradise that existed without the oppressive stereotypes of patriarchy. Free to experiment spiritually and sexually, the Convent women of *Paradise* contrasted a homogeneous space constructed by women against a heterogeneous space constructed by men. *Paradise* asked the question, what makes something paradise? Is it the absence of white people? Is it the absence of men? Is it when the inherent immoral nature of a woman is controlled? Or is when a woman is allowed to explore the various avenues of her life: sociality, sexuality, and spirituality.

*Paradise* intentionally did not answer these questions to continue to confirm the fluidity of interpretation. A narrative dedicated to exposing the complications of asserting universal meaning to a text, *Paradise* could not assert Convent womanhood over Ruby womanhood, nor could it assert the Convent as paradise over Ruby. Intentionally, this narrative left such solidification open to the cultural and historical context of the reader. All *Paradise* did was depict the response black men, committed to misogynist black town culture, rendered against a group they found to be a threat to their constructed utopian space.

When the Convent women kept to themselves they were gossiped about but not really seen as a threat. The problem came when the behaviors and views of the Convent women infiltrated the town of Ruby. No longer was this female paradise confined to itself. Now it was mingling with the patriarchal paradise of Ruby. Now, as perceived by the Ruby men, the loud, irresponsible, salacious women were walking the streets of Ruby, tempting the men and
encouraging the women to live outside of the cultural and religious confines originally established. The people of Ruby began to view the women as “witches” having “power” outside of the Christian God they served. The people, through the voice of the narrator, asserted in frustration that “If they stayed to themselves, that’d be something. But they don’t. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families. We can’t have it, you all. Can’t have it at all” (Morrison 276). This Convent womanhood was not simply a threat to Ruby male sexuality or Ruby womanhood’s gender roles, but it was a threat to the long constructed culture of respectability politics established within Ruby.

This breech of social respect sanctioned nine Ruby men to eradicate these sexually immoral, spiritually confused, and socially removed women. It was their worship and sexual expression that indicted them, decriminalizing their death penalty. Relaying in vivid detail the battle between the Convent women and the Ruby men, Paradise exposed how oppressors justified their unlawful behavior by vilifying the nature of their victim. Described as “lovingly drawn filth” the Ruby men looked in disgust at the “defilement and violence and perversions” that were drawn on the Convent walls (Morrison 287). Although these paintings never bothered the Ruby men but were rather a spiritual expression of the Convent women, they used their personal paintings as a means to remove guilt from their minds as they searched the Convent for the women.

In the midst of justifying their violence the men realized that “the women [were] not hiding. They [were] loose.” Women who had been called “black Eves” by men who believed their immodest dress was a foreshadowing of the end of Ruby, were thought to be hiding. Similar to the thought of God in the Garden, the men thought that the women were hiding in fear of the
punishment they were about to receive. The women running loose at the end of *Paradise* was necessary as it aligned with their characterization. Women hiding in the Convent from the men would have exemplified women who subscribed to the Oven’s reading as “Beware the Furrow of His Brow.” Because the women’s behavior throughout the novel has been to contest this notion, their fleeing the scene coincided with their subscription to the Oven as reading “Be the Furrow of His Brow.” They did not need to fear the justice of God but rather acted in it. Believing God was on their side, the women in the Convent enacted justice of God by running away from their attackers. Fleeing like ex-slaves from the lash of their master’s whip, the Convent women’s escaping the attack of the Ruby men depicted a perceived partnership the Convent women believed they had with God by acting on their desire for liberation. By ending the narrative with the women fleeing the Convent, *Paradise* confirmed that Convent womanhood was resistant to Ruby patriarchy. By never subscribing to their construction of womanhood the fleeing of the Convent women showed how they also did not subscribe to the punishment for their perceived offense either. Rather, this ending revealed how the Convent women subscribed to the notion of “Be” in that they believed they had the power to liberate themselves from Rubian gender oppression.

This narrative invariably presented the question anyone invested in biblical interpretation and the legitimation of violence asks; under what circumstance(s) is violence, even murder an appropriate action? If “hermeneutics...[transform] interpretation into meaning and meaning into political or social instruments for contesting both reality and truths held by others,” is hermeneutics, particularly the hermeneutic of suspicion, to blame for the legitimation of violence within various religious circles (Salih 33)? If Strickland is correct, and “the student of literature is a student of history” then the answer is found in the historical practice and fictional
representations of a hermeneutics that condones violence. *Paradise* showed this through the Ruby men’s dedication to the history of Haven. By remembering the actions of the men before them, they determined what was acceptable behavior in the present and future. This was why they ultimately returned to the Oven after the incident. By scratching on the Oven “We Are the Furrow of His Brow,” the men used language to create a meaning that described their partnership with God. Giving them authority to articulate His words through spoken or written language and actualize His words through direct action. The consequence of Ruby righteousness became the construction of a unified or agreed upon interpretation. For this reason:

They couldn’t misread or misspeak that, so they had to hurry up and fix its slide before it was too late – which it might already be, for the same young people had changed its words again. No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffiti on the hood of the Oven now was “We Are the Furrow of His Brow (Morrison 298).

The actions of the Ruby men determined the interpretation of the Oven. “They couldn’t misread or misspeak” it because the assault on the Convent had already taken place and could be not taken back. *Paradise* revealed that oftentimes interpretation determines behavior, but many times people justify behavior by creating justifiable interpretations. The young men and the old men joining forces to enact the justice of God created a new meaning for the Oven’s inscription. The complications involved with interpreting a text was eliminated the moment the men united in action against the women. This action created meaning or intent within a text to be the consequence of implementing interpretations within society that are gained through the hermeneutic of suspicion. Therefore, “We Are the Furrow of His Brow” was the unified interpretation that justified the unified action of the assault on the Convent.
CONCLUSION

REVEALING THE BLOOD BOOK

Narrating the story of a black town misogynist culture that restricted black women to domestic spaces, silence, and sexual repression, *Paradise* depicted the role of biblical interpretation in the construction of ethics and morality. Illustrating the construction of fictional black towns Haven and Ruby in conjunction with the investigation of Canaan Land in the Bible and the founding of historic black towns, *Paradise* showed how men have always excluded women from nation building. This exclusion allowed men to construct a society that privileged black men and restricted black women. *Paradise* illustrated this by pointing to the construction history of Haven and Ruby through the construction of the Oven.

An edifice that monumentalized the exclusion of women from nation building, the Oven became a sacred text that sanctioned gender oppression within Ruby because it was built based upon gender exclusion. This construction history was reverenced, which made the communal kitchen a “Holy Oven” because it was a sacred-authoritative text the Ruby men looked to for social and political guidance. The inscription on the Holy Oven became imperative when five Convent women attempted to freely explore their sexuality and spirituality amongst themselves. It was not until the Convent women injected their unique forms of expression into Ruby culture that these women became a problem. This caused the Ruby men to debate about the Oven’s inscription because they were looking for direction on how to handle this new threat to their paradise.

Either “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” or “Be the Furrow of His Brow” the Ruby interpretative community was divided in half. These two generations separated by historical time and the experiences and ideologies of those times, the Ruby men constructed different readings
of the Oven based on their different lived experiences. Exposing the openness within interpretation, particularly within the hermeneutic of suspicion, *Paradise* revealed how the Ruby old men could not separate the history of Haven from their hermeneutics. The persistent threat of Ruby’s destruction by the Convent women caused the men to act without an agreed upon meaning of the sign. The inability of the Ruby men to come to a consensus was getting in the way of the desired end. The Convent women had to be dealt with. By acting together to eradicate the threat these women brought, the men created a new meaning for the Oven. “We Are the Furrow of His Brow” became the message on the Oven’s lip to justify their new belief that they were in a partnership with God to enact His justice with Him.

This narration of how people interpret sacred text to legitimize violence exposed the historic use of the Bible as a tool to sanction violence and oppression. Serving as a symbol for the Bible, the Holy Oven consistently showed how the Bible was a text whose meaning was constructed to permit the enslaving of African peoples and the social, sexual, and physical abuse of women. For this reason it is necessary to build upon Allan Dwight Callahan’s notion of the Bible as “Talking Book” and “Poison Book.” As stated in the introduction, the Bible was a “Talking Book” because when it was read aloud to the illiterate slave it spoke of her liberation, but the same book also argued for her inferiority and enslavement causing it to function as a “Poison Book.”

With the Bible being used historically as a tool of oppression it is important to point out how *Paradise* exposed the Bible’s use as a tool of violence. Specifically, violence against people who did not abide by the cultural expectations established for them by interpretive communities that held the most power within a society. Because this behavior was manifested in both *Paradise* and the Bible I classify the Bible with a new term called “Blood Book.” Defined as any
text that sanctions and/or illustrates the violence, murder, and genocide of any person or group of people based on the meaning the dominant interpretive community extracted from a sacred text, a Blood Book empowers those who read themselves as the “Chosen of God” to exterminate any human that threatens their social or religious order. The Bible and Paradise exemplified this by illustrating humanity’s practice of killing people whose behavior was contrary to the beliefs and expectations of the narrative’s dominant culture. Constructing a fictional narrative that interrogated African American women’s experiences with patriarchal oppression permitted by Scripture, Paradise exposed the practice of gender exclusive and gender oppressive interpretations of the Bible. By illustrating a biblical reading that resulted in the violent attack of the Convent women, Paradise revealed the Bible as a Blood Book. This was significant because it revealed how Paradise did not simply display an in-depth portrait of black women, but also presented an in-depth portrait of the Bible and the God represented within. Paradise refrained from romanticizing the Bible. It engaged the biblical narrative through a humanist lens divorced of doctrine to expose the patriarchal oppression inherent within the biblical text.

Chronicling the story of five women in a Convent just a few miles outside of an all-black town built on misogyny; Paradise documented how nine Ruby men attempted to kill five unarmed women because their behavior was contrary to their expectations of black womanhood. With the Bible present throughout this novel, one cannot help but query if this fictional depiction of men killing people based on the victims refusal to adhere to the behavioral expectations established was illustrated within the same Bible these individuals used to sanction such violence. This left the reader to interpret the Oven and the Bible in the following ways: 1) Read the text to reveal a God who favors violence as a means to enforce the beliefs and expectations of
a dominant culture; or 2) Read the text as illuminating man’s interpretive practice of sanctioning violence by attributing it to the will of God.

Based on the attempted murder of the women in the Convent, this project concludes that the interpretation given the Oven’s inscription revealed how men interpret the Bible to sanction the subjugation of women by brute force. Such violence was permitted because the Bible is filled with stories of humans killing other humans because certain individuals did not adhere to the expectations of the dominant culture. These individuals were viewed as a threat to the social, political, and religious framework and thus deserved death. The women in the Convent threatened Ruby’s misogynist black town culture with their boorish behavior, loose sexuality, and unique spiritual practices. They were a threat because their refusal to adhere to Ruby’s expectations of black womanhood disrupted the sexually pure social framework, attacked the political control Ruby men had on Ruby women, and contested the uniformity of protestant Christianity.

Similarly, Jesus disrupted the social framework by interacting with people marginalized for illness, behavior, and gender. His birth attacked the Roman political framework because His prophetic presence spoke of Him as king. But the most dangerous threat He posed was to the dominating religious body known as the Jews. Healing on the Sabbath, raising Lazarus from the dead, and proclaiming to be the Son of God were direct threats to the Jew’s because a “Messiah” from Nazareth performing these supernatural feats was outside of their cultural and religious expectations. Because the behavior of Jesus was contrary to their expectations of Messianic behavior the leaders of the Jewish Church ordered Him killed. This execution became the most remembered demonstration of love in the history of the world. By looking at Reverend Pulliam
and Reverend Misner’s sermons on love and the cross in Morrison’s *Paradise*, this section concludes the death of Jesus as the ultimate support for the Bible as a Blood Book.

Written in the chapter called “Divine,” *Paradise* relayed for the reader two conflicting sermons about “Love.” Set at the wedding of K.D. Morgan and Arnette Fleetwood, Reverend Pulliam shared a controversial sermon on love where he asserted the character of God. Preaching, “Love is divine only and difficult always…If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God” Reverend Pulliam made these confusing assertions that love was neither natural nor physiological but rather a Being. In the same breath he stated that it was “a learned application.” What is the theological principle within this statement? If God is love and love is learned so that it is practiced, does humanity learn God for the purpose of practicing Him or being Him in everyday life? If so, how is such a lesson learned? Pulliam does not take long to answer these very questions in the affirmative stating, “You have to practice God. You have to think God—carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love. Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it” (Morrison 141). Spoken within the context of marriage Pulliam was making sure this young couple understood love was not sex or infatuation, but the diligent study of God so as to practice His character towards one another.

Where Pulliam’s theology broke down for Reverend Misner was when he stated, “God is interested only in Himself which is to say He is only interested in love…God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share that interest” (Morrison 142). This statement was problematic for Reverend Misner because it asserted God as a being who was innately selfish in His manifestation and acquisition of love.
Misner believed such theology was contrary to the example of the cross. For this reason Misner walked to the back of the church and grabbed the cross off the wall and held it in front of the Church for everyone to see. Not saying one word, Misner constructed a sermon in his mind about a black Christ that loved both God and humanity perfectly.

Avoiding the identification of Jesus as the Son of God, *Paradise* revealed a vivid crucifixion scene without articulating the reason for the sacrifice. By not engaging the Christian belief that Jesus died for the sins of the world, Morrison’s crucifixion relinquished the burden of His death having a divine sacrificial purpose and revealed how men execute anyone whose behavior is contrary to their established identity politics. Just as the Ruby women were expected to adhere to a black womanhood that was domestic, silent, and modest, Jesus was expected to behave within the Messianic expectations of Sabbath reverence, strict devotion to the Mosaic Law, and overthrow the Roman government. Because these individuals did not abide within these confines their murder was permitted by interpretations of sacred texts that were ultimately shaped by violent political agendas.

*Paradise* described Reverend Misner as imagining “the execution of this one solitary black man propped up on these two intersecting lines to which he was attached in a parody of human embrace” (Morrison 146). Identifying the man hanging from this perpendicular object as black, *Paradise* established a link between the suffering of the black experience and the suffering Jesus endured on the cross in crucifixion. James Cone prioritized this correlation in his work *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In this text he asserted the need for a theological “norm” that identified Jesus “as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation” (Cone 38). While Cone privileges the need for the crucifixion and suffering of both Christ and blacks to
represent a larger purpose, *Paradise* revealed the Bible as Blood Book and simply depicted the crucifixion as the unmerited suffering and death of a black man.

*Paradise* illustrated the crucifixion of the black Christ by inviting the reader to “see” the slow death of asphyxiation and the shame and disrespect experienced by this man.

His wooly head alternately rising on his neck and falling towards his chest, the glow of his midnight skin dimmed by dust, streaked by gall, fouled by spit and urine, gone pewter in the hot, dry wind and, finally, as the sun dimmed in shame, as his flesh matched the odd lessening of afternoon light as though it were evening, always sudden in that climate, swallowing him and the other death row felons, and the silhouette of this original sign merged with a false night sky (Morrison 146).

This imagery racialized the Biblical Christ to confirm the experiential correlation within gendered and raced execution. By eliminating redemption from this act of suffering *Paradise* revealed the unnecessary nature of black death.

In his recent book *Exodus Politics* Robert Patterson mentioned the notion of non-redemptive suffering or “unmerited suffering” in relation to the four girls killed by the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL in 1963. Providing a critique of bridge and formal leadership during the Civil Rights Movement as depicted in Ernest J. Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Patterson addressed Messianic leadership and its historic articulation of having redemptive value. Patterson quoted womanist theologian Stephanie Mitchem who said, “suffering in itself is not salvific. It is redemptive only in that it may lead to critical rethinking of meaning or purpose, as might any life process” (Patterson 52). Quoting her to support his argument that the notion of American redemption should be removed from black death and suffering, Patterson’s assertion coincides with the removal of redemption from the crucifixion of this unnamed black man in *Paradise*. Just like the death of the women in the Convent was unmerited so was the death of the biblical Christ. This removal of redemption was necessary to further expose the Bible as Blood Book. The death of this black Christ is only
redemptive in that it caused this reader to rethink the implications of the entire Bible and caused me to see this sacred text as a Blood Book.

This narrative removing redemption from suffering illuminated how the Bible documents the unmerited killing of men based on the interpretation of sacred text. The Blood Book also functions as a text that men interpret to kill men today. Published on April 1\textsuperscript{st} in an online blog entitled \textit{Salon}, Brittney Cooper, professor of Women’s and Gender studies and Africana studies at Rutgers University, wrote an article entitled “The right’s made-up God: How bigots invented a white supremacist Jesus.” In this essay Cooper expounds upon her belief that American religion has constructed images of Jesus that support the oppression and violence of people groups who differ in look, opinion, and behavior of the dominant group. In this sense \textit{Paradise} remains a pertinent and prophetic text as it forces the reader to challenge the merit behind biblical interpretations that sanction the assault of people who look or believe differently from predetermined social identities. My concluding thoughts of \textit{Paradise} as a revelation of the Bible as Blood Book becomes imperative as it points to the continued misuse of the Bible as a tool of violence even in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

A time when women are still restricted from ordained religious participation, black men are shot because their “walk” or dress wreaks of “trouble,” and men and women whose behavior does not coincide with socially prescribed gender roles are discriminated against socially and economically, one is forced to see the modern consequences oppressive hermeneutics presently have on our society. \textit{Paradise} showed that biblical interpretation is fluid. This openness will always present opportunity for oppressive and violent readings of the Bible. \textit{Paradise} showed that because the narratives within the Bible chronicled stories of people who killed or assaulted people who behaved, thought, and looked different than the prescribed identity of the dominant
culture, the Bible would always be a Blood Book. It was important that this interpretive practice be exposed so that people become aware of their social, spiritual, and physical abuse. It was important to expose how people apply oppressive hermeneutics to scripture to illuminate how humanity perpetuates biased cultural expectations and practices a dangerous politics. Humanity may be one interpretative community, but its various experiences generate different readings of text that have the power to both enslave and liberate, attack and defend, empower and disenfranchise, kill and let live.
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<http://www.salon.com/2015/04/01/the_rights_made_up_god_how_bigots_invented_a_white_supremacist_jesus/>.


