

Article

“Looking ‘Foreword’ to Milton in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”

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Abstract: Prior to the 2014 republication of Toni Morrison’s, *Paradise*, the novelist had not published any commentary about the role of literary influence John Milton might have had on her fictional writings. In a foreword to the republication of her 1997 novel, Morrison offers her first published acknowledgement of Milton’s influence on any work in her canon. My essay contends this Miltonic revelation constitutes a groundbreaking event in literary criticism. I explore the critical significance of this revelation by explicating the foreword, Milton’s significance within it, and its implications for reading the 17th-century epic writer’s (in)visible influential presence throughout *Paradise*. Placing particular emphasis on the interpretive significance of Morrison’s womanist critique of Milton’s portrayal of Eve, my essay turns to a focus on the Convent women as interrogated replicas of the first mother presented in *Paradise Lost*. This analysis of the novel enlarges the grounds of contention in Milton and African American studies, providing a richer interpretive reading experience that has never been cited or examined in existing literary criticism prior to now.

Keywords: grounds of contention; (in)visible; revisionist interrogation; spiritual translation; uppity; womanist

The foreword to Toni Morrison’s 2014 republication of her 1998 novel, *Paradise*, constitutes a major event in literary criticism. More than a foreword, this brief literary essay on matters of religion, literary culture, and black history breaks new ground in studies devoted to John Milton and African American women’s writings. Of particular note, Morrison’s Miltonic foreword provides a religious lens for examining and reclaiming a body of African American women’s writings where select authors in the tradition adorn their works with the intertextual spirit of Milton’s influential and (in)visible presence. These spirit-filled citings of Milton’s presence in Morrison’s foreword merit serious consideration because of the interpretive implications they hold for comprehending *Paradise* and the Miltonic scope of the novel’s artistic complexity. As Morrison’s foreword intertextually forecasts, her spiritual meditations on Milton give old and new readers alike something Miltonic to look forward to prior to turning the page to the novel’s beginning chapter. From that moment forward, Morrison’s readers encounter a novel that performs myriad spiritual and revisionist interrogations of Milton and his signature epic, *Paradise Lost*, toward reclaiming black women’s bodies as messianic divas rather than fallen Eves or subjugated Adamic helpmeets.

No criticism prior to this essay exists that theorizes Morrison’s intertextual engagements with Milton in *Paradise*. This void in literary criticism robs culture of understanding more fully the poetic genius of one of America’s most profound and astutely gifted writers of the past 50 years. *Paradise* marks a critical watershed moment in Morrison’s literary career. It is the first novel she published subsequent to winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. Epic in scope and complexity, *Paradise*, fictionally preaches a gospel of black revolt by troping imaginatively with God’s religious language and restoring its poetics to literary righteousness in fallen contemporary times.

Bearing Morrison’s Soulful Miltonic Witness in *Paradise*

Preaching gospels of black revolt in African American tradition covers a range of politicized literary projects where authors remaster the English language with accented inflections of semantic difference. One of the ways African American writers have showcased their skills in remastering English is by demonstrating a “subversive fluency with Milton” while “completing and complicating” him with erudite sophistication (Wilburn 2014, p. 3). Morrison, extending a tradition inaugurated by Phillis Wheatley, remasters Milton in her own distinct style. As she declared in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “we do language”, an act she understood as possibly signaling “the measure of our lives”. (Morrison 2019b). To disregard the intertextual weight of her Miltonic heritage, therefore, is tantamount to religious sacrilege, contributing to what may be regarded as a textual bastardization of canonical exegesis that is unworthy of two of the most preeminent and gifted of literary writers in English.

On the one hand, Milton has long been revered as a heroic literary icon in English tradition. To the Victorians, “Milton, like *Hamlet* had become a classic (Gray 2009, p. 35). The literary success accorded to *Paradise Lost*, meanwhile, has shaped interpretations of the impressive religious work as that of “a poetic Bible” (Gray 2009, p. 45). Morrison’s prestige in literature will loom equally as large in the future annals of literary history. Subsequent to her death in August of 2019, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. tweeted, “Toni Morrison’s funeral on Friday solemnizes the passing of one of the most sublime voices in the history of our country” (Gates 2019). This accolade among others throughout Morrison’s impressive 50-year publication career will assure her a formidable presence in canons of literature in English.

In “Getting Uppity with Milton; or Because My Mom Politely Asked: ‘Was Milton Racist?’” I clear theoretical space for considering the intertextual weight of Morrison’s Miltonic heritage by briefly explaining how England’s Christian and epic poet of liberty works in her writings. In addition to reclaiming and revaluing the pejorative term, ‘uppity’, as a culturally responsive mode of black Miltonic reception and critique, I argue Morrison’s various allusions to Milton and *Paradise Lost*, in particular, constitute a “wayward aesthetic that creates intertextual distance from [him] by distorting her many [glosses on] his works so that they are almost beyond recognition” (Wilburn 2020, p. 273). This theoretical intervention in literary criticism provides scholars who read as artists a more nuanced understanding of the Milton Morrison engages throughout several works from her *oeuvre*. Readers as artists, according to Morrison, are notable for “sifting, adding, [and] recapturing” details in literary writings to the point of “making the work work while it makes [them] do the same” (Morrison 2006, p. 175). *Paradise* prompts such activities with its myriad wayward allusions to Milton and his writings. These allusions reveal a pressing need for performing the nuanced work of Miltonic exegesis where examinations of Morrison’s novels, and *Paradise* in particular are concerned.

Only three other articles attempt to account for Milton’s intertextual relevance or significance in Morrison’s writings. Tessa Roynon’s two articles on *A Mercy* provide the most substantive discussions of Morrison’s Miltonic engagements in any of the novelist’s literary works. Roynon’s articles focus on the “trope of dominion as a key intertextual motif” and the value of the Miltonic journey as a route to ontologically regaining paradise from within one’s individual sense of and quest for self (Wilburn 2020, p. 273). Lauren LePow’s notice of Milton in Morrison’s *Tar Baby* precedes Roynon’s intertextual findings by nearly 25 years. Her reading of *Tar Baby* calls specific attention to an allusive aesthetic operating throughout Morrison’s fourth novel where figures of “geographical dualism” ultimately reflect the novelist’s “fusing . . . antipodal elements of Milton’s Hell and Heaven into hybrid signifiers” (Wilburn 2020, p. 272). Joseph Wittreich and Marc Conner also have offered speculations about Milton as critical to Morrison’s literary heritage. Both, to differing degrees, validate the capacious range of Morrison’s vast and astute knowledge of literary tradition. Wittreich and Conner also highlight Morrison’s clever appreciation for one of the most highly praised and revered of poetical writers in the English canon.

A responsible accounting of Morrison’s numerous poetic engagements with Milton throughout *Paradise* as forecasted in her Miltonic foreword may best be understood through the lens of Katherine

Clay Bassard's theorizations on strands of religious intertextuality as performed by early African American women writers. Bassard identifies and redefines these intertextual practices as "spiritual interrogations". Altered and updated in scope, style, and philosophical outlook, such "revisionist interrogations" surface myriad times throughout *Paradise* and with a Miltonic tenor of intertextual religiosity that has yet to be examined. Revisionist interrogations, according to Bassard, produce performances of intertextual response and reception "from the heart" as prompted by any number of questions raised in or by some precursor text in literary or cultural tradition (Bassard 1999, p. 3). Bassard further explains that it is "within this divine dialogue" between writers separated by dates of publication that "black women's subjectivity is produced even as her agency is acknowledged and affirmed" (Bassard 1999, p. 3). This give-and-take dynamic between and among artists announces a stylized reception of the Miltonic works Morrison signifies upon in her own writings of innovative originality. *A Mercy* attests to this give-and-take exchange with Milton, as Roynon has noted. However, no one has theorized on this exchange as it manifests throughout *Paradise*, the novel where Milton reverberates more numerous than in any of Morrison's literary productions.

Morrison's Miltonic foreword to the millennial republication of *Paradise* justifies and confirms her literary affiliation with Milton that I long suspected prior to 2014 as discussed in my 2020 essay in *Milton Studies*.¹ The foreword's several commentaries on and appropriations of Milton underscore the myriad instances throughout *Paradise* where Morrison tropes with the epic writer so that he remains (in)visible before astute readers' eyes. Inasmuch as her Miltonic foreword is notable for its revelations concerning Milton and *Paradise Lost* as religious intertexts permeating her seventh novel, it turns out that the discussions in the essay are elaborations upon literary meditations Morrison wrote about nearly 25 years earlier but never published. Her Miltonic foreword, then, actually constitutes an expanded literary afterthought that enlarges upon beliefs she held about Milton's linguistic and imagistic value while composing *Paradise*.

One discovers the origins of Morrison's religious meditations on Milton in her essay, "God's Language". A kind of spiritual meditation, "God's Language" likewise functions as intertextual scripture, in effect, removing all doubt that Morrison knows and creatively re-masters Milton according to her own fancy of intellectual genius. Moreover, its meditative reflection renders a gospel of revolt in a brief form of literary criticism that reveals the aesthetic soul underlying Morrison's numerous revisionist interrogations of Milton throughout *Paradise*.

Perhaps, without intending to do so, "God's Language" strikes a religious tone with a thematic message echoically suggestive of John 1.1. In this synoptic gospel of the New Testament, John declares, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God".² John's scriptural declaration unequivocally establishes God as the author and embodiment of language. By 1996, when Morrison begins writing *Paradise*, the novelist knows too well that God talk is debased and fallen in her contemporary moment. Meditating on writing for the literary marketplace at a time of mass consumerism and idolatrous capitalism, Morrison chafes at a seeming widespread rejection if not bastardization of religious language and Christian ideology in the fin de siècle of the 20th century.

It seems impossible to Morrison that writers of this period can find a remedy for recuperating or restoring the purity of God's language in modern times and in creative prose writing more specifically. Hence, she decides to reject English with its "paenastistic, rapturous, [and] large words", choosing, instead, to "reveal their consequences" (Morrison 2019a, p. 254). This poetic strategy allows Morrison to bypass what she regards as the corruptible quality of English language and "cliché-ridden expressions" laden in any attempt to render "religion-inflected prose narrative" in poetic forms that might "make the experience and journey of faith fresh, as new and as linguistically unencumbered as

¹ See "Getting Uppity with Milton" in *Milton Studies* 62.2 where I discuss my brief conversation with Morrison about Milton in 2012 and prior to presenting my pre-circulated paper on *A Mercy* at the 2013 convening of the New England Milton Society held at the University of Connecticut.

² John 1.1.

it was to early believers” in pre-modern times (Morrison 2019a, p. 253). As Morrison relays in her meditative essay, she invests in a poetics that would restore the purity of God talk and derivatives of its Christian language as a noble linguistic field for telling aright the “history of African Americans” (Morrison 2019a, p. 248). Doing so affords her literary opportunities for regaining paradise through creative prose that subsequently positions her to do justice to African American culture and its religious belief systems and ideals without sacrificing “ambiguity, depth, and moral authority” as a fallen poetics “aimed at reinforcement rather than liberation” (Morrison 2019a, p. 253). Indeed, a literary project of this majestic scope aligns with Milton’s poetic treatment of language in *Paradise Lost* where he radically “neglects . . . rhyme” in favor of blank verse, which, according to him, “is to be esteemed an example set” of recovering “ancient liberty . . . to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming”.³

An intertextual interplay between Morrison’s Miltonic foreword and her novel translates Milton across the annals of time and the color lines of literary tradition. This spiritual conversion of Milton’s translatability in African American women’s writing reverberates periodically throughout the Miltonic foreword. Functioning as a spiritualized vernacular by this process, Milton also operates as a “hidden transcript” of overlooked influence in readings of select novels by Morrison where he appears (in)visible to all but the most astute and perceptive of literary audiences (Bassard 1999, p. 18). The novel bears soulful witness to this spiritual conversion of Milton, marking Morrison’s “uppity” genius with her precursor and *Paradise Lost* by subjecting both religious intertexts to her awesome powers of revisionist interrogation.

In bearing soulful witness to these spiritual conversions in literary tradition, Morrison performs a ‘saving change’ of revisionist interrogation. That is, she bears soulful witness to Milton’s canonical influence and presence throughout literary tradition as “an important dialectical movement” in her writing (Bassard 1999, p. 23). This literary moment also “signals both a departure and an arrival, an eternal continuity of the soul, even as it demands a discontinuity . . . in the course of [western culture’s] sinful life (Bassard 1999, p. 23). Thus, Morrison’s Miltonic foreword reveals a literary quest wherein she attempts to regain Paradise by appealing to the wonder-working powers of religious language and a radical intertextual engagement with Milton. Her radical re-imagining of contemporary society, Edenic myth, and religious language combine to hallow her novel with Milton’s accented (in)visible presence. In doing so, Morrison Aretha-izes her fictional gospel of black revolt by moving astute literary readers to “start gettin’ the [intertextual] spirit” of Milton in the poetic darkness of the novelist’s playful imagination.⁴ This soulful witness of allusive feeling re-animates the novel with a religious energy Morrison foretells in her Miltonic foreword.

Spiritual conversions announce the remarkable change that transforms one whose soul has been lost in perdition then found as the result of some salvific happening. The spiritual conversion instantly translates the formerly abject individual to new heights of restorative sublime. Paul of Tarsus experienced such a conversion along a road to Damascus. Select early African American women writers give utterance to their spiritual conversions in different literary genres by engaging with Milton in a variety of poetic manners. Phillis Wheatley, a founding mother in African American literary tradition, gives prophetic voice to the efficacy of this dynamic for black subjects, who, as Bassard notes, are “victims of cultural theft and misappropriation” (Bassard 1999, p. 11). In “On Being Brought from Africa”, for example, Wheatley serves prophetic notice “that *Negros*, black as *Cain*/May be refin’d and join th’ angelic train” (Wheatley 2001, p. 13). This sentiment at once espouses an unshakeable

³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, “The Verse”.

⁴ Aretha Franklin, “Spirit in the Dark” (Franklin 1970). The term ‘Aretha-izes’ refers to Franklin’s uncanny spiritual ability to place her own innovative stamp of genius on her covers of original hits sung by other recording artists. As with Otis Redding’s “R-E-S-P-E-C-T”, or Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water”, Franklin totally reworks and re-masters the original recording, typically surpassing it with a musical excellence that ultimately makes the song uniquely her own.

belief that Africans, like others of the human race, may be converted, receive salvation from God, and therefore gain the right hand of fellowship as equal citizens of humanity.

Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Rebecca Cox Jackson's respective spiritual biographies offer subsequent examples in African American women's writings that promulgate "the need to attend to the centrality of issues of spirituality in black women's literature" toward better understanding how they represent themselves "as religious subjects with a variety of sacred traditions" (Bassard 1999, p. 141). Morrison extends and worries the line of this spiritual tradition across the centuries of black women's writing by performing spiritual conversions of a different type and to varying effect. In novels like *Tar Baby*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, *God Help the Child*, and *Paradise* most particularly, Morrison engages in a poetics of revisionist interrogation that bears soulful witness to Milton as a rhetorically loaded figure of speech. Both a rhetoric and intertext of "tropological vernacular" in select Morrison novels, Milton provides a "linguistic and textual ground for black intertextuality" (Bassard 1999, pp. 14–15). Additionally, Milton, largely due to his canonical status as a premiere Christian poet in English tradition, operates as a spiritualized vernacular and "hidden transcript" of overlooked influential presence (Bassard 1999, p. 18).

Milton's near (in)visibility in this regard is evidenced by the paucity of criticism that seldom links these two writers. Morrison's Miltonic foreword, however, alters this course in literary history. Bearing soulful witness and testimony to Milton's intertextual value in the writing of *Paradise*, Morrison's foreword performs a spiritual conversion of the epic poet. Authenticating him as a figure and mode of textual intercourse, the artist as writer spiritually interrogates her famous 17th-century precursor, appropriating and revising him at will. Her crossing the color lines of black and white literary traditions convey inflections of poetic creativity that are accented by her double-voiced mastery of English words and 'uppity' genius.

"Gettin' the Spirit in the Dark" of Morrison's Miltonic Foreword

Morrison's Miltonic foreword performs a spiritual conversion of Milton against orthodox type. A preeminent Christian poet in English tradition, Milton and his canon are saturated with receptions of greatness and high literary achievement to the point of being untouchable, or as Harold Bloom has noted, "the great Inhibitor . . . , who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles" (Bloom 1997, p. 32). Morrison spiritually converts this orthodox Milton, appropriating him in her foreword as though she were revering his high status and impressive mark on literary tradition only to subject him to her iconoclastic whim. In the foreword, Morrison spiritually converts Milton into a tropological vernacular of paradoxical collapsibility. That is, she intertextually translates and transforms his orthodox religious meanings by turning the Milton she understood as an "experimental theologian" both upside/down and inside/out as *Paradise* repeatedly evidences through the novelist's wayward aesthetic of Miltonic allusion (Wittreich 2006, p. 192). An example of this spiritual conversion occurs on the level of the title to Milton's "great religious epic" (Wittreich 2006, p. 132). Commenting on Morrison's "fussing over the last word (paradise) of her novel", which she intended originally to be capitalized, Wittreich wonders if the novelist's depth attention to capitalizing the last word of the fictional work reflects her remembrance that the epic "initially appeared as *Paradise lost*" (Wittreich 2006, p. 64). Furthermore, by entitling her novel to suggest an allusive clipping of Milton's epic, Morrison performs a spiritual conversion of the Christian poet in a 'clapback' to religious tradition aimed at restoring a sense of Heaven to be enjoyed in the here and now on earth rather than in some spiritual afterlife.

The foreword's spiritual conversion of Milton into tropological vernacular proves especially significant in the sense that Morrison performs this act of revisionist interrogation through a literary genre of belated prophecy. Forewords offer introductions or prefatory overviews and accountings of some specific aspect of a given literary work. Morrison's foreword to *Paradise* is notable for its author's rendering of the incidents that gave rise to the novel's Miltonic origins. In accounting for the intertextual role *Paradise Lost* plays in her conception and composition of the novel, Morrison presents introductory remarks with pointed asynchronous timing. Telling the novel's Miltonic origins

well after the fact of its first and now second publication, Morrison likewise retrieves the past of her literary imaginings, grounding this re-membering of source material in the 17th-century yet in a genre of essay writing that, by its very name, connotes a performance of forward-looking thinking. This belated prophecy of sorts spiritually converts Milton as literary fodder useful for Morrison's 'uppity' reimagining of Paradise and its transformed meaning in the fallen times of her, then, writing present.

In addition to appropriating an extended passage from Milton's Christian epic in the foreword, Morrison comments and theorizes on other spiritual matters. For instance, she reflects on the extent to which Hell often appeals to audiences more than conceptions of Paradise do. Later, she critiques the limiting role Milton ascribes to Eve in his epic. This limited portrayal, which *Paradise* enlarges upon, correctively responds to Milton's chauvinistic portrayal of Eve, amplifying the first mother of the epic poem in the characters of Morrison's convent women. This revisionist interrogation of Eve contributes to the growing body of feminist criticism in Milton studies. It also solidifies Morrison and her novelistic writings within a literary fellowship I elsewhere identify as "Milton's early black sisterhood" (Wilburn 2013). This chorus of "self-invented women" along with their "evangelical appropriations of Milton" performs various intellectual engagements and revisionist interrogations of the Christian poet such that they and their writings must no longer be confined to the "margins of footnotes" or endnotes in criticism associated with his epic name in literary tradition (Wilburn 2013, p. 260).

Still another evocation of Morrison spiritually converting Milton in her foreword concerns the nuances of womanist theology permeating the essay. The term, "womanist", as coined by Alice Walker, expands the terrain of black feminist studies to include and celebrate unconventional expressions of womanhood and femininity grounded in Africanist experience. A womanist spirit privileges frivolity, a behavior typically regarded as "irresponsible [or] not serious" in nature (Walker 1983, p. xi). Womanism also privileges an uncompromised respect for women's diverse sexualities, their cultures, "emotional flexibility", strength, and commitments to the "survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker 1983, pp. xi, xii). Combined, these attributes bespeak a rebellious ontological orientation and counter stance to patriarchal norms.

Morrison's Miltonic foreword performs a spiritual conversion of Milton based on the novelist's revisionist interrogations of Eve. In a passage from the essay, Morrison critiques Milton's limited portrayal of Eve throughout his epic. This critique ruptures a "grounds of contention" in Milton studies, what editors, Mark R. Kelley, Michael Lieb, and John T. Shawcross describe as vast ideological terrain that shapes interpretive communities' diverse receptions of precursor works (Kelley et al. 2003, p. 3). Morrison's rupture of this interpretive field breathes womanist life into an old text in literary tradition that not only marginalizes white Eves as subordinate to their Adamic helpmeets but does so to the exclusion of rendering black women visible or worthy of consideration at all. Thus, Morrison's womanist rupture of Milton's limiting portrayal of Eve pays specific attention to gender as a telling "political and social attitude" (Kelley et al. 2003, p. 2). This attitude simultaneously re-informs the interpretation of a major literary work in epic tradition along with its attendant orthodox meanings. These ruptured grounds also impact interpretations of *Paradise Lost* relative to its "period of production" and "any future looked at from that future's contemporaneity". By spiritually converting Milton through a womanist spirit of revisionist interrogation, Morrison imbues her introductory essay with thematic resonances that ultimately constitute the poetic soul of a foreword that bears undeniable witness to the Christian poet's unexplored influential presence.

The foreword spans five-and-a-half pages in length. It begins and ends with Morrison's reflections on her grandfather's influence on her life. His largeness of character, she explains, inspires aspects of characterization, emplotment, and theme in *Paradise*. After speculating on how he successfully managed to acquire literacy while growing up in the south during the second half of the 19th century, Morrison wonders how he could have learned to read since he quit school after attending on the first day. More specifically, she asks, what school in "rural Alabama", might have existed for black children

prior to the *Emancipation Proclamation* at this time?⁵ Recognizing a need for earning a living as more practical than attending school, Morrison's grandfather opted for the former. Morrison is equally curious about the methods her grandfather undertook to become literate enough to read the "King James Version of the Bible cover to cover five times" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Unable to account for this phenomenon, Morrison proceeds to discussing at length her grandfather's love for reading and its influence on subsequent generations of her family.

By the time of her childhood, reading, for Morrison, signaled "a defiant political act since historically so much effort had been used" to withhold literacy from blacks (Morrison 2014a, p. xii). The activity also nurtured her enduring love for reading black newspapers. Morrison found newspapers especially appealing because the genre contained a "complex record of African American life" (Morrison 2014a, p. xii). Reading these source documents ultimately played a critical role in motivating her to conceive writing the novel that became *Paradise*. While researching and curating materials for *The Black Book*, for example, Morrison became intrigued by 19th-century African American pioneers who charted entrepreneurial paths of westward expansion across the US.⁶ Intent on founding exclusive all-black communities that would be free of the racism experienced in the Reconstruction South, these entrepreneurial wayfarers sought geographical refuge out west.

In an Africanist variation on the Eden trope conceived and popularized by Anglo-Americans from the earliest formation of the US, black pioneers of the west sought to make a racial Paradise on earth. Such an Africanist Paradise provided a racial haven for blacks whose existence within the US routinely offered them a hellish condition by contrast. J. Lee Greene notes the Eden trope materializes as "prevalent in the configuration of so many African American novels before and after the 1950s" (Greene 1996, p. 6). *Paradise* evidences its literary affinity with this sub-genre of African American writing, taking cultural inspiration from various advertisements Morrison reviewed when curating material for *The Black Book*.

In reading these newspapers, Morrison was struck by advertisements encouraging blacks to embrace adventures of heading west to establish exclusive racial communities. A number of these clippings promised newcomers a paradisaal existence while also warning potential pioneers to "Come Prepared or Not All" (Morrison 2014a, p. xii). For Morrison, this injunction against a marginalized population of an already racially minoritized group implied biases of racial-class exclusivity. Her recognition of this dynamic in African American culture subsequently prompted her to wonder about the workings of caste restrictions within all-black communities modeled on utopian ideals and visions. Several themes and topics emerged for Morrison the more she pondered these ideas. As a result, she set her creative sights on adhering to four poetic tasks. These tasks evolved to highlight several of the antagonistic forces she desired to explore in the utopian novel she began composing.

According to Morrison, she specifically wanted to address questions concerning race, gender, and colorism and the impact these antagonisms might pose for societal members of an all-black community whose founders envisioned a settlement evocative of a racial paradise. This project, she believed, also required an interrogation of Paradise. The interrogation would take on a revisionist scope but not before "exploring" crises of fallenness in black utopian societies from a "reverse" angle or standpoint (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). In other words, Morrison became invested in a literary enterprise focused on entertaining whether or not racial Paradise could exist unsullied by sins of otherness as perpetuated by "black-skinned" citizens rather than white perpetrators of racist and hegemonic violence (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Holly Flint's assessment of *Paradise* addresses this tenet of the novel. Commenting on dynamics within the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, Flint argues the patriarchal community "consigns itself to the same problems . . . that have historically undermined (white) America's promise of a cultural paradise where all people would be equal and have equal

⁵ (Morrison 2014a, p. xi). All subsequent quotations from the essay will be cited parenthetically in endnotes.

⁶ Morrison edited *The Black Book*, a work comprising newspaper clippings, advertisements, photos, song sheets, and pictures.

voice" (Flint 2006, p. 605). As a result, this black Edenic community exhibits fallenness when its members uncritically succumb to the wiles of several antagonistic threats, namely, colorism, class divisions, and misogyny.

In addition to exploring societal fallenness in the fictional black Edenic community of Ruby, Morrison particularly sets poetic sights on committing to a linguistic project that required deconstructing the workings of patriarchy and matriarchy. Another linguistic project involves experimenting with "disrupt[ing] racial discourse" as a means for emancipating characters from the cant of racist signifiers (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Each of these projects attests to a poetics of liberation, therefore placing Morrison on Miltonic grounds of contention whereby she commits herself "to rescuing [her] people from bondage" in addition to "revising their liberty and restoring their freedom" (Wittreich 2006, p. 139). Morrison satisfies these poetic impulses by turning to Milton and spiritually converting his epic into an allusive tropological vernacular, critically aware that a literary project of this scope ultimately required her to "examine the [very] definition of paradise" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). It is at this juncture of her brief essay, that Morrison poetically breathes Miltonic life into her foreword. In doing so, she reveals the literary extent to which Milton figures as the intertextual soul of the foreword and an (in)visible influential presence not to be discounted or overlooked.

Milton's hermeneutic spirit surfaces in the foreword near the middle of the essay when Morrison considers the Christian poet's canonical epic as a signature tropological vernacular for Paradise in the western imagination. Cognizant that "the idea of paradise is no longer imaginable, or, rather . . . over-imagined" contemporarily, Morrison further considers the figure as having "become familiar, commercialized, even trivial" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). She underscores her reasoning on this point by subsequently appropriating select passages from Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*. Her direct appropriation of Book 4 quotes various lines in a creative style of elliptical enjambment. She, in effect, rewrites numerous descriptive clauses and phrases that span lines 148–247 of Book 4.

Specifically, she reminds readers how "Milton speaks of 'goodliest trees, loaden with fairest fruit, Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue . . . with gay enameled colours mixed . . . ; of Native perfumes'. Of 'that sapphire fount the crisped brooks, Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold . . . ' of 'nectar visiting each plant, and fed flowers worthy of Paradise . . . Groves whose rich trees wept-odorous gums and balm; Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind, Hung amiable, . . . of delicious taste. Betwixt them lawns, or level downs, and flocks Grazing the tender herb'. 'Flowers of all hue and without thorn the rose'. 'Caves of cool recess, o'er which the mantling vine Lays forth her purple grape and gently creeps Luxuriant . . .'" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). According to Morrison, these appropriated lines promote an impressionable image of Eden as a "grand" yet "accessible" landscape, one "seductive as though remembered" yet irretrievably ancient as well (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Here, Morrison argues that the very concept of Milton's depicted Paradise is lost to contemporary culture. However, she duplicates this loss by intertextually curating a series of enjambed phrases and clauses from Book 4. Morrison's verbal performance, in essence, re-members Milton's Edenic passage anew. Moreover, it ultimately rewrites her precursor's Edenic scene via a poetic subtility of revisionist interrogation that soon introduces Milton as the soulful spirit of Morrison's Miltonic foreword.

This spirit rests, rules, and hovers about the remainder of the foreword and throughout *Paradise* as well. Milton's soulful spirit manifests primarily through Morrison's revisionist interrogation of Miltonic Paradise as a tropological vernacular for debauched or fallen utopian states at the close of the 20th century and into present times. This vernacular, as we shall see throughout the foreword and the novel, recognizes the concept of Paradise as available only in debauched terms. Hence, Morrison takes poetic liberties with Milton's Eden through a tropological procedure that ironically checks or undermines its positive symbolic connotations. In doing so, Morrison strategically links this revisionist symbolic figure with connotations of satanic fallenness.

By undermining Paradise and its once positive symbolic connotation, Morrison performs a transvaluation of the Edenic signified through a style of creative language that Danielle A. St. Hilaire elsewhere identifies as "satan's poetry". This poetic speech act, modeled after Milton's Satan, constitutes

a performance of creative writing that proves “a distinctly fallen activity” (St. Hilaire 2012, p. 3). As St. Hilaire explains, this verbal art form figures as satanic “not because it is somehow evil, but because the language in which poetry speaks is a product of the Fall” (St. Hilaire 2012, p. 3). The remaining passages from Morrison’s Miltonic foreword theorizes the canonical weight of his influence on the western literary and cultural imaginations in language that speaks in echoic tongues of Satan’s poetry. Allusively channeling the infernal hero from *Paradise Lost*, Morrison adopts fallen poetic language as a mode for theorizing her understandings of contemporary culture as analogous to Satan deigning to “make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n” (*PL* 1.255). Satan’s perversion of goodness for evil purposes occurs through a language of poetic re-creation. Morrison’s foreword and novel privileges this manner of poetic speech as well, thereby enlarging a ground of Miltonic contention in Milton studies that secures a womanist space for African American women writers of various literary persuasions to occupy as theologians of a liberating gospel.

Morrison begins preaching a literary gospel of Milton criticism in the foreword when the essay segues to an examining of Paradise and its conceptual perversion in contemporary culture. In a sarcastic tone laced with ironic wit, Morrison asserts “Milton’s Paradise is quite available these days, if not in fact certainly as ordinary, unexceptional desire” (Morrison 2014a, pp. xiii–xiv). This debauched sense of Paradise exists in the form of “bounded real estate owned by the wealthy and envied by the have-nots” (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Morrison also notes this debauched sense of Paradise specifically flourishes in perverted characteristics like “beauty, plenty, rest, [and] exclusivity” (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). Each of these Edenic characteristics highlights individual and social practices involving the controlling or raping of nature and its resources, luxuriating in greed and excess to the envy of the have-nots, outcasting the less privileged, and/or perverting ideals of rest to the point of redefining the concept as synonymous with laziness.

Perversions of Paradise also flourish in other aspects of contemporary life according to Morrison. For instance, she notes a perversion of exclusivity operates to keep the marginalized and disenfranchised from ever being able to afford living within the paradisaic geographies of the wealthy. This “popular yearning of the middle class” announces the onset of a new perversion where the vainglorious pursuit of attaining Paradise reflects a debauchery tinged with capitalistic greed (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). Similarly, a concept like “eternity” undergoes perverse transformation as individuals turn to pursuing its “earthbound” attainment as opposed to remaining content in achieving this spiritual Paradise in afterlife (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). In each of these instances, Paradise connotes what Morrison recognizes “as an earthly project as opposed to a heavenly one” (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). These Edenic perversions, she argues, have “serious intellectual and visual limitations” to the point of underscoring just how fallen contemporary society has become relative to the debauched conception of Paradise typical of the contemporary moment (Morrison 2014a, pp. xiv–xv). Overall, Morrison’s theoretical outlook on Paradise within the poetic imagination of conceptual ideation materializes what she recognizes as a collective renouncing of any earthly need for attaining a heavenly Paradise at all. This spiritual understanding of society’s ideological fallenness motivates her to perform further revisionist interrogations of Milton’s epic that are grounded in her satanic readings of Hell and the exciting drama it has generated for centuries.

Swerving from a geographical preoccupation with Paradise, Morrison shifts to focusing on literary depictions of Hell and the appeal this demonic landscape holds for audiences throughout history. “Dante’s Inferno beats out Paradiso every time”, she asserts, while also noting, “Milton’s brilliantly rendered pre-paradise world, known as Chaos, is far more fully realized than his Paradise” (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). For Morrison, a reason for this contrast owes to the signifying properties of language. Hell’s “visionary language of the doomed reaches heights of linguistic ardor with which language of the blessed and saved cannot compete”, she explains (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). Moreover, “the hell of everyday life” tends to provide far more excitement or drama than the quietude and “outwitting [of] evil” that paradise offers its inhabitants (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). Morrison’s recognition

of the linguistic ardor associated with Hell's language and satanic poetry more specifically accords with theories postulated by several prominent critics in Milton studies.

For instance, Stanley Fish, discussing the austere sublime of God's language in *Paradise Lost*, recognizes the Creator/Father's speech acts as expressive of natural purity. That is, his method of presentation is "determinedly non-affective" with the "form of his discourse . . . determined by the nature of the thing he contemplates" (Fish 1997, p. 62). Fish further notes, "the names God imposes reflect the accuracy of his perception rather than his attitude toward the objects named" (Fish 1997, p. 64). Additionally, Fish understands Milton's God as "the perfect name-giver whose word *is* the thing in all its aspects" and the "self-generating exposition of what is" (Fish 1997, p. 65). The Father's language starkly contrasts that of Milton's infernal hero. As Neil Forsyth explains, it is Milton's infernal hero who provides the "satanic epic" with much of its animating rhetorical energy of rebellion in addition to playing a primary role in arousing the "strength and eloquence of the passions" that make reading *Paradise Lost* such an exhilarating experience (Forsyth 2003, p. 5). St. Hilaire extends this line of criticism when she acknowledges "Satan's unique status among epic characters" as pertaining to his "possessing a strange agency", one founded "on a denial of the most powerful Creator in the poem" (St. Hilaire 2012, p. 23). Because the infernal hero's poetry of "satanic creation" emerges from his rebellious decision to "re-create himself in a different image" other than God intended him to be, his speech acts affirm Morrison's astute understanding of Hell's linguistic ardor throughout western culture (Forsyth 2003, p. 18). This same duality of spirit inspires Morrison's hellish tropological engagements and revisionist interrogations of Milton's epic.

Like the school of British Romantics or "English Jacobins" who Mary Nyquist identifies as devoted to a spirit of "first-generation Satanism", Morrison, too, knowingly writes herself into the devil's party (Nyquist 2014, pp. 220, 222). For Nyquist, Satanism reflects a "capacious magnetic field" of the poetic sublime (Nyquist 2014, p. 221). Within the contexts of a Miltonic sublime, Satanism balances supernal and infernal properties by aesthetically twinning elements of good and evil. This aesthetic "attracts both affective energies and progressive political platforms" while displaying a given literary artist's "heightened sensibility and enlightened 'genius'" (Nyquist 2014, p. 221). Morrison's recognition of Hell's gravitational pull on audiences' cognitive reading practices will inform a salient aesthetic operating throughout her canon whenever she elects to trope with Milton from rhetorical distances that distort him beyond clear recognition. Simultaneously holding figures of Heaven and Hell in rhetorical balance, she fuses both, therefore "confound[ing] the human mind by intimating divine grandeur as well as the revolutionary prospect of revolutionary change" (Nyquist 2014, p. 221). Channeling Miltonic Satanism in this mode echoes the plundering of Paradise that reverberates throughout Milton's epic, surfaces periodically in select passages from Morrison's foreword, and in her novel as well.

A subsequent paragraph in the foreword checks and undermines the concept of Paradise once again by introducing a womanist critique of Milton's Eve. "Notable in Milton's Paradise is the absence of women", Morrison states. This evaluative assessment takes Milton to special task for portraying Eve in a limited fashion. Eve, from Morrison's perspective, is afforded "the most prominent space" in Paradise. Yet, her subordinated position in the epic proves far from ideal. She seemingly has nothing more to do in Paradise than to tend to its bounteous garden. "Progeny apparently is not required", Morrison sarcastically muses (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). Querying Eve's status in the epic further, she asks, "besides caretaking what is there for women to do?" (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). These concerns critique Milton's portrayal of Eve as little more than a helpmeet of negated presence within the epic. *Paradise* radically revises this limited reading of Eve, rewriting the first mother as a tropological basis for the several revisionist interrogations Morrison performs when spiritually converting Milton's Eve in the image of her several womanist divas and evangelists.

Paradise will spiritually interrogate Milton's Eve by centering women characters as collective protagonists in the novel. Interestingly, Morrison's narrator in the opening chapter identifies the five Convent women as "Bodacious Black Eves" (Morrison 2014b, p. 18). Identified as bodacious in the sense that they conduct themselves in ways that patriarchal culture deems antithetical to conventions

of true womanhood, the men from the nearby town of Ruby, Oklahoma certainly regard the Convent women as unorthodox. As Mix explains, “the men come to the Convent because they wish to reassert a particular order—one that positions these women as wicked bodies that must be destroyed” (Mix 2015, p. 166). Because these Adamic patriarchs consider their bodacious Eve-like neighbors responsible for the moral decline occurring within Ruby, they invade the Convent with the express purpose of eradicating them from the vicinity. Their misogynist and fallen illogic lead them to “shoot the white girl first” as the opening sentence of the novel indicates (Morrison 2014b, p. 3). Not until late in the crisis stage of plot does the narrator reveal the men’s motivations for invading the Convent.

They shoot to maim and/or kill because they regard the women as heretically unfeminine, satanic, and a threat to their paradisaal community. Like patriarchal demons, then, the men from Ruby invade the Convent, fearing these bodacious Eves constitute a threat to their community’s survival. Morrison resurrects these Eve-like characters from death in the climax and the *denouement* of the novel. This spiritual translation of their collective characters elevates them to an office of womanist divines who selflessly “shoulder the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” on earth (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). It is through this perfecting work of characterization that Morrison likewise performs an amplified revisionist interrogation of Milton’s Eve. Translating the Convent women from their hellish sufferings to states of Paradise and celestial ministries on Earth, Morrison re-creates these bodacious Eves in the transfigured likeness of womanist divas. Morrison’s womanist critique of Milton’s Eve in the foreword alludes to the amplified revisionist interrogations of that character as evidenced by the novel’s transfigured Convent women.

Another section in the Miltonic foreword worthy of attention concerns Morrison’s poetic interest in plundering paradise on grounds of contention inflected by linguistic codes of racelessness. After critiquing Milton’s limiting portrayal of Eve, Morrison discusses her aesthetic interest in playing manipulatively with the language of race in a rather unique way. She admits to experimenting with a form of writing invested in “disrupt[ing] the assumptions of racial discourse” through “race-specific/race-free prose” (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). This linguistic experiment aims to emancipate the English language from its racist cant and the racially biased interpretations of characters made by ill-informed readers.

Aware that racializing discourse contributes to practices of dehumanization in reading and interpretation, Morrison experiments with race-specific/race-free prose so literary audiences become empowered to read her characters more critically, with greater empathy, and as “fully realized individuals—whatever their race” (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi). Troping with race through this poetic mode aids Morrison in neutralizing colonialist language. The device also emancipates audiences from the “wearying vocabulary of racial domination”, which, as she argues, both “limits” and “imposes” upon diverse readers’ imaginations to the detriment of honoring an equality of verisimilitude relative to the black characters she creates (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi). Whereas Milton rebelliously adopts blank verse in *Paradise Lost* as a means for recovering “ancient liberty . . . to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming”, Morrison takes strident poetic liberties of her own in her novel. Specifically, she ruptures racial language as an emancipating discourse of freedom.⁷ She, too, aspires to restore freedom by investing in a poetic project where “narrative seeks to unencumber itself from the limit that racial language imposes upon the imagination” (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi).

The Miltonic foreword nears its close with Morrison addressing the novel’s more prominent themes and antagonistic conflicts. Morrison notes these conflicts are “gender-related and generational”, sometimes extending to competitive “struggles over history” or ownership rights concerning the telling or controlling of a paradisaal community’s historical narrative and future (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi). Additional conflicts include the ethical choices and social mores of her multiple characters or experiences borne by those whose various identity politics challenge the ideologically fallen to re-imagine Paradise

⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, “The Verse”, 2.

as an Edenic site of inclusiveness. Morrison explores these and other dynamics in *Paradise* because she finds spiritually interrogating them as “most compelling when augmented by yearnings for freedom and safety” within contemporary culture” (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). Most important, she recognizes these explorations as critical for reimagining Paradise as it could be if not for the numerous perversions contributing to its debauched conception presently.

Reimagining Edenic culture through a mode of revisionist interrogation is Morrison’s poetic method for conveying the sense that all is not lost in the fallen Paradise of our contemporaneity. Catherine Gray and Erin Murphy’s thoughts on a new brand of Milton criticism in the 21st century helps to clarify why Morrison’s reimagining of Paradise proves significant. According to them, a new mode of Milton criticism participates in “connecting [his] particular historical moment to a ‘now’ that unfolds in the mind’s eye infused with futurity, potential, and hope” (Gray and Murphy 2014, p. 3). As Morrison further explains in the foreword, she devotes herself to reimagining and expanding Paradise toward emancipating its constrained and antiquated conceptions, which routinely are empty of usefulness or concrete meaning. She also seeks to free up imaginative space so attaining or regaining Paradise might occur in the here and now rather than the forestalled hope of inhabiting it in the afterlife. Regaining Paradise in this regard, according to Morrison, proceeds “by the search for one’s own space, for respect, love, [and] bliss . . . [and as] an interrogation into the narrow imagination that conceived and betrayed” its conception in the first place (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). It is on these grounds of contention, interpretation, and reception that Morrison closes her Miltonic foreword with a sympathetic nod to “Big Papa”, the grandfather who “didn’t exert power” but, rather, “assumed it” (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). Big Papa helped Morrison to “understand and create the men in Ruby”, the fallen Adamic patriarchs whose “easy assumption of uncontested authority” ultimately impacts the novelist’s revisionist interrogations of Milton’s Eve (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). Overall, Morrison’s foreword gives readers something Miltonic to look forward to before turning the page and encountering the allusive spirit of Milton influential presence as early as the novel’s first chapter.

Paradise and the Literary Reclaiming of Morrison’s Miltonic Convent Women

The religious (in)visible spirit characterized by Milton’s influential presence throughout *Paradise* surfaces by way of Morrison’s poetic treatment of the novel’s geographical setting. The opening chapter, “Ruby” is named after the deceased daughter of one of the exclusive all-black town’s founding fathers. Additionally, the character of the Ruby community symbolizes a replica of an Africanist Eden. Mark A. Tabone, for instance, argues “the all-black town of Ruby is readily recognizable as the absolutely sealed-off enclave of the classical ‘modern’ utopia” (Tabone 2016, p. 132). A competing symbolic Paradise exists not far from the town of Ruby, however. Bringing to mind the dualism Lebow examines in her reading of *Tar Baby*, Tabone notes, “the small all-women community known as the Convent resembles the ‘postmodern’ utopias of the 60s and 70s” (Tabone 2016, p. 132). Patriarchal receptions of the Convent women, though, perceive the edifice and its inhabitants as satanically fallen. Notwithstanding this fallen reading of the Convent and its female inhabitants, Morrison promotes an even stronger association with Paradise and Milton’s epic at the end of the chapter when her omniscient narrator describes the allegedly fallen protagonists as bodacious black Eves. Associating the women with Eve assumes even greater symbolic meaning based on the allusive and poetic significance of their collective names. Each woman’s name in some way designates her as fit to assume the ministry of uplifting the spiritually desolate. Collectively, then, Morrison’s bodacious black Eves are poised to facilitate healing by the *denouement* of the novel. It is just prior to this moment in the plot structure that the narrator reveals the Convent women’s spiritual translation. Their translation elevates them to an angelic office, a literary reclaiming of their bodies that resurrects them to a Miltonic status of messianic divas.

At the start of the novel, which really begins like an epic, *in media res*, only Consolata, or Connie is fit to serve as a womanist messiah and spiritual divine. Throughout the novel, her character serves as a kind of spiritual mother to the four troubled women who arrive at the Convent at different moments

throughout the crisis stages of plot. For most of the novel, Connie appears to exist as little more than an elderly caretaker for the women arriving at the Convent. By the crisis stage of plot, however, *Paradise* associates her character with Eve, describing her adulterous affair with Deek Morgan through imagistic language that Deborah M. Mix recognizes as imbued with “Edenic resonances” (Mix 2015, p. 177). This Edenic language ultimately casts Connie in a “prelapsarian role [suggestive] of Eve”, Mix explains (Mix 2015, p. 177). Symbolically, and as her formal name connotatively suggests, Connie possesses a spiritual gift of compassionately consoling the grieved and bereaved. Readers realize the spiritual dimensions of Connie’s ministerial gifts near the close of the chapter named after her.

From the moment the narrator introduces Connie, readers gain a sense of her spiritual nature. Exhibiting clairvoyant certitude almost immediately after meeting Mavis, Connie chides the first of her womanist mentees for lying to her. Mavis lies to Connie, claiming she is not “a drinking woman” when asked (Morrison 2014b, p. 38). Connie’s clairvoyant reprimand solidifies an interpretation of her as spiritually gifted and induces Mavis to confess the truth concerning her drinking habits. Not long after this exchange, Connie excuses herself from the kitchen so she can attend to the care-taking needs of Mary Magna, the ailing elderly Mother Superior who lives upstairs. Soane Morgan, a neighbor from Ruby, soon visits the Convent while Connie attends to Mary Magna’s needs. As Soane and Mavis introduce themselves and become better acquainted with each other, Connie returns to the kitchen without either woman hearing her approach. The narrator, describing Connie’s silent return, notes her “entrance was like an apparition” (Morrison 2014b, p. 43). This description of Connie’s apparitional re-appearance builds off of the narrator’s earlier characterization of the seer’s clairvoyant spiritual talents. Connie’s divine nature becomes more pronounced in the “Divine” chapter where she is seen working her spiritual “magic” on another of her Convent mentees (Morrison 2014b, p. 173). While welcoming Pallas into her lap, for instance, Connie successfully encourages the wounded young woman to cry, tell her story, and begin releasing her pains. Previously, Pallas had been reluctant to express her emotional pains.

Connie especially works her spiritual magic in the “Consolata” chapter during a ritual of womanist healing. She presides over her spiritual mentees who are “like maidens entering a temple or a crypt” (Morrison 2014b, p. 222). Together, they descend to the basement to be purged of the various traumas associated with their respective failed relationships. Traumatized particularly by “men who once had desperately loved” them, or as the narrator adds, “should have ... might have ... or would have” the Convent women benefit from their spiritual mother’s womanist magic (Morrison 2014b, pp. 222–23). At the end of the chapter in still another moment underscoring Connie’s ministerial prowess, she exclaims to her mentees, “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here [,] you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (Morrison 2014b, p. 262). Shortly thereafter, she preaches an autobiographical sermonette, instructing the women to honor equally the bones of their bodies and the flesh that is spirit. “Where is it lost?” she asks before exclaiming, “Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve” (Morrison 2014b, p. 262). These rhetorical tautologies concerning bone/body, spirit/flesh, and Eve/Mary express a womanist theology designed to empower Connie’s spiritual mentees to become imparadised within themselves notwithstanding their dichotomous natures.

The Convent women come to a greater knowledge of themselves and experience spiritual purgation following Connie’s sermonette. By the end of the chapter, in fact, the final lines of the chapter reveal the Convent women “were no longer haunted” (Morrison 2014b, p. 266). This revelation suggests the women have been emancipated from their respective traumas via Connie’s unconventional rituals of womanist healing. Ironically, their emancipation culminates in setting the stage for their physical demise which the novel’s opening chapter already has suggested and the spiritual translation which will be revealed in the final stages of plot. By this point in the novel, Morrison, in addition to highlighting Connie’s spiritual gifts of consolatory uplift, has fully characterized the womanist Reverend or “secular Mother Superior” as a reimagined Miltonic Eve (Mix 2015, p. 170). Connie’s

Eve-like nature is not limited to an intertextual association with the Biblical account rendered in *Genesis*. Morrison allusively hallows Connie's character with Miltonic resonances when associating her character with Christ's College, the institution where Milton earned baccalaureate and master's degrees. Two paragraphs later, Morrison associates Connie with Milton more specifically by characterizing the setting and episodic incidents with *Areopagitica* and *Eikonoklastes*, two of the 17th-century epic writer's most iconic political tracts.⁸

Mavis' poetic name extends Morrison's revisionist interrogation of Milton's Eve. In English, the name Mavis identifies a "songbird" of the thrush variety. A songbird's musical abilities can uplift the spirits of the downtrodden. In this symbolic sense, Mavis' name characterizes her as one gifted in providing inspiring consolation to others through a ministry of song. Grace, another of the troubled and dispirited Convent women, arrives at Connie's residence seeking spiritual relief. She is known affectionately as Gigi throughout the novel. Her name, too, resonates closely with a divinely endowed spiritual ministry. In particular, her birth given name denotes the handiwork of God's favor. Thus, her name also symbolically personifies her as representative of virtue, mercy, and the dispensing of liberal compassion. In French, the name identifies her as an "earth worker". These combined meanings characterize Grace as a gracious spirit, symbolically outfitting her for a ministry geared to the selfless supporting of the disconsolate and spiritually wounded.

Seneca is another of Morrison's Eve-like characters. Her name instantly highlights Morrison's classical heritage. Morrison playfully bends this heritage to reveal her ongoing revisionist interrogations of Milton and his signature epic. The namesake of the famous tragedian and philosopher, Seneca, initially spurs a recollection of the influential contributions to stoic philosophy made by her Roman precursor in antiquity. The stoic philosopher's contributions to the branch of virtue and personal ethics holds symbolic implications for the character bearing his name in Morrison's novel. On one level, Morrison's practice of poetic naming spurs an interpretation of this womanist character as potentially poised to perform a ministry of consolatory uplift. Seneca's name also underscores the esteemed worth of her consolatory ministry since her namesake in Roman antiquity ranks among the most celebrated of tragedian writers. Viewed from this aspect of the womanist character's classical name, Morrison's revisionist play with classical culture qualifies the character of Seneca's consolatory ministry. In particular, her name suggests her spiritual ministry especially attends to uplifting those whose existence seems bound in the crucible of tragic life experiences.

It also is worth noting that Morrison's poetic naming of Seneca's character is not limited to the tragedian and stoic philosopher. The character's name also highlights Milton's (in)visibility as an allusive influential presence throughout the novel. Seneca's Miltonic name characterizes her with a tenor of allusive wit grounded in Morrison's innovative style of satanic poetry. First, Seneca arrives in town having stowed herself away in "the bed of a brand-new '73 pickup" (Morrison 2014b, p. 126). Upon reaching Ruby's town limits, she jumps out of the vehicle and immediately begins walking alongside Sweetie, a character, who at this point in the novel, suffers a state of temporary madness and despair. Sweetie heads to the Convent, desperately seeking Connie's spiritual healing and guidance. Seneca, in pain herself, follows Sweetie without knowing she will be healed from her spiritual infirmities also. Meanwhile, readers have yet to discover the allusive extent to which Morrison's Seneca is worthy to be compared to the character *Sin* from *Paradise Lost*.

The playful Miltonic contours associated with Seneca's name begins to materialize the more the narrator chronicles the character's faithful devotion to Sweetie as both women make their way to the Convent. Almost instantly, Seneca tends to Sweetie by draping the troubled woman in her serape. Seneca soon introduces herself to Sweetie only to be ignored by her. At one point as they head to the Convent, Sweetie turns to acknowledge her "uninvited companion", noting to herself, "Sin . . . ,

⁸ In a subsequent essay on *Paradise*, I continue examining Morrison's playful allusions to Milton where her sophisticated wordplay with Christ College, Connie's burning of books, and her destruction of profane Christian iconography ground the novel's poetic aesthetic in aspects of the 17th-century writer's educational background and select political writings.

I am walking next to sin and wrapped in its cloak" (Morrison 2014b, p. 129). By the time she and Seneca see the Convent in view, Sweetie considers herself "grateful to be so clearly protected from and unassociated with the sin shape walking next to her" (Morrison 2014b, p. 129). After they arrive on the Convent grounds, Sweetie, according to the narrator, "slogged up the driveway", leaving "the demon" beside her to do the rest" (Morrison 2014b, p. 129). Subsequent paragraphs repeatedly refer to Seneca either as a demon or an "it". Both references portray Seneca as more monstrous than human. The "Divine" chapter characterizes Seneca as demonic also. Throughout this chapter, for instance, the Convent women abbreviate Seneca's name by calling her "Sen" instead. This term of endearment solidifies Morrison's style of Miltonic characterization by playing allusively and homonymously with Milton's *Sin* from Book 2 of his epic.

Sin, makes her infamous appearance in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* when Satan encounters her as he makes his fugitive escape from Hell. Satan does not recognize *Sin* at first, for he has been estranged from his daughter-consort and their son, *Death*, for some time. Morrison allusively revises the character of Milton's *Sin* by tropologically making a homonym of Seneca's clipped name, which subsequently associates her with the "portress from Hell" in *Paradise Lost* (Milton 2004). That Seneca proves quite flirtatious and sexually promiscuous heightens this comparative reading of both characters. For Mix, Seneca represents one of two Convent women whose bodies constitute "sources of betrayal and humiliation" (Mix 2015, p. 171). As a result, they arrive at the Convent traumatically impacted by years of sexual abuse.

Pallas is the second of these two Eve-like outlaws. As her name allusively suggests, she is associated primarily with Homeric epic, namely, the Greek goddess, Pallas Athena from *The Odyssey*. Homer is not the only precursor in epic writing Morrison appeals to in this poetic naming of one of the Convent women. Milton likewise serves as a source origin for this allusive play with precursors in literary tradition. Interestingly, Pallas' father is named *Milton* Truelove. Her mother's name is "Divine", a poetic signifier that confers goddess status upon the maternal character. Each of these familial names relate to epic tradition in some way. That Morrison includes Milton's name within this symbolic family only enhances the Christian poet's profile as an (in)visible influential presence operating throughout *Paradise* and Morrison's characterization of her Eve-like Convent women.

The above explications evidence Morrison's skill in playfully naming the Convent women in such a way as to provoke different types of allusive interrogations with Milton's epic and Eve in particular. On the one hand, Morrison invites a reading of these womanist divas-in-training as muse-like goddesses. As muse-like divas-in-training, Morrison's Convent women possess names symbolically associating them with ministries of consolatory uplift. Because they also symbolize 'bodacious' black Eves, each is poised for divine greatness. They achieve divine status in the *denouement* where Morrison resurrects these characters from death by spiritually translating them into divas and womanist messiahs.⁹ Leading up to the *denouement*, which occurs near the end of the "Save Marie" chapter, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, and Pallas return to their respective sites of traumatization where their individual stories began. They return to these sites either to reclaim an item dear to them or to reconnect temporarily with an estranged loved one.

The final paragraphs of the novel accord with these women's subsequent spiritual translation by presenting Connie in the lap of Piedade, an Afro-Brazilian divine who sings a consolatory song of uplift to the Reverend mother who has been changed supernaturally as well. Piedade's appearance at the end of *Paradise* is significant in the sense that she "represents a resolution of the Eve/Mary, body/spirit tension that animates the action of the novel" and is implicated more profoundly during Connie's earlier sermonic ritual in the "Consolata" chapter (Mix 2015, p. 185). The narrator, commenting on Piedade and Connie's closing moments together, explains that the former's lyrics "evoke memories

⁹ Morrison continues to forge an association with Milton's Eve in her 2006 novel, *A Mercy*. Specifically, Morrison's narrator comments on Eve, who, "confused about her role" as Adam's subordinated helpmeet, constitutes "the first outlaw". See (Morrison 2018, p. 115).

neither one has ever had”, namely that of enjoying “the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun” (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). This reflection resonates as an echo of Morrison’s concluding statements in her Miltonic foreword where she acknowledges her novel’s entertaining myriad questions associated with reimagining paradise as grounded in “the search for one’s own space, for respect, love, [and] bliss” (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). In other words, the conclusion of *Paradise* gestures toward a redefining of the concept by spiritually translating Connie and her womanist sisterhood into messianic angels who may be found ministering to humanity by watching over us all day and all night.¹⁰ It is the sacredness of Piedade and Connie’s shared moment of spiritual intimacy at the close of the novel that retrieves, restores, and regains Paradise from ideological loss as a favorably available concept in contemporary times. Morrison’s closing image in the novel especially secures this project of radical reimagining.

The closing paragraph of the novel brings Morrison’s reimagining of Paradise into clearer focus. An approaching ship staffed by crew and filled with passengers who the narrator classifies as the “lost and saved” sail into Piedade and Connie’s view (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). These sailing wayfarers approach the coast “atremble”, for as the narrator explains, they “have been disconsolate for some time” (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). The arrival of the disconsolate passengers proves significant to Morrison’s project of reimagining Paradise because the concluding sentence of the novel indicates the role Piedade and Connie will play in the spiritual lives of the lost and saved. At this closing moment of the novel, Piedade and Connie enjoy their final moments of peaceful solitude “before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). With this closing line, Morrison’s narrator implies Connie has been translated spiritually to that of a messianic divine and womanist emancipator for those who have lost Paradise within themselves. She, along with the other Convent women who have been resurrected from death several paragraphs earlier, experience spiritual translation from their former selves as black and bodacious Eves that the narrator first mentioned at the close of the novel’s opening chapter. Indeed, they have been changed and spiritually translated to epic womanist divas by the *denouement*. Collectively, then, their new spiritual ministry on earth now defies the demonic grounds of fallen geographic space and conventional timeframes simultaneously.

This ending also makes clear Morrison’s messianic divas are not to be reduced to a static angelic image that merely consigns them to passive ministerial acts. Rather, as Mix argues, these more than “gentle angels”, these “warriors”, womanist divas, and messiahs “offer healing but [are] also prepared to refuse comfort, to seek retribution, and, when necessary, to fight” (Mix 2015, p. 184). Morrison’s angelic and messianic divas, therefore, evidence the strains of religious duality, both the secular and carnal and divine spirituality that many a Romantic reader has admired in Milton’s Satan. African American readers and writers have long sympathized with this uppity and rebellious reading of Milton’s infernal hero as well. In particular, writers of the tradition “gravitate to . . . [Milton’s] satanic energy” because they “identify with [the infernal hero] for messianic purposes that proclaim and advocate causes of black freedom” (Wilburn 2014, p. 14). Through this spiritual transvaluation of their characters, Morrison, “renders the Convent women as empowered agents in a world that has been *totally* transformed to accommodate their impossible presence” (Tabone 2016, p. 140). This technique enhances Morrison’s overall project of reimagining Paradise in the ‘now’ of readers’ contemporaneity as opposed to forestalling the promise of regaining it in afterlife.

Paradise foreshadows this rupture of geographical space and conventional time earlier in the “Save-Marie” chapter when the married couple, Richard and Anna Flood, return to the Convent grounds to verify whether the rumored “mass disappearance” of its occupants is true or not

¹⁰ It, perhaps, is not coincidental that Morrison publishes *Paradise* one year after the release of Richard Smallwood’s *Adoration*, the 1996 recording that in addition to containing the widely popular song, “Total Praise”, also includes the equally favorite, “Angels”, a contemporary gloss on the old-time gospel tune that relays, “all day, all night, the angels watchin’ over me my Lord”. I contend Morrison’s muse-like/Eve-like divas epitomize the reimagining of Paradise through their womanist roles as ministering angels and messianic emancipators at the close of the novel and beyond.

(Morrison 2014b, p. 303). Having surveyed the Convent grounds, the Floods return to their vehicle in a passage that allusively reverses Adam and Eve's departing exile from Eden. This spiritual interrogation of Book 12 from Milton's epic, presents the Floods, who, with a backward-facing glance, evoke a recall of Adam and Eve as they, too, "looking back, all th' eastern side beheld / Of Paradise, so late their happy seat/Waved over by that flaming brand".¹¹ When the Floods look back, they view a mysterious sign neither clearly comprehends. For instance, the narrator explains, "They saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see" (Morrison 2014b, p. 305). What seems a "door" to Anna and a "window" to Richard, the narrator identifies as a mysterious "sign" (Morrison 2014b, p. 305). Though the sign proves a mystery to the married couple, its significance sharpens in interpretive clarity by the end of the novel when Piedade and Connie prepare to shoulder their messianic ministries for the salvific benefit of the lost and saved. Morrison's reimagined Paradise in this sense, then, spiritually interrogates the indelible Edenic image Milton's epic foregrounds and bequeaths to western civilization. She achieves this reimagining of Paradise by radically reconfiguring the setting of the novel at the *denouement* as a "place of eternal other-worldly bliss of which Christianity speaks" (Stave 2014, p. 318). She, in effect, re-creates Heaven on Earth so the humans of the fictional world she creates no longer have to wait to enjoy Paradise in the afterlife. With the help of the spiritually translated Convent women, the disconsolate peopling Morrison's fictional world can be uplifted to new heights of sublime on Earth and enjoy Paradise in the here and now.

The Convent women's spiritual translation is prefigured by the foreshadowing and mysterious sign the Floods are unable to comprehend prior to the novel's ending. The narrator questions the interpretive indeterminacy of the mysterious sign as the Floods struggle to comprehend its meaning. "Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised", the narrator offers, "what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?" (Morrison 2014b, p. 305). The *denouement* makes evident that Connie and her Eve-like sisters exist in another spiritual dimension and in a different world of spatiotemporal reality. Such an episodic rupture, as Grattan observes, structurally tropes with "space and time between the first and eight chapters" as "the expression of ... a utopian enclave" (Grattan 2013). This reading of the novel's structure recognizes Morrison's manipulation of literary form as both a poetics and interpretive framework for rupturing and reimagining Paradise on the level of the book itself. Apart from Morrison's characters, digressive plots, and elements of storytelling, the novel ruptures time and geographical space as stylistic utterances of literary form that facilitate a regaining of Paradise for the Convent women who are spiritually translated to the womanist office of messianic divas by the *denouement*.

With this structure of literary form in mind, Morrison's spiritual translation of the Convent women outside and beyond this spatiotemporal dimension, answers the questions posed by the narrator in the moment when the Floods find themselves confounded by the mysterious sign they see but cannot comprehend. Morrison, in effect, interrogates a scene from Milton's epic with revisionist uppityness and aesthetic waywardness. In particular, she echoes the expansive view Adam and Eve see as the fallen couple head beyond the gates of Eden with "the world ... all before them ... /and Providence their guide".¹² This mosaic of allusions ultimately amounts to showcasing Morrison's various spiritual interrogations of Milton's Eve on womanist grounds of contention. Throughout *Paradise*, her clever poetic manipulations of Milton's epic re-creates and re-purposes the first mother of the canonical poem by amplifying her heroic status in the personages of five bodacious women, who, by novel's end, are sublimated to ministerial offices of messianic divas.

As such, Morrison poetically facilitates a reimagining of Paradise through a womanist interrogation of Milton's Eve that the novelist's Miltonic foreword helps clarify. Marking the grounds of contention

¹¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12.641–43.

¹² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12.646–47.

with her uppity reception of Milton, his epic, and women's limited role within the poem, gives readers something Miltonic to look forward to beyond the pages of the 2014 foreword. Now, when a new dispensation of readers looks beyond the title page of Morrison's novel and reads more creatively into each of its nine chapters, they may bear spiritual witness to Milton's (in)visible influential presence more clearly than ever has been cited in previous literary criticism. As her Miltonic foreword makes evident, Morrison's 1997 novel reimagines Paradise by inviting audiences to embody its conceptual image in the here and now. Should readers embody this state of Paradise within, her novel suggests, they can stand amid a great cloud of spiritual witnesses, who, without shame, preach gospels of black revolt that have been anointed by womanist revisions. Such revisionist interrogations give us all something Miltonic to look forward to whether in the shared present, beyond the times of our immediately foreseeable future, or long afterwards.

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