

‘What Good Is Good?’

Philanthropy in Toni Morrison’s Oeuvre

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Rico Hollmach, geboren am 12. August 1986 in Weimar

Gutachter:

1. Prof. Dr. Caroline Rosenthal (FSU Jena)
2. Prof. Dr. Katja Kanzler (TU Dresden)
3. Prof. Dr. Jörg Nagler (FSU Jena)

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Toward an Understanding of American Philanthropy	11
2.1 ‘The Great American Game’ – America’s Philanthropic Tradition.....	11
2.1.1 ‘Definitions Belong to the Definers’	13
2.1.2 Christianity, Democracy, and Capitalism – Philanthropy’s Historical Development in the United States	16
2.1.3 The Perception of Philanthropy: Between ‘Fascination and Suspicion’	30
2.2 Philanthropy in American Literature and Literary Studies	39
3. ‘A House Divided’ – Toni Morrison’s Journey from House to Home	52
3.1 The Significance of Houses.....	52
3.2 House Imagery in Fiction.....	60
3.3 Contested Space: The ‘House/Home Antagonism’ in Toni Morrison’s Works.....	63
3.3.1 Ideal White Standard vs. Bleak Black Reality: <i>The Bluest Eye</i> as Paradigmatic Text for Morrison’s Oeuvre.....	65
3.3.2 Of Imperial Mansions, Urban Apartments, and Rural Shacks: The Futile Quest for ‘Home’ in <i>Tar Baby</i>	85
3.3.3 ‘Neither Sweet, nor Home,’ Neither Utopia nor Dystopia: <i>Beloved</i> and the Ambivalence of the American House	100
3.3.4 ‘Paradise Lost:’ The Inversion of Symbolic Spaces in <i>A Mercy</i>	117
3.3.5 Frank and Ycidra Money as Present-Day Hansel and Gretel in <i>Home</i>	141
3.3.6 Chapter Summary.....	172
4. ‘It Was/This Is Not a Story to Pass On’ – Readerly Figures in Toni Morrison’s Oeuvre .	175
4.1 Reader-Response Criticism	178
4.2 Readerly Figures in Morrison’s Oeuvre.....	184
4.2.1 Claudia MacTeer as Mediator between Implied Author and Audience.....	190
4.2.2 Between the Narrative Cracks – Denver Suggs as Readerly Figure	199
4.2.3 ‘How Unreliable I Am’ – <i>Jazz</i> ’ Unusual Narrator	215
4.2.4 Chapter Summary.....	239
5. Conclusion.....	242
Bibliography.....	252
Ehrenwörtliche Erklärung	274

1. Introduction

When the Founding Fathers (and Mothers) declared independence on July 4, 1776, they essentially formed a country dependent on philanthropy. Without a monarchy or state religion to provide schools, hospitals, orphanages, work houses, libraries, houses of worship, and other kinds of services, it took individual people and their commitment to more than themselves to have a supportive society. Philanthropy was and is critical to be able to offer both the basic things that everyone needs (food, clothing, shelter, and care) and also those things which make us a meaningful culture, which includes the arts, services providing safety, organization, and a social fabric. (Dietlin n. pag.)

With these words Lisa Dietlin sums up the immense importance of philanthropy to the United States. At least from the genesis of the American republic, philanthropy has been a culturally formative power – it has shaped and determined American society in the last two and a half centuries, it has made a decisive impact on notions such as American democracy, and it has influenced the United States’ auto- as well as heterostereotype.¹

Throughout America’s history leading public actors have stressed the philanthropic spirit of the nation. President John F. Kennedy, for instance, claimed, “Philanthropy, charity, giving voluntarily and freely ... call it what you like, but it is truly a jewel of an American tradition” (National Philanthropic Trust n. pag.). Recent statistics about philanthropic giving of time and/or money further underline this phenomenon’s outstanding role: According to Robert Payton and Michael Moody, eighty-nine percent of U.S. households donated money in 2000 while forty-four percent of U.S. citizens volunteered in the same year. Annually, approximately two percent of the United States’ GDP amounts to giving and the total amount of money spent on philanthropic purposes estimated some \$260 billion in 2005 (plus an estimated worth of voluntary work equal to the total amount of dollars donated to philanthropic causes) (16-19). From these data Payton and Moody conclude, “philanthropy is in the midst of a growth spurt” (7) in America and the incredible number of almost two million philanthropic institutions in the United States supports their assumption (18).² Hence, Payton proudly declares, “the philanthropic tradition is the best thing we [Americans] can say about ourselves” (“The Philanthropic Dialogue” 134).

¹ In most European countries, by contrast, philanthropy has not exerted a comparable influence on society. Largely perceived as an answer to a lack of state-sponsored welfare, Europeans tend to equate the United States’ philanthropic tradition as a response to an apparent governmental failure to provide for the needy: Christian Wernicke, for instance, holds, “Amerikas Sozialstaat ist seit jeher schwach, und die Lücken, die er lässt, stopfen die großen Spender“ (3).

² Most recent statistics indicate that even the economic recession in 2008 has only entailed a temporary decline in philanthropic giving: Both the total amount of dollars donated and the percentage of giving in terms of the United States’ GDP have recovered to a level fairly similar to figures in 2007 (*Giving USA 2015* 38/47).

While philanthropy has indeed shaped the notion of Americanness and continues to wield influence over the nation's self-perception, it is also important to discuss its downsides: No small number of critics maintains, "philanthropy is a rich man's game" (Payton and Moody 50). The skeptics identify dangers that appear to be inextricably related to American philanthropy such as elitism, cultural hegemony, the imposition of certain values, and the neglect of the recipients' needs. Especially in capitalist societies, philanthropy has been seen as an odd outgrowth of exploitation, a mere sedative that treats symptoms rather than root causes since it is part and parcel of a system that created these problems in the first place. "Critics of Western democratic capitalism," explains Alfred Castle, "see private philanthropy as one of the many ideological means by which the capitalist class maintains its privileged status" (100/101). As capitalism in disguise, then, sometimes philanthropy not only seems to create what it allegedly attempts to correct (e.g., poverty), but also appears to solidify certain social and structural imbalances. Commenting on this puzzling situation, Martin Luther King, Jr. once presciently cautioned, "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary" (24). Others, in turn, have argued that every dollar spent on philanthropic causes is a dollar wasted. The transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, for instance, rejected the emerging practice of organizational philanthropy in the nineteenth century. Emerson exclaimed, "I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong" ("Self-Reliance" 154). Despite their severe criticism of relief societies and other private initiatives allegedly designed for the public good, Emerson and Thoreau did not reject the idea of philanthropy altogether. Instead, in pointing out certain Christian ideals and in distancing philanthropic acts from money, they forwarded a belief in a more 'ancient' or traditional practice of philanthropy. As a democratic bottom-up process, this particular form of philanthropy would eventually reform each individual and, in the long run, contribute to change on a societal level. Hence, American philanthropy surfaces as an ambiguous figure – a phenomenon that describes the United States' best and worst characteristics simultaneously.

Philanthropy's immense significance for the U.S. finds expression in the summer 2015 issue of *Lapham's Quarterly*. Dedicated entirely to this phenomenon, the volume approaches philanthropy through a great variety of sources that enlarge the audience's grasp of this concept substantially. Focusing on American philanthropy in its preamble, Lewis Lapham perceives an apparent discrepancy: While today's perception of that term is strongly affected by foundations, large-scale financial funding, and the near apotheosis of generous patrons,

there seems to be a deeper, almost hidden meaning. Dwelling on its reliance on Christianity and its strong connection to American democracy, Lapham critically assesses philanthrocapitalism, a term recently coined to describe the alleged need of the non-profit sector to become more effective in its distribution of funds, to develop more efficient means of investing their capital, and to become closer in nature to the for-profit market ultimately (Bishop n. pag.).³ Instead, Lapham describes a uniquely *American* philanthropy: “philanthropy inherent in democracy as conceived by Paine, attested by Tocqueville, practiced by Whitman,” states he, “is the care of other human beings, virtue ‘considered useful,’ almost never gloriously promoted” (23). As a culturally formative power, philanthropy is absolutely central to any consideration of the United States – it determines people’s understanding of notions such as American identity, American democracy, and Americanness.

‘What Good Is Good?’ Philanthropy in Toni Morrison’s Oeuvre will claim that philanthropy’s prominent place within an American context finds an echo in American literature – and especially so in fiction by so-called minorities as the traditional recipients of philanthropy. Here, the ambivalence of this concept becomes apparent: Engaging critically and creatively with American philanthropy, minority literati are able to express criticism of this uniquely American form, to transcend its narrow limits, and to eventually arrive at a revised understanding of this term.

Since her oeuvre is extremely productive for a discussion of philanthropy, I focus on Toni Morrison’s novels in my interpretation. As an African American author, Morrison belongs to a racial minority in America on whose history American philanthropy has left an unmistakable mark: Black America’s experience with generous patrons, foundations, and philanthropic money narrates the ambivalent story of American philanthropy. In her historical fiction, she discusses slavery, racism, and segregation on the one hand. Her novels, on the other hand, also show an intense interest in the fight for the abolition of slavery, for civil rights, and for equality among the races.⁴ More important, however, is that philanthropy is a

³ Undoubtedly, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – with an endowment of over \$44 billion the largest that ever existed – is the very embodiment of philanthrocapitalism: Conducting their philanthropic engagement like a traditional business investment, their foundation’s mission is to tackle health problems, hunger, and child mortality on a global scale. Due to the sheer size of their foundation, the Gateses have also extended their sphere of influence – a process that has not only earned them gratitude, but also turned them into objects of suspicion. In a recent article, Lorenz Wagner dubs the Gateses the “United States of Money” (n. pag.): With their incredible fortune as door opener, they have entered world politics; without being democratically legitimated, they operate as if they were heads of state.

⁴ Next to her literary engagement with America, Morrison has also established herself as an outspoken social critic and requested intellectual. In her numerous essays, interviews, and speeches she criticizes the social

central issue in most of her novels. My book shall therefore take a twofold approach to this phenomenon in her works: Firstly, I discuss philanthropy as a motif in her oeuvre. This part places emphasis on Morrison's reconceptualization of this term and asks in how far African American ideas and concepts can alter and add to the notion of American philanthropy. Secondly, I analyze her novels themselves as philanthropic acts. Assuming that knowledge is the philanthropic gift that her works have to offer their audience, certain narrative means that actually secure a stable communication between sender, text, and receiver and thereby guarantee a transmission of the gift of knowledge come under scrutiny. Hence, *'What Good Is Good?'* aims to make a meaningful contribution to cultural and literary studies, which expands the field of investigation and includes historical, philosophical, and sociological research. The subsequent chapters attempt to understand the United States as a three-sector society with an exceptionally influential non-profit sector. With the introduction of the issue of philanthropy to Morrison studies, most importantly, innovative readings of her novels will become possible.

In order to address philanthropy's various facets in Morrison's works, I employ a different understanding of this concept. Perceiving philanthropy as a defining force throughout U.S. history, the following notion deviates significantly from the traditional definition: Instead of placing emphasis on the stereotypical rich, almost exclusively white, mostly male philanthropist; instead of looking at large-scale funding by philanthropic foundations that, most often, bear the names of these generous patrons; and instead of perceiving money as the ultimate philanthropic gift, I attempt to broaden the scope of American philanthropy in my discussion. Defining philanthropy closer to the etymological origin of 'love of humankind,' I use this term to refer to a wide variety of interpersonal relations that are shaped and characterized by this phenomenon: The care of a community for the poor and needy among them is philanthropy; a mother that selflessly provides for her family is spurred by philanthropic principles.⁵ What the following chapters also claim is that a broad definition of philanthropy is far more appropriate than its narrow counterpart – especially so in an American context: Since giving and helping are believed to be quintessentially American characteristics and receiving and being helped are certainly not, the traditional take on philanthropy effectively denies large proportions of the U.S. nation access to one crucial

conditions in the United States and attacks the nation's complacency from her African American perspective. In 2012, President Barack Obama awarded her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award of the United States, as a sign of gratitude for her contribution to the discourse on the nation's state and development.

⁵ Philanthropy is a compound word derived from the Greek words *philia* (affectionate love) and *anthropos* (human being). For a more precise definition of the concept philanthropy see chapter two.

indicator and determining factor of Americanness. Accepting a more inclusive, a broader definition of the term ultimately implies a considerable change in understanding of American philanthropy. In this process, Morrison's oeuvre helps to illuminate philanthropy's role within the United States from an African American perspective and to arrive at a reevaluation of this concept.

In her eleven novels, Morrison has addressed diverse historical eras in American history and has broadened her audience's understanding of the nation – she has probed the United State's self-perception and questioned what it means to be American. From the pre-colonial, pre-racist utopia of *A Mercy* to the haunting legacy of slavery in *Beloved* to more recent backgrounds in *Love* and *God Help the Child*, her historical fiction has attempted to add to and partially revise the American grand narrative. Casting light on the largely neglected black experience and giving voice to the formerly silenced and oppressed, she provides her readers with many different and at times contradictory standpoints. Being “a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, [...] a writer who is black and a woman,” she states that her “job becomes [...] to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” (“The Site of Memory” 70). Additionally, Morrison has frequently drawn from African folklore as well as religion, the Bible, Greek mythology, and European fairy tales for inspiration. Consequently, her work has elicited a plethora of critical responses by critics of various academic backgrounds and, to date, uncountable monographs as well as essays have been published on the vast canvas of her novels. With regards to philanthropy in her oeuvre, however, literary criticism remains largely silent.⁶ This, in turn, does not mean that this phenomenon is not of any importance to her works; in fact, philanthropy is in close proximity to at least two pervasive issues in her oeuvre. Firstly, it ties in with Morrison's preoccupation with different forms of love, and, secondly, it overlaps with her novel's treatment of good and evil as inseparably related concepts.

Translating to the literal ‘love of humankind,’ philanthropy fits into the novelist's oeuvre-wide concern with love in its various facets: In *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, and *God Help the Child*, the strong, if ambivalent, force of maternal love is discussed; *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Home* focus on family relationships that are characterized by love or the lack

⁶ The neglect of philanthropy in Morrison's novels can be traced to a larger trend in literary studies: Except for a few scattered book-length studies on that issue in nineteenth-century fiction, philanthropy has attracted hardly any scholarly interest. The relative silence of literary studies about philanthropy is all the more striking when that phenomenon's central role for the United States' self-image and its utmost importance for the understanding of this nation are taken into account. Time and again, then, researchers (in virtually all academic fields except cultural studies) and activists in philanthropic institutions have dwelled on philanthropy's significance for the U.S.

thereof; love and affection among friends is at the center of *Sula* and the eponymous novel *Love*, while *Tar Baby* focuses on romantic love and its tragic aspects. With its emphasis on a set of striking dualities, most prominently the brutal violence of Ruby's men against the women at the Convent, *Paradise* bespeaks the opposite of love – hatred. And the end of *Jazz*, finally, sees an intimate relationship between text and reader that borders on romantic love. Evidently, love is a multi-faceted and highly complex issue in her novels. Distinguishing between the different levels of love in Morrison's fiction, Katherine Bassard states, "in her artistic vision, eros (sexual love) and agape (divine, self-sacrificial love) are either mobilized or disallowed by the presence or absence of the philos (brotherly, community love), a mediating category" (122). The love of humankind, then, is of central importance in her novels: While this at times ambivalent force is a fundamental power in interpersonal relationships among her novels' characters, it is also a guiding principle of her fiction at large that shapes the interaction of author, text, and audience.

In her fictional as well as non-fictional works, as David Carrasco remarks, Morrison has "unmasked the lethal lie of the myth of American innocence" (n. pag.). Her novels and social criticism expose racism and its firm grip on society throughout American history. Slavery and its legacy are constant backdrops in most of her works and her African American protagonists encounter the consequences of racial discrimination in language, law, interpersonal relationships, and concepts of beauty. In her essays, interviews, and speeches, Morrison points out that American literature is polluted by racist attitudes. Unmasking the representation of the black 'Other' as a haunting Africanist presence in works by white American authors, she shows that the definition of American identity as free and white is based on the existence of its exact antitheses:

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not historyless, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (*Playing in the Dark* 52)

While brutality, depravity, and violent hatred are certainly major forces in her fiction (e.g., rape, murder, and violence against the weak and defenseless), her works also engage critically and creatively with the dichotomy of good and evil. Blurring the boundaries between both categories, her novels play with their readers' expectations. I argue that this ambivalent and challenging attitude surfaces clearly in her treatment of American philanthropy: Portraying this phenomenon as an equally contradictory concept, Morrison disrupts binary oppositions and provokes her audience.

In her 2012 Ingersoll Lecture Morrison dwells on the very nature of goodness and defines this term as “the acquisition of self-knowledge” (n. pag.). Questioning this concept’s origin, she asks: “What good is good?” (ibid.) and narrows down her focus to altruism. As the literal concern for the other, altruism is a motivation to do good as well as an impetus to engage in philanthropic activities. The myriad of scholarship on this concept provides her with three different theories. First, she claims, “altruism is not an instinctive act of selflessness” (ibid.). As something that is taught and learned, that is inspired by certain religious, moral, and ethical codes, she considers altruism a part of social learning. Secondly, she states that it may also take the form of self-interest in disguise resembling “narcissism, ego enhancement,[and] even a mental disorder” (ibid.). In taking a detour to natural sciences, lastly, Morrison finds “some of the most thought-provoking theories [in] scholarship [...] seeking evidence of an embedded gene automatically firing to enable the sacrifice of oneself for the benefit of others” (ibid.). Accordingly, she conceives of pure altruism as an innate human quality as she asks: “Is there a good gene along with the selfish gene” (ibid.)? What links these three kinds of altruistic behavior is that they produce language and that through this language her characters – and, by extrapolation, her readers – may learn something vital.⁷

Further, she maintains that goodness functions on all three of the above mentioned levels in her works: As part of social learning, it is a feature in *A Mercy* in the minor character of the priest who teaches slaves to read and write and helps them despite the danger of punishment; as narcissism or mental disorder it manifests itself in the character of Soaphead Church in Morrison’s debut novel *The Bluest Eye*. In its “most common and representative” (ibid.) form – as an innate human trait –, however, it surfaces in more than one character and in more than one novel. *Sula* sees a mother who deliberately chooses to lose her leg in order to provide for her family, who kills her son to protect him from himself, and who jumps out of the window to rescue her daughter from fire. In *A Mercy*, Florens’ mother saves her daughter from imminent danger of the slave system, while the last pages of that novel come closest to Morrison’s understanding of altruism. The healing of a strayed community member through the hands of Lotus’ women and the Money siblings’ physical as well as mental recovery in

⁷ Almost unavoidably, her focus on goodness leads her to a consideration of its antithesis in the Ingersoll Lecture. Probing the place of evil in culture, Morrison detects a literal “obsession with evil” (n. pag.) in contemporary literature. She states: “Evil has a blockbuster audience – goodness lurks backstage. Evil has a vivid speech and goodness bites its tongue” (ibid.). Morrison finds the reason for the apparent central importance of evil in twentieth-century literature in the historical context of this century – most prominently, of course, in the two World Wars and the Holocaust that have made a deep and lasting impact on mankind. She concludes that acts of goodness “are treated with irony at best or they are sort of covered with suspicion or fruitlessness at worst” and that “Many of [twentieth-century literary heavyweights] are masters at exposing the frailty, the pointlessness, and the comedy of goodness” (ibid.). Notions such as weakness, pity, and apology, it appears to her, always accompany representations of goodness in contemporary literature.

Home, finally, testify to Morrison's preoccupation with acts of human goodness.⁸ While goodness is a defining power in her novels, good and bad often cannot be easily differentiated in her works. Even though Morrison claims that she has "never been interested in or impressed by evil" (ibid.), her oeuvre avoids a Manichaeian differentiation and her characters cannot readily be divided along the simplistic line of good and evil: In *Sula*, for instance, Eva Peace highlights the indifference between Nel and Sula and thereby puts emphasis on the inseparability of good and bad, of innocence and guilt (*S* 168).

In her oeuvre, then, Morrison's concern with goodness (and its opposite evil) is highly productive. As a means of personal development for her fictional characters as well as a critical lens for the moral undercurrents in her novels, acts of goodness reach to the core of her works. By extrapolation, she argues that they can lead to a development within the reader and within society in the Ingersoll Lecture: "Acts of goodness, however casual or deliberate or misapplied [...] produce language. But even when not articulated, [...] such acts must have a strong impact on the novel's structure and on its meaning," states Morrison, "Expressions of goodness are never trivial in my work, are never incidental in my writing. In fact, I want them to have life-changing properties and to illuminate decisively the moral questions embedded in the narrative" (n. pag.). Just like goodness is a productive, if ambivalent, force in her fiction, so Morrison engages creatively with the concept of American philanthropy in her novels. For one thing, the indeterminacy of the categories of good and evil comes to surface in her treatment of this phenomenon as a motif in her works. For another thing, her oeuvre can be seen as philanthropic act in itself since certain learning processes are triggered by her novels both on a level immanent and non-immanent in the texts proper – indeed, her works seem to have 'life-changing properties.'⁹

It is exactly this highly complex and remarkably diverse context that gave rise to my examination of philanthropy in Morrison's novels. The interesting discrepancies between this concept's vital role in the United States as well as its ambivalent perception on the one hand and the striking imbalance between the utmost importance of that phenomenon for American society as well as cultural studies' relative neglect of that issue on the other hand provide enough room for a controversial and deep discussion. The main body of *What Good Is*

⁸ The list of acts of goodness that Morrison has begun to compile in her Ingersoll Lecture could easily be expanded: Valerian Streets financial support of Jadine's education in *Tar Baby*, for instance, may be perceived as part of his social learning as member of the upper class; goodness in the guise of narcissism can be seen in the character of Dr. Scott in *Home*, and another example of the purest form of goodness can be found in the character of Baby Suggs in *Beloved*.

⁹ Coincidentally, I will discuss some of the examples that Morrison cites as acts of goodness under the heading philanthropy in the following interpretation, too.

Good? is divided into two parts: While chapter two will lay the theoretical framework for my interpretation, chapters three and four will offer different readings of Morrison's novels.

I intend "Toward an Understanding of American Philanthropy" (chapter two) to develop this book's underlying definition of philanthropy. Discussing America's philanthropic tradition, I aim to trace this phenomenon's role throughout U.S. history. Additionally, I examine philanthropy's (non-) place within literary studies critically.

Following this step, my discussion will concentrate on the depiction of philanthropy in Morrison's fiction. In conducting close readings of her works, I adopt a dual approach to that issue: While the first analytical chapter discusses philanthropy as a motif in Morrison's novels, the second one shifts emphasis to a consideration of her literature as philanthropy.

"A House Divided" – Toni Morrison's Journey from House to Home" (chapter three) focuses on one of the most pervasive metaphors for America and a potent symbol of philanthropy: the house. Throughout this chapter, I argue that an in-depth analysis of houses in Morrison's novels allows for certain conclusions about philanthropy: Traditionally, both the American house and American philanthropy are structured hierarchically with a strong, most often white, father figure as its literal head of house. I also claim that philanthropy has often been employed as a means to uphold the neat façade of the nation-house. Morrison's journey from house to home, then, resembles a reconsideration of the United States (as a place that is and is not home to many), and of philanthropy (as a phenomenon that can cause social cohesion and social stratification). While she attempts to change the understanding of both issues, Morrison, however, does not reject the idea of the house or of philanthropy. Hence, her concept of home and her different take on philanthropy have to be perceived as ideals.

In "It Was/This Is Not a Story to Pass On" – Readerly Figures in Toni Morrison's Oeuvre" (chapter four), I finally conduct a reader-response reading of Morrison's works that discusses her fiction as philanthropy. Foregrounding the communicative situation of her novels, I put emphasis on the receiving end of the fictional interaction between author/narrator, text, and reader/narratee. With a focus on her literature's impact on its audience, certain readerly figures are at the center of this analysis. As didactic tools, I interpret them as mediators between the fictional as well as extrafictional realm. Facilitating communication between the parties involved, these characters and/or narrators go through a developmental process parallel to the audience and thereby guide the readers. Ultimately, I

argue that readerly figures are employed as a means to pass on the gift of knowledge in Morrison's novels.

While *'What Good Is Good?'* claims that one can find a certain didactic impetus in most of her novels and that her works have indeed something to offer for their readership, I do not think of Morrison as a moralist. I also do not want to 'reduce' her work to its aesthetic qualities, its poetic language, and its unique style of narration: Despite her powerful use of the English language, there is nothing ornamental or artificial about her art. Valerie Smith therefore claims that Morrison's fictional as well as non-fictional writing carefully and successfully negotiates between the seemingly irreconcilable opposite of aesthetics and ethics: "Her adroit use of language notwithstanding, at their core, all of her novels provide astute analyses of cultural and historical processes," she argues. "Likewise, their critical insightfulness notwithstanding, Morrison's essays and articles make powerful use of narrative and imagery. One never forgets that she is a novelist writing analytic prose or social and cultural critic writing fiction" (3). Hence, her approach to philanthropy fits squarely into her novels' politics: Probing deeply and relentlessly into one of the United States' key characteristic, she is able to formulate a critique of the American society from the outside; employing her fiction to philanthropic ends, however, she may also bring about a reconceptualization of notions such as Americanness and humanity from the inside.

2. Toward an Understanding of American Philanthropy

Jon Van Til considers philanthropy an “essentially contested concept” (23). Researchers in many different academic fields – among them history, economy, business administration, sociology, political sciences, and philosophy – disagree about and, at times, passionately argue over this term and its related notions. Consequently, the broad scholarly literature on philanthropy shows a certain vagueness concerning the definition, usage, and reception of its research topic. And especially within an American context, students will find a myriad of diverse understandings of philanthropy. The different stances in the literature on this phenomenon are largely based on the diametrically opposed connotations that are attached to this concept (e.g., goodness vs. ‘do-gooderism’), a general disagreement about its contribution to U.S. society (e.g., motor of social reform vs. means of cultural imperialism), and the special role as well as development of philanthropy in U.S. history (Daly 543-545).

To think of philanthropy as an essentially contested concept, however, does *not* mean to confuse or obscure its meaning. Rather, scholars have to avoid these pitfalls and critically engage with philanthropy’s inherent (and creative) ambivalence – in this sense, any discussion of the notion in academia as well as outside should be stimulated, not confined. Accordingly, the scope of the following chapter is to describe my underlying understanding and usage of this term. In the subsequent subchapters, I trace the historical development of this concept in American history (chapter 2.1) and sketch the role of philanthropy in literature as well as literary and cultural studies (chapter 2.2).

2.1 ‘The Great American Game’ – America’s Philanthropic Tradition

Throughout U.S. history, “Americans have regarded themselves as an unusually philanthropic people” (Bremner 1). The United States has claimed a long tradition of benevolent and charitable endeavors – from the civilizing effect of the early settlers on the untamed ‘wilderness’ of the New World to the philanthropic spirit of the American Revolution to more recent engagements of the U.S. Government and American foundations abroad. For one thing, this may be explained by the historically strong Protestant influence and importance of religion in America. The American Revolution, for example, employed a heavily religiously charged rhetoric and fervent Christians managed large parts of nineteenth-century reform movements. Even today’s secular philanthropic foundations adhere to Christianity’s missionary impulses and oftentimes present their arguments in a quasi-biblical tone. Moreover, philanthropy and American democracy are closely intertwined and have

induced a special ‘American Creed’ where the responsibility of the individual for the community is accentuated. The advent of professionalized, ‘scientific’ philanthropy and the emergence of large-scale foundations around the turn of the twentieth century may also be seen as further justifications for an American self-understanding that is firmly rooted in philanthropy. Whereas the state claims authority over the general welfare of its citizens in most Western nations, the so-called ‘third sector’ has gained an exceptional position of power within the United States, catering to the needs of the underprivileged. Without doubt, therefore, philanthropy is a culturally formative power in the U.S.

The historically evolved significance of philanthropy in the United States has lent verisimilitude to the hypothesis of so-called American exceptionalism: “because American philanthropy is so pervasive and fundamental,” Maurice Gurin and Van Til explain, “it is unique in the world” (3). Thus, Robert Bremner’s *American Philanthropy* – one of the most widely read studies on this phenomenon in the United States –, includes lengthy discussions of Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush’s benevolent deeds in order to underline the Founding Fathers’ philanthropic zeal as well as an examination of Alexis de Tocqueville’s principle of ‘voluntary associations’ as *the* fundamental component of American democracy. Bremner boldly maintained, “giving is the great American game” (1). American philanthropy seems inseparable from American identity formation since “it draws on values that Americans claim for themselves [...]: a commitment to profit-making but also to social justice; a respect for individual freedom and a strong sense of community” (Zunz 298). Indeed, an understanding of philanthropy is paramount to gaining insights into U.S. society’s workings, into the nation’s self-image, and into understandings of ‘Americanness.’ Consequently, in their tellingly named study *Understanding Philanthropy* Payton and Moody assert: “The point is that if you don’t understand how the United States works as a three-sector-society, as a society heavily reliant on philanthropic action in the third sector, you don’t understand the United States” (2008: 13).

It is, however, equally important to put emphasis on the instrumentalization – or even exploitation – of philanthropy in the United States. Throughout American history, this concept has been employed as a means to specific ends, among them, for instance, not only the accentuation and forging of a distinctively American identity in the wake of the Revolution, but also the justification and reinterpretation of the inherently inhumane stance toward certain minorities (e.g., Native Americans and African Americans) as deeply benevolent commitments to their well-being. To say the least, throughout U.S. history various actors have

always attempted to consciously depict philanthropy as a central and exceptional American character trait. Scholars thus find themselves in the uneasy terrain of mythology as they have to carefully negotiate between ‘the mythos’ and ‘the kernel of truth’ surrounding this phenomenon.

In order to arrive at this book’s understanding of philanthropy, I shall now provide a definition of philanthropy (chapter 2.1.1), give a historical overview of its development in American history (chapter 2.1.2), and discuss the perception of this concept as well as its impact on U.S. society (chapter 2.1.3).

2.1.1 ‘Definitions Belong to the Definers’

According to Gurin and Van Til, a “generally accepted comprehensive definition [of philanthropy] does not exist” (3). This concept’s meaning and scope are debatable and a wide range of possible interpretations opens up, which locates philanthropy somewhere between the binary opposites of a broad, inclusive and a narrow, exclusive definition. As a result, the term has been used to designate a meaning close to the etymological Greek origin of ‘love of humankind.’ This interpretation allows for a variety of different forms of personal, direct help that are aimed at alleviating the plight of the poor and the needy. It is therefore closely related to the Christian practice of charity. In more recent times, however, philanthropy has predominantly been used to denote what is now known as the ‘third sector’ – describing efforts by non-governmental organizations which “focu[s] beyond the immediate condition of people to root causes of human problems and systematic reform” (ibid. 4). This rather impersonal type is strongly associated with large-scale financial funding by non-governmental institutions such as the Carnegie, Rockefeller, or Ford foundations. Before I actually delineate this book’s underlying definition of philanthropy, I will briefly discuss some of the most influential understandings of this term.

The debate about a proper definition within American academia is largely based on a more or less careful differentiation between the related terms of charity and philanthropy – a development that Shioban Daly, for example, traces back to “the open nature of the concept of philanthropy and more specifically its evolution in the United States” (545). In an older study, Payton, for instance, argued that the difference between these two ideas is based on disparate impetuses (religious vs. secular), is characterized by opposing relationships between the parties involved (direct vs. distanced), is rooted in their divergent goals (treating

symptoms vs. finding cures), and is explained by the fact that philanthropy may be seen as a more recent development of the earlier concept of charity. He therefore concluded,

The religious tradition – the charitable – is founded on altruism; the secular tradition – the philanthropic – is founded in what Aristotle called prudence and what we would call enlightened self-interest. The culture of Israel gave us charity; classical civilization gave us philanthropy. (Payton “Values” 27)

Parallel to Payton’s early definition, his colleague Robert Gross locates charity in the beginning of the New World, whereas he perceives philanthropy as a more current trend in U.S. history that has had its beginnings in the early Republic. Even though Gross holds that the former is deeply influenced by Puritan beliefs and the latter shaped by worldly forces such as economics, he nevertheless contends that these “two strains form the story of giving in America” (31). The common understanding of this concept has changed considerably since the rise of institutional philanthropy in the late nineteenth century. The benevolent gift is generally equated with money and the prototypical benefactor is seen as what has recently been coined ‘philanthrocapitalist.’ Thus, “The most visible form of philanthropy is that of major gifts of money and other resources,” says Michael O’Neill, who further explains, “Gifts that are large, have some social distance between giver and receiver, and are intended to have significant and long-lasting effects are more likely to be called philanthropic” (141).¹⁰

In contrast to the above-mentioned researchers, who distinguish charity from philanthropy primarily in order to sharpen the profile of benevolent foundations, others have defined this phenomenon in a less exclusive way. In a more recent study, Payton and Moody have apparently felt the need to revise the Payton’s older understanding. They now state that academics “must think of philanthropy as encompassing both the spontaneous, individual acts of kindness and the planned, organized efforts that ensure acts of kindness are not ineffective or short-lived” (2008: 20). Even if they do differentiate between formal and informal philanthropy, it is important to note that, next to corporate giving, large-scale foundations, and the like, Payton and Moody subsume the “pervasive, character-shaping good works that are immediate, direct, or personal – the domain of traditional benevolence, love of neighbor, civility, and tolerance, the ‘ordinary virtues’ if you will” (ibid.) under the umbrella term philanthropy. Likewise, Van Til defines this idea “as a pervasive behavioral force” (32) of humankind that shapes and determines the ways we relate to each other.

¹⁰ However, statistics underline the importance of the individual: Four out of five dollars donated to philanthropic causes in America are given by private citizens, their willingness to spend time on voluntary work is equally substantial, and more basic, spontaneous, and less institutionalized efforts to help cannot even be quantitatively expressed as statistical data.

The diametrically opposed perceptions of this phenomenon underline the fact that “definitions belon[g] to the definers” (*Beloved* 225) – the teaching of Toni Morrison’s cruel slaveholder’s reminds both the Sweet Home slaves in *Beloved* as well as the researcher in the field of philanthropy of underlying politics and ideologies that always affect our understandings of the world. The different perspectives on philanthropy also highlight the inexactness of that term, which, according to Gurin and Van Til, is a “vagueness [that] is inevitable, even desirable” (3) for critics and that offers them creative elbowroom.

In the following, I employ a rather broad sense of the term philanthropy in order to describe a multitude of interactions. I discuss philanthropy as a multi-layered and complex social relation that describes *inter-* as well as *intra*racial relationships, which are shaped and determined by this phenomenon. Additionally, I conceive of philanthropy as a powerful and socially discernible marker of ‘Americanness.’ Time and again this concept has been used to refer to allegedly unique ur-American characteristics and it has provided ample justification for the belief in the idea of American exceptionalism. The apparent need to make a clear-cut differentiation between *Christian* charity (i.e., interpersonal giving by ordinary people) on the one hand and *American* philanthropy (i.e., foundational giving initiated by extraordinary men) on the other seems to be a trend exclusive to the United States, which has lent additional verisimilitude to this line of thought. Since philanthropy is intimately linked to representations of American identity, it would, however, be counterproductive to limit the scope of this term to large-scale financial funding, because this somewhat simplistic understanding would then gloss over the United State’s heterogeneous society and perpetuate white male hegemony. Ultimately, the American grand narrative, which heavily relies on philanthropy, would still be a story *of* and *by* the prototypical WASP¹¹ authority. As a result, a narrow focus would effectively deny large parts of U.S. society – namely the traditional benefactors of philanthropy (e.g., women and racial minorities) – access to this crucial indicator of Americanness.¹² A more inclusive definition, then, that looks at, for example, voluntarism as well as direct help in the form of knowledge, crucial goods, and assistance will eventually lead to a reshaping of the traditional understanding of this important part of America: “By expanding the concept of philanthropy beyond large cash donations, [ultimately,] practitioners and researchers allow the philanthropic histories of traditionally

¹¹ WASP is an acronym for ‘White Anglo-Saxon Protestant,’ a group of people believed to be in control of large parts of U.S. government, society, and finance.

¹² I perceive Payton’s shift away from his narrow interpretation of philanthropy in his older studies toward a more inclusive understanding in his more recent ones as a case in point here.

marginalized groups such as African Americans to be included in the general discourse” (Center on Philanthropy 2).

In its approach to philanthropy, *‘What Good Is Good?’* attempts to take an intermediate position between the extreme standpoints and explores this concept’s limitations and possibilities. Such a multi-faceted and at times contradictory method will eventually yield a deeper insight into the complexities of this phenomenon and is used as a frame of reference for the later interpretation of its function in the novels by Toni Morrison. Since I apply a rather broad definition of this term – close to the etymological meaning ‘love of humankind’ – in my book, a wide array of possible philanthropic gifts opens up: Money, as the most obvious, is accompanied by time, food, and help of any sort. Accordingly, the concept of philanthropy is not restricted to the so-called ‘third sector’ – the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller type – with its aim of eradicating social ills by reforming the society. Instead, I extend the scope and include interpersonal as well as foundational or institutionalized efforts under this umbrella term. Hence, I interpret philanthropy as a pervasive and fundamental force throughout U.S. history that has made a significant impact on race relations, definitions of American identity, and understandings of U.S. society.

2.1.2 Christianity, Democracy, and Capitalism – Philanthropy’s Historical Development in the United States

The interconnectedness of and intimate relationship between Christian faith and philanthropy has been interpreted as a unique American characteristic of giving. In the course of U.S. history, Robert Wuthnow contends, “religion and giving have been closely linked; indeed, the identity of the latter could seldom be sharply distinguished from the former” (1990: 3). Religion has provided potential sponsors with motivational role models, most prominently the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), and educated them in Christian charity.¹³ According to the Bible, giving is one of the three acts of righteousness that should be practiced by every Christian in order to live a life that is pleasing to God (Mt. 6:1). Seen as a social responsibility and obligation for every believer (e.g., Rom. 12:9-13 and 16), it will eventually spread the gospel (2 Cor. 9:12-13). The Bible, furthermore, also provides answers to how one should give:

¹³ Moreover, the church has made available crucial institutional structures: It has offered its members meeting facilities, brought people together in concerted efforts, informed them about people’s needs, and administered as well as distributed their help.

Give generously to [your brother] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Deut. 15:10-11, original emphasis)

The alleged piety of the American people has had a considerable impact on the practice of philanthropy. Helping one's fellow men as well as 'the poor and needy' has consequently been seen as an American duty. America's genesis, for instance, saw an upsurge of strongly religiously motivated as well as justified endeavors and most colonizers were imbued with a philanthropic spirit: "Almost every effort of colonization had, or claimed to have, a philanthropic motivation," asserted Bremner, "there were natives to be converted to Christianity, poor men to be provided with land and work, and a wilderness to be supplied with the institutions of civilization" (7). The cultivation of the supposedly virgin New World – the bringing of culture, Christianity, and civilization – has been inextricably intertwined with philanthropy. This interconnectedness can best be observed in the writings of two of the most prominent men of colonial America: John Winthrop (1578-1649) and Cotton Mather (1663-1728).

Winthrop's famous sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" (delivered in 1630 either aboard the *Arabella* en route from England to Massachusetts Bay Colony or before the crossing) can be interpreted as an effective strategy to secure cohesion among the settlers in times of impending hardship.¹⁴ Therefore, the Puritan leader inculcated them with the Christian ideal of charity and instilled a sense of chosenness into his fellows: God's providence for the settlers and their colony will only be fulfilled if each and every one of them adheres to the principles of reciprocity, mutuality, and communalism.

First, Winthrop defended the supposedly God-given hierarchical order of humankind stating, "in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean and in subjection" ("A Model" 1). Most notably, this underlines the dependence of ordinary people on their superiors – the Puritan leader thereby attempted to secure his own leading position as well as to retain the allegiance of the designated settlers. This social stratification, however, does not cause frictions between the colonizers since all men are bound together by bonds of "brotherly affection" ("A Model" 9) – reciprocity and mutuality appear to be the guiding principles of a successful colonial enterprise: "This

¹⁴ Even though Winthrop's "A Model" is written as a sermon and reminds the reader of someone preaching to an audience, it is important to note that the author himself was a layperson and businessmen rather than a member of the clergy.

sensibleness and sympathy of each other's conditions will necessarily infuse into each part a native desire and endeavor to strengthen, defend, preserve, and comfort the other" ("A Model" 6). Consequently, charity, giving, and neighborly love are core characteristics that Winthrop dwells on at length: He, for example, highlights biblical role models such as Jesus Christ and the apostles to underline the long philanthropic tradition in the Christian church. In analogy to the concept of the church as one body in Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-26), the governor of the Colony then evoked powerful body imagery in order to bring about a sense of unity and solidarity among his followers. Their individual future and very well-being are intimately bound to the community's. The 'ligaments' of this communal body are the core characteristics of reciprocity, charity, and mutual aid that Winthrop had established in the beginning of his speech.¹⁵ Finally, he described the settlers as God's chosen people by drawing parallels to the Israelites, highlighting their access to divine truth, and claiming God's favor for the colonizers. The Puritan settlers, Winthrop stated, have "entered into Covenant" ("A Model" 9) with God – they supposedly have the divine consent to build a truly Christian community based on the above-mentioned principles of charity and mutuality. If the settlers abide by the underlying rules of this 'contract' with God, He will secure the colonies' prominent position in the world: "For we must consider that we shall be as a *City upon a Hill*, the eyes of all people are upon us" ("A Model" 10, emphasis added).

Winthrop's allegory of the American colonies as 'a City upon a Hill' – directly quoted from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:14) – "has been alternatively praised but more often blamed as exhibit A of American exceptionalism, a tradition that proudly or arrogantly makes this country the 'hub of the universe'" (Holland 73). "A Model" vividly reveals the intimate relationship of the seemingly irreconcilable ideas of philanthropy, the literal 'love of *all* humankind', and American exceptionalism, the firm belief in the superiority of only a *small* proportion of humankind. Matthew Holland even claims that Winthrop's sermon "appears to have provided the blueprints for two cities upon one hill" (83): The first is deeply rooted in optimism, communalism, benevolent reciprocity, sympathy, and empathy; harshness, judgmentalism, paranoia, and a Manichaean outlook on the world characterize the second. Winthrop's speech can therefore be considered an ur-text of American literature. Even before its publication in the nineteenth century, this work had circulated widely among Americans and "A Model" has continued to exert influence over political leaders of the United States: Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, William

¹⁵ Interestingly, Winthrop's body imagery strongly recalls America's later motto *e pluribus unum* – 'out of many one' (Schweitzer 449).

Clinton, and both Bushes (ibid. 74) as well as current President Barack Obama have employed parts of Winthrop's speech – especially, of course, his trope of America as 'a City upon a Hill.' Its author, then, becomes "at once a significant founding father of some of America's best and worst impulses" (ibid. 2), since he 'preached' the twin-gospel of empathy, communalism, and philanthropy on the one hand and intolerance, exclusion, and exceptionalism on the other.

John Winthrop's ideas of philanthropy seem to have greatly influenced Cotton Mather, Puritan minister and author of over four hundred books. In Mather's widely received historical genealogy of the genesis of America, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is referred to as "New-English Nehemiah" (*Magnalia* 111), a biblical character who is renowned for being a man of religious commitment, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and thereby restoring faith (see the Old Testament book of Nehemiah), and a whole chapter is devoted to him. The differences between these two famous Puritan men, however, become apparent when Mather's *Bonifacius, Or Essays to Do Good* (1710) is subjected to close scrutiny: Whereas his forerunner understood charity primarily as the rich man's duty and saw the need of a strong central power and leadership in order to reform society, Mather placed his hopes in Christian individuals of every rank and their voluntary associations. Hence, Kathleen McCarthy reads *Bonifacius* as an almost didactic "clarion call for social activism" (15) – philanthropy, in Mather's view, was a bottom-up concerted action directed at the common good.

In the preface to this work, the Puritan minister strongly emphasized the central importance of 'doing good' to each man: "'A good man is a common good;' and, 'none but a good man is really a living man;' and, 'the more good any man does, the more he really lives'" (*Bonifacius* 38). In order to live a fulfilled and righteous life, the practice of philanthropy appears to be integral. Directly addressing his readers, he demanded their unhesitating commitment to this cause: "Sirs! An unfainting resolution to do good, and an unwearied well-doing, is that which is now urged upon you" (*Bonifacius* 45). Firmly rooted in the Puritan belief in the inherent wickedness of the world and its institutions as well as in the innate depravity of human nature, Mather tried to provoke a change in his audience – he literally attempted to convert his readers to a life of strict Puritan discipline and piety that finds one of its foremost expressions in philanthropy.

In terms which are decidedly less gloomy, the minister then moved on to describe the rewards of doing good: According to his view, philanthropy is "an invaluable honour," "an

incomparable pleasure,” “a most suitable business,” and “a most precious privilege” (*Bonifacius* 53). Moreover, Mather stated that philanthropy constitutes recompense in itself since it is “a thing that enriches you, and that you are favoured of God, when he does employ you to do good” (*Bonifacius* 54). Parallel to Winthrop, a sense of chosenness seems to accompany Mather’s notion of doing good. Other than the famous governor, however, the Puritan minister developed a more democratic idea of philanthropy: Highlighting the power of each individual, he stated, “‘Plain men, dwelling in tents’ – persons of a very ordinary rank may, by their eminent piety, prove persons of extraordinary usefulness” (*Bonifacius* 70) and showed that combined efforts may eradicate certain social ills. In analogy to direct interpersonal help, Mather extended philanthropy’s reach from help within everyone’s family right up to associations of men that address more complex societal problems. The form of help followed one simple imperative: “Render them all the assistance which their necessities may require” (*Bonifacius* 101). It is important to note that – next to direct help in the form of assistance, advice, or money – Mather strongly encouraged a more sustainable influence to be exerted on the receiver. Therefore, future philanthropists ought to provide what would nowadays be called ‘capacity building.’ Among his goals, employment of the poor ranks as the most important one: Mather polemically said, “set them [the needy] to work, and keep them to work” (*Bonifacius* 103). Other means of Mather’s philanthropic capacity building were spiritual guidance, necessary correction, and, most importantly, education. In this respect, his approach resembles more modern forms of social reform and work.

Roberta Knickerbocker therefore argues that Cotton Mather “made a significant contribution to the institution of American philanthropy” (313) and that his *Bonifacius* reminds the reader of the strong relationship of philanthropy and religion on the one hand and the close proximity of philanthropy and democracy on the other. She interprets these essays as a literal “‘how to’ manual for all people desiring to incorporate more philanthropic activities into their daily lives” (ibid. 313/314). As guidelines for a ‘useful’ life in the service of the public good, *Bonifacius* has had a lasting impact on the founding father Benjamin Franklin¹⁶ and seems to have foreshadowed Alexis de Tocqueville’s notion of ‘voluntary associations’ as core characteristic of American democracy.

Decades after Winthrop and Mather, the founding of the United States was characterized by a rhetoric that attempted to justify and promote the revolutionary cause by charging the

¹⁶ Franklin, for example, founded the Junto – according to him “a club for mutual improvement” (57) – in 1727 in Philadelphia and planned on writing an instructional book by the working title *The Art of Virtue*, which by his own admission “would have shown the means and manner of obtaining virtue” (82).

thought of ‘America’ with a quasi-spiritual tone. Especially in opposition to the Old World – most explicitly Great Britain, of course – the American colonies gained ever new dimensions that highlighted the inherently philanthropic promises of the New World, most prominently democracy – the rule of the people. On the eve of the Revolutionary War, Thomas Paine, for instance, published his immensely influential and successful pamphlet “Common Sense” (1776), which polemically called the American people to an immediate independence from Britain and thereby earned him the epitaph ‘Father of the American Revolution.’ In this work, the political activist did not tire in underlining the heightened role of America with its supposedly utopian or even redemptive effect on the history of the world. “The Sun never shined on a cause of greater worth” (“Common Sense” 84), Paine stated and continued by describing the colonies as “the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from *every part* of Europe” (“Common Sense” 87, his emphasis). He even drew an analogy between the American cause and the biblical Flood – the prototypical cleansing of humanity and consequent rebirth free from sin:

We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months. (“Common Sense” 118/119)

Following this spirit, the idea of philanthropy has been written irrevocably into the founding documents of the U.S. during the American Revolution and has ever since contributed to the mythic aura surrounding this era and its protagonists. The Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution of the United States (1787), according to the “Message from the Director” of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services “the two most important, and enduring documents in [U.S.] history” (n. pag.), are animated with a philanthropic spirit. The Declaration’s best-known phrase, for example, reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (*Declaration* 1). The inherently philanthropic principles of equality among humankind and promises of ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness’ have attracted people from all over the world to the United States and still stand as the most visible beacon of America’s values: President Abraham Lincoln, for instance, called the Declaration and its dictum of liberty to all an “apple of gold” (“Fragment” 169). Its premises have later been enshrined in the silver frame of the Constitution – the famous two documents are consequently seen as promise and fulfillment as the Declaration becomes the proverbial

golden apple on the silver tray of the Constitution. The preamble of the latter document frames the most basic duties of the supreme law of the land, namely to “form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity” (*Declaration* 9). It is only with the so-called Bill of Rights – the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which were adopted in 1789 – and especially the First Amendment, however, that the fundamental personal liberties such as freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly have been granted the American people. The ideological principals of the American Revolution, which are deeply rooted in the interplay of religion, democracy, and philanthropy, therefore, “formed an American Creed that held that every citizen had an implicit right to create organizations, lobby for change, and participate in political and economic developments through the voluntary sphere” (McCarthy 202). Philanthropy did not only shape and determine American democracy; it is also deeply implemented in the United States’ founding documents and consequently in almost any notion of American (self-) understanding.

With regards to their lofty principles, however, the Declaration’s and the Constitution’s standpoint toward the ‘peculiar institution’ of American slavery – the ultimate antithesis to their philanthropic values – acquires an almost schizophrenic dimension: Paradoxically, the founding documents promised ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness’ and held that ‘all Men are created equal,’ while, at the same time, they perpetuated the system of institutionalized bondage by inserting the Three-Fifths Clause, by postponing the end of the slave trade to the year 1808, and by including the Fugitive Slave Clause.¹⁷ The Founding Fathers also played a dubious role: While decrying their enslavement by the hands of King George III, most of them were slave owners themselves. The renowned Thomas Jefferson – leading author of the Declaration, third president of the United States, and wealthy slave owner – exemplifies best these obvious contradictions. On the one hand, Jefferson openly and vociferously condemned slavery throughout his political career: He, for example, called the ‘peculiar institution’ an “abominable crime” (60), regarded it as a degradation to both master as well as slave, and time and again welcomed the abolition of this institution and efforts by societies formed to bring about this end. On the other hand, he failed to live up to his own principles: A large landowner and member of the so-called Virginia planter aristocracy, Jefferson grew increasingly rich on slave labor and slave trade. Like most of his peers, he

¹⁷ It was only after the Civil War that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments overruled the Fugitive Slave and the Three-Fifths Clause, respectively.

supported the gradual abolition of slavery, fostered strong racist beliefs concerning African Americans in general, and was in favor of colonization of freed slaves in either the West Indies or Africa (Magnis 491-509).¹⁸ This is why Houston Baker concludes, “Slavery was written into the American Constitution” (4) – the founding documents’ and their framers’ philanthropic spirit is strongly contested by their attitude toward slavery and their openly racist mindset.

Commenting on this puzzling situation, Toni Morrison remarks that this era’s specific “climate reflected not only the Age of Enlightenment but [also] its twin, born at the same time, the Age of Scientific Racism” (“The Site of Memory” 69). This pseudo-scientific branch of academia had its origins in the writings of some of the most important Enlightenment thinkers – Voltaire, Kant, and Hegel, to mention just a few – and made a significant impact on many academic disciplines, the public discourse, and politics. Consequently, the nineteenth century saw a literal reinterpretation of, for example, slavery and the Indian Removal as benevolent deeds largely in accordance with the principles of the founding documents. In his “Second Annual Message” to the United States Congress in 1830, President Andrew Jackson boldly announced, “that the benevolent policy of the Government, steadily pursued for nearly thirty years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching to a happy consummation” (“Message” 110). Echoing the Declaration’s philanthropic principles, he went on by explaining that the removal will “enable them [Native Americans] to pursue happiness in their own way and under their own rude institutions” (“Message” 111) and claimed that it will ultimately have a civilizing effect upon this minority. In a self-congratulating tone, Jackson declared the U.S. government’s policy “toward the red man [as] not only liberal, but generous” (“Message” 113) – it has become nothing less than “*true philanthropy*” (“Message” 112, emphasis added) and provides solutions where public endeavors and social reform have lacked to offer any. Finally, the seventh president of the United States linked philanthropy to the notion of ‘Manifest Destiny,’ the ultimate reason for Indian removal: “Philanthropy could not wish to see this continent restored to the condition in which it was found by our forefathers” (ibid.). The belief in the God-ordained right of Americans to further expand their land westward therefore purports to be a ‘truly’ philanthropic deed to all humankind.

¹⁸ Additionally, scholars continue to debate whether or not Jefferson had a sexual relationship and several children with his slave Sally Hemings – thus exercising the widespread *droit du seigneur* during American slavery.

The discussion around scientific racism reached its climax just prior to the Civil War. Pro-slavery advocates sought to lend credence to the ‘peculiar institution’ by providing supposedly hard science that explained the alleged natural inferiority of African Americans. Having conducted pseudo-scientific experiments such as craniometrical measurements of the head, ‘researchers’ like Samuel George Morton and Josiah Nott supported the belief in polygenism of humankind and claimed that African people had decreased intellectual capacity due to their skulls.¹⁹ To further substantiate this position, pro-slavery circles employed a clearly racist-motivated biblical exegesis that justified the peculiar institution: When Ham, one of Noah’s sons, had seen his father drunk but had not covered his immodesty, Noah cursed his descendants: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gen. 9:25). Interpreting this prophecy as an explanation for the enslavement of Africans, allegedly the children of Ham, pro-slavery advocates imagined science and religion at their sides. Consequently, slave owners thought of themselves as generous superiors and harbingers of Western culture; fathers even, who had the God-ordained responsibility to provide for their child-like slaves. Slavery was reinterpreted as a civilizing and Christianizing influence on the supposedly barbarian, uncultured Africans. Moreover, by publishing pro-slavery literature that presented the South as an almost idyllic place, apologists sought to highlight the failures of abolitionist northerners and to generally justify the ‘southern way of life.’ Susan Ryan, for instance, quotes from several “‘anti-Uncle Tom’ novels” that attempted to paint a different picture of slavery characterized by “white benevolence on the one hand and black gratitude and dependence on the other” (2003: 154/155).²⁰

Thus, two of the most horrible incidents in U.S. history – crimes that seem incompatible with America’s liberal principles, even with a due amount of cultural relativism – have been justified as quasi-philanthropic endeavors: First, the Trail of Tears, which caused several thousand Native American casualties, had devastating psychological effects on the survivors, and may have led to a generational trauma among the Native peoples. And second, American slavery, which allowed for a crude economical system that relied on human trafficking, bondage, and extreme exploitation and which also provoked a national crisis in the 1850s that was characterized by increasingly hostile regional tensions, political compromises (e.g., the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision in 1857) as well as violent outbreaks of hatred (most

¹⁹ With the end of the Civil War, however, racial prejudices in academia did not come to a sudden halt. Instead, there is quite an impressive list of literature on racial hygiene, eugenics, etc. published in the U.S. up to the 1930s. Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), in which he forwarded his theory of ‘Nordic superiority’ over the other races, is, for instance, a prime example here.

²⁰ In chapter 2.2, I will further elaborate on the role of literature in social reform movements.

notably Bleeding Kansas in the 1850s and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859), and eventually resulted in the bloodiest war in U.S. history.

The rise of institutional, 'scientific' philanthropy in the nineteenth century and especially the advent of large-scale foundations at the turn of the twentieth century have, lastly, been interpreted as further expressions of support for the thesis of American exceptionalism since these developments turned the United States into a three sector society with an exceptionally influential third sector. On the one hand, some critics have argued that this particular system empowered America's democratic system; on the other hand, however, others have pointed out the inherent dangers of powerful elites exercising enormous influence on U.S. society. Olivier Zunz, for example, claims that institutional philanthropy seems caught between the opposing poles of conservatism and progressivism (7). Other researchers have argued that institutional philanthropy and the rise of capitalism are inseparably and discursively related: McCarthy, for instance, holds, "philanthropy helped to foster market values" and he maintains, "the history of American philanthropy provides a fresh lens for assessing the scope and nature of the market revolution and the country's transition to capitalism" (6). This set of problems can best be exemplified by analyzing the opposing evaluations of philanthropic associations by the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville as well as by the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau – the former foreshadowing later developments, the others warning of certain trends.

Even though not considered a founding document proper, Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal work *Democracy in America* has time and again been used as a starting point for studies trying to understand American democracy and philanthropy.²¹ Since its first publication in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, respectively, the French aristocrat's book has attracted a wide readership and exerted considerable influence on researchers in the humanities as well as on numerous different U.S. politicians. *Democracy* has become canonized and appears on many syllabi of U.S. universities – it is required reading for students in the political and social sciences and read alongside the Declaration and the Constitution. Hence, Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop even go so far as to claim that de Tocqueville's *Democracy* "is at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America" (xvii).

²¹ It is important to note that de Tocqueville never once uses the term 'philanthropy' in his *Democracy*. However, most scholars concerned with the history and development of American philanthropy include the French historian in their discussions.

In Part II of the second volume, de Tocqueville described certain sentiments and emotions that Americans supposedly show. Among them are not only the love of equality (chapter one), but also an almost inevitable tendency toward individualism (chapter two). Even though the French observer was highly critical of egotism under democracy and regarded it as a potential threat to the American republic, he also noticed two antidotes to this problem: voluntary associations and the principle of ‘self-interest rightly understood.’ According to de Tocqueville, the foundation of voluntary associations for the advancement of the public good is a uniquely American development: “Wherever, at the head of a new undertaking, you see in France the government, and in England, a great lord, count on seeing in the United States, an association” (*Democracy* 896). These voluntary associations, the French historian claimed, become the very backbone of American democracy: As ideal training grounds for democratic participation, they extend the reach of democracy beyond the political to the private sphere and thereby counteract the potential threat of egotism and individualism. According to Payton and Moody, voluntary associations are “‘great free schools’ teaching the civic skills [...] that are necessary to make democracy work” (2008: 34). Democratic participation and grassroots democracy – both comprised in the institution of voluntary associations formed by ordinary people “of all ages, of all conditions, of all minds” (*Democracy* 896) – therefore become the most fundamental components of social cohesion within the United States. “So it is by charging citizens with the administration of small affairs, much more than by giving them the government of great ones,” the French historian observed, “that you interest them in the public good and make them see the need that they constantly have for each other in order to produce that good” (*Democracy* 891/892). Core characteristics such as mutuality and communal allegiance seem to be the logic result of the American people’s engagement in the advancement of the public good. De Tocqueville stated “that [he] ha[s] often seen Americans make great and true sacrifices for public affairs, and [has] observed a hundred times that they hardly ever fail to lend faithful support to each other as needed” (*Democracy* 893). He even claimed that Americans have developed a philanthropic habit and that their voluntary associations function as an effective form of checks and balances that prevents despotism. This, however, does not mean that Americans are driven by selflessness; instead, the French explained that they rather act according to what he terms “doctrine of interest well understood” (*Democracy* 920). This particular form of enlightened egocentricity eventually unites personal with communal interests and, according to de Tocqueville, is a pervasive force in the United States: “among the Americans of today, it has been universally admitted; it has

become popular; you find it at the bottom of all actions; it pokes through all discussions. You find it no less in the mouths of the poor than in those of the rich” (ibid.).

The foundation of voluntary associations and the principle of self-interest rightly understood are closely related – American philanthropy, then, is not caught between the force fields of altruism and egotism but rather resembles a more harmonious combination where the advancement of the public good is also seen as improvement of the individual’s life. De Tocqueville therefore concluded, “enlightened love of themselves leads [Americans] constantly to help each other and disposes them willingly to sacrifice for the good of the State a portion of their time and their wealth” (*Democracy* 921). In stark contrast to today’s stereotypes, which commonly equate philanthropy with the names and persons of large-scale financial donors such as Carnegie, Rockefeller, or, to mention more recent examples, Gates and Buffett, de Tocqueville described nineteenth-century philanthropy not as “the privilege of the few, [but as] the practice and the prerogative of the many” (McCarthy 3).

Whereas Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* presents philanthropic associations as the very fundament of American democracy and as literal ways of “apprenticeship to power” (Robbins 2004: 235),²² the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were highly critical of philanthropy as practiced by their contemporaries. However, while both rejected how it was practiced in their day – that is by spending money mostly through philanthropic institutions – they did *not* reject philanthropy altogether: Emerson and Thoreau, time and again, voiced their severe criticism by, for example, pointing out the uselessness and shallowness of philanthropy, but they also identified means and ways of how one can and, indeed, should give correctly.

Attacking institutional philanthropy, the transcendentalists made ironical cross-references to the Bible – the point of departure and explanation of many a philanthropic endeavor – and also at least implicitly alluded to de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and its appraisal of voluntary associations. In *Walden*, for example, Thoreau mocked the biblical command to give without attracting unnecessary attention to this act in order to avoid self-glorification (Mt. 6:3) by saying, “If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing” (*Walden* 172). While de Tocqueville warmly applauded Americans for their tendency to form voluntary

²² The French historian’s interpretation holds true especially for certain socio-historical developments that took place around the publication of his work, such as the women’s rights movement, which reached a first peak with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, and, as another example, abolitionism, which gained growing influence during the 1850s. In chapter 2.2 I will explore these historical issues in depth.

associations for the benefit of the public good, the two New England philosophers severely condemned this practice. “The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow,” Thoreau bemoaned,

whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the Almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet as lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund for the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently (“Civil Disobedience” 95).

His colleague and friend Emerson likewise expressed harsh criticism of philanthropic institutions and strongly put their usefulness into question by lamenting over the alleged randomness of “popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots, and the thousandfold Relief Societies” (“Self-Reliance” 154). For the two New England transcendentalist, the practice of spending money for benevolent purposes ran counter to the very heart of philanthropy – Emerson and Thoreau therefore concluded that their contemporaries’ philanthropic undertakings resemble “goodness tainted” (*Walden* 169) and their money spent is nothing but “a wicked dollar” (“Self-Reliance” 154).

Even though both agreed upon their assumption of the depravity of philanthropy as practiced by their peers,²³ they still firmly believed in a transcended philanthropy that is not based on the donation of money, but rather characterized by a more personal, immediate relationship between helper and helped. Emerson, for instance, was profoundly convinced of the inherent goodness, quality, and capacity of humankind saying that he believed each and every person capable of being “a free and helpful man, a reformer, a benefactor, [...] a brave and upright man” (“Reformer” 40). Moreover, he pointed out Jesus Christ as a prototypical and quite literal philanthropist: “This great, overgrown, dead Christendom of ours still keeps alive at least the name of a lover of mankind. But one day all men will be lovers; and every calamity will be dissolved in the universal sunshine” (ibid.). Philanthropy as practiced and preached by this ancient role model is a concept that Emerson clearly approved of and that has a close affinity to some utopian ideals and thoughts of his time. His colleague Thoreau also called for a different understanding of philanthropy and just like Emerson linked this to a deeper knowledge of the Christian nature of this phenomenon. “[Man’s] goodness must not be a partial and transitory act,” the philosopher explained, “but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious. This is a charity that hits a multitude of

²³ Thoreau even ironically expressed his fear of ‘do-gooders’: “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life” (*Walden* 169).

sins” (*Walden* 171).²⁴ Philanthropy, as conceived of by Emerson and Thoreau, first and foremost improves the individual self by adhering to their teachings of self-reliance and self-help and, by extrapolation, will eventually also benefit the society at large. Recapitulating this imperative, Robert Richardson concludes: “At the deepest, most important level, we must believe that what is good for us individually is good for us all” (5). Likewise, Joseph Wood Krutch comments on Thoreau’s thoughts on social reform saying “it is the individuals who must first reform themselves if society is to be reformed; not that a reformed society will reform man” (3). Hence, the two best-known nineteenth-century American philosophers were highly critical of a trend in philanthropy that was just in its infancy during their lifetime, institutionalized philanthropy – a development that reached a first apogee around the turn of the twentieth century. Intimately connected to industrial tycoons such as Andrew Carnegie, who published his instructional and programmatic article “Gospel of Wealth” concerning the responsibility of the rich to redistribute their fortune in 1889, this trend ushered in large-scale financial support for various benevolent causes through the superrichs’ philanthropic foundations and thus fundamentally altered the perception of American philanthropy.

By contrast, *What Good Is Good?* interprets this phenomenon as a universal human tradition in order “to emphasize the deep historical roots of philanthropy – meaning that some form of philanthropy has existed in all societies from the beginning because it is a basic human response to the human condition” (Payton and Moody 2008: 10). Its origins can be found in basically all different religious beliefs all over the world because “the faithful emulate a generous God or gods by becoming givers themselves” (Robbins 2004: 234). This is especially true for the development of philanthropy within the United States, where this concept assumes a key importance in the formation of this nation’s self-perception and self-understanding.

I have shown that philanthropy is inextricably related to the notion of American exceptionalism since it is closely linked to America’s Christian faith and can be seen as a powerful expression of American democracy as well as republicanism; since it has traditionally had a strong and highly influential role in American society, filling the vacuum between the private, individual sector and the government; and since it is also firmly rooted in the United States’ belief in economic market values. Castle therefore claims, “philanthropy will continue to help define the United States as a culturally distinct part of the world” (103). I have also argued that philanthropy is central to American identity formation since this

²⁴ The latter part of this quote is a reference to 1 Peter 4:8.

particular form of social interaction defines the relationship of the individual to the larger community and assigns distinct social roles to the parties involved. In this respect, the act of helping is a prototypical American characteristic, whereas being helped is deemed un-American. Through her engagement in benevolent activities, the philanthropist therefore makes herself and emerges a strong, self-reliant, and integral U.S. citizen (Hamer 167).

2.1.3 The Perception of Philanthropy: Between ‘Fascination and Suspicion’

Since philanthropy has had a deep and lasting influence on representations of American identity throughout U.S. history, it has also attracted various scholars’ research interests. Even though most seem to agree on the centrality of philanthropy for their subject matters, they remain rather undecided about its exact role and this term’s perception has constantly been a matter of fierce controversies. While some critics have emphasized its positive impact on society – where its alleged main goal is the common good, the general “improvement in the quality of human life” (Bremner 3) –, others have highlighted its inherent contradictions. Philanthropists have therefore been seen as mere agents of “sophisticated conservatism” (Arnove 18) and preservers of the *status quo* who are only seemingly engaged in and committed to social change. As a result, the perception of philanthropy oscillates between the opposite poles of “fascination and suspicion” (Christianson 2007: 13).

Undeniably, philanthropic engagement has exerted significant influence on the reality of life in the United States; again, the two probably most prominent philanthropists to date – Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller – can be taken as prime examples. While Carnegie is renowned for building public libraries in many cities in the United States and Great Britain, Rockefeller provided substantial financial support for different universities such as Yale, Harvard, and Columbia, to mention just a few. Ever since, wealthy benefactors have tried to follow their example and today’s so-called ‘philanthrocapitalists,’ for instance, signed the Giving Pledge in 2010. Spearheaded by the billionaires Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, 122 superrich people from around the world have made a “commitment [...] to dedicate the majority of their wealth to philanthropy” (n. pag.) as their official websites’ announcement reads.

Especially in times of economic crises, U.S. society’s dependence on private benefactors and their monetary gifts becomes apparent: St. Louis, Missouri, a city that has seen a dramatic decline in its economy as well as its population since the 1950s and, consequently, was hit hard during and after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, has to rely on private donations in

order to secure the maintenance of crucial parts of public service and life. Its libraries, museums, zoo, as well as theater could not survive without financial aid by philanthropic foundations and private individuals and St. Louis' famous Forest Park, which hosted the Olympic Games and the World Fair in 1904, would not have been able to carry out extensive restoration of its facilities since 2000 (Wernicke 3). Hence, Dietlin summarizes the vital role of philanthropy in the United States:

Well, to put it absolutely bluntly, we could not survive without it. Both critical money donations and essential donations of time are the only reasons that we have strong universities, great parks, vital health clinics, crucial research, and well, you get the idea. Without philanthropy, there would not be a single theater, dance company, great museum, green movements, underwater exploration, animal shelters, programs to end hunger and homelessness, school orchestras, and likely everything else that is more than the most basic services. So many parts of our society depend on philanthropy! (n. pag.)

Apart from these crucial impacts on Americans' everyday life made possible by billions of dollars spent each and every year in the United States, "Philanthropy is about more than money," as Payton and Moody remark: "it is about mission, shared values, organization, and much else before and besides money" (2008: 30). This concept has therefore been interpreted as a means of community building and a suitable way to socio-political power. Firstly, philanthropy establishes a relationship between benefactor and beneficiary that is characterized by reciprocity, a social situation in which "*donors and recipient both give and get*" (Ostrander and Schervish 93, their emphasis) – even though they are not equals and certain power hierarchies as well as the social distance between donor and donee are usually perpetuated. Following de Tocqueville's appraisal of voluntary associations as *the* backbone of American democracy, some critics have emphasized the special importance of philanthropic voluntarism in the United States and analyzed it as "a way of building and serving the community and bringing people together in serving common community goals" (Hodgkinson 495). Direct help and assistance to people in need have been regarded as "more generous gift[s] than the gift of money" and as "the most immediate and personal and self-revealing – therefore the most challenging – form of service" (Payton and Moody 2008: 43). As I have shown in the Introduction, statistics about the amount of time spent on voluntary engagements in the United States further support these assumptions and underline the fact that Americans tend to get involved in the assistance of various philanthropic causes more readily than citizens of other nations.

Secondly, many scholars have stated that philanthropic endeavors function as a motor for social change and provide certain sections of the population, which may have been formerly barred from socio-political participation, with ways to contribute to the creation of U.S. society. Kevin Robbins, for instance, argues, “The subversive, insurrectionary, and liberating potentials of philanthropy in history are plainly evident and demand new attention” (235). A short analysis of the development of the woman suffrage movement in the United States as well as the importance of racial self-help to African Americans will actually prove this point, since activists in both camps employed their dedication to philanthropy not only for specific political or cultural ends – that is, the vote for women or the alleviation of plight for African Americans – but also regarded their involvement as a literal “apprenticeship to power” (ibid).

Throughout the nineteenth century, women participated in most of the various reform movements of that time: They were active supporters and public speakers in the temperance movement as well as abolitionism and eventually fought for their right to vote. Even though the then firm belief in the concept of ‘separate spheres,’ which carefully divided the domestic – the domain of women – from the public – the domain of men –, effectively denied women access to participation within the wider society, women still managed to slowly expand the female sphere and to assume new roles: The supposedly civilizing effect of the domestic realm was simply projected onto the public and women’s alleged moral superiority and their role as religious core of the family served as justification as well as obligation to help and to become involved in various reform movements. Especially within antislavery circles, women gained leading roles and became celebrated public figures – even today, eminent ladies such as Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, the Grimké sisters, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are renowned figures not only for their dedication to abolitionism, but for being champions of the women’s rights movement (DuBois 238-251). Their involvement in antislavery taught female activists how to efficiently apply certain tactics, it gave them a public platform to transport and refine their ideas, and it finally turned them into political professionals. “Women developed fund-raising skills, they learned how to distribute literature, how to call meetings – and some of them even became strong public speakers,” political activist Angela Davis states, and further explains, “Most important of all, they became efficient in the use of the petition, which would become the central tactical weapon of the woman’s rights campaign” (39). Their devotion to diverse philanthropic endeavors of the nineteenth century has been seen as path toward participation in U.S. society and toward an American identity since they emerged as powerful helpers of people in need and acquired crucial abilities to advance their own position.

Likewise, intraracial philanthropy among African Americans has a long history, even though black people are “typically looked upon as recipients of philanthropic efforts” (Gasman and Sedgwick 1). Their racial self-help, oftentimes directed at African American uplift where the motivational impulses of mutual aid and social reform are inextricably related and cannot be clearly separated, has been interpreted as a literal survival strategy in an otherwise hostile American society. “Perhaps for their very survival,” Mary-Frances Winters explains, “African Americans have been compelled to share and give back from the moment they arrived on the shores of this country” (109). Historically, the black church has played a key role in African American philanthropy and many scholars agree that it has often been the “most significant institution” and functioned as “the primary political, social, and philanthropic [center] during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Center on Philanthropy 4). Its relative independence from white authorities and its appeal to large proportions of the black population effectively turned it into a “community foundation, channeling individual donations to support community needs” (Carson 11). From the ranks of the black clergy emerged a powerful class of black leaders and social activists such as Richard Allen, Alexander Crummell, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Moreover, it has also been the backbone of efforts in African American education both in the antebellum as well as post-Civil War eras, as fervent supporter of teachers and as provider of meeting places as well as other resources, and has played a vital part in nineteenth- and twentieth-century protest and reform movements. The successes of the Underground Railroad and of the civil rights movement, for instance, appear not to have been possible without substantial help from the black church and its members. From its primarily religiously motivated beginnings in the eighteenth century, African American philanthropy has therefore predominantly been a form of racial self-help that secured the most basic needs during slavery, provided education and training in Reconstruction America, and eventually gave rise to the large-scale social reform and protest movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

Next to the central importance of the black church in the development of African American philanthropy, the special role of the family has to be taken into consideration – ideas and ideals of kinship and community have permeated the understanding and exercise of help within this minority and therefore shaped and determined a unique form of giving. The preeminence of the family, a term that traditionally covers a wider range of people within African American communities, can be explained by the historical exclusion from white institutions and “isolation from the structures and resources of white society” (Center on Philanthropy 3). This particular constellation has increased the importance and dependence of

the individual to the larger community and established a kinship system based on reciprocity as a social norm and obligation. Thus, James Joseph considers the African American individual a “*homo-communalis*” (73, his emphasis). Further, he explains that this individual is located within “a network of kin that function[s] as an economic, religious, and political unit with its own customs, traditions, and rituals” (74). In stark contrast to Western understandings of philanthropy, Joseph argues that a strong *African* tradition of communality and racial self-help has to be considered the fountainhead of African American philanthropy and cites quarter communities, the Underground Railroad, and the black church during slavery as well as their modern-day ‘follow-ups’ – the civil rights movement, fraternities, and sororities catering to the needs of the African American community – as best examples for this phenomenon (77-84). African American intraracial philanthropy has thus been seen as an answer to oppression as well as discrimination and has primarily been directed at the ultimate goal of racial uplift.

Many black people, however, have also tried to prove their eligibility to citizenship through racial self-help. Since philanthropy seems to be intimately connected to American identity and since it has been interpreted as “the mark [...] of legitimate membership in the nation” (Ryan 2003: 161), these efforts and movements may have been motivated by the desire to demonstrate African Americans’ ‘worthiness’ to become integral parts of U.S. society. According to Susan Ryan, helping others as an ur-American characteristic is a perfect way to remove the “taint of dependence” (ibid. 176) that has contradicted the ability of this minority to live a self-sufficient life throughout their history. Parallel to women’s engagement in philanthropy, African Americans have therefore been able to “extend their roles as citizens [and] destabiliz[e] the very racial and ethnic biases inherent in citizenship, especially the premise that America was ‘the white man’s country’” (Friedman 12), through their intraracial philanthropic efforts.

While many researchers have indeed reflected well on philanthropy, other critics, however, have pointed out that “Sometimes the beneficiaries have gotten the worst of the deal” (Friedman 21). Power hierarchies, social imbalances, and subordination are only a few of the negative properties that appear to accompany the philanthropic gift. Furthermore, “there is something about philanthropy that seems to go against the democratic grain” as Bremner remarked (2). Self-reliance and (rugged) individualism as core characteristics of the stereotypical American contradict a relationship between two people in which one has to accept help from her counterpart. Other commentators have oftentimes described a literal

“suspicion of the poor” (Bergman and Bernardi 3) by Americans; some try, at length, to carefully distinguish the needy from the idle and to justify the supposedly God-given class division between rich and poor.

As mentioned previously, the transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau were highly critical of philanthropy as practiced by their contemporaries and consequently rejected it. Ever since, critics who have emphasized its proximity to elitism, conservatism, and capitalism have subjected philanthropy to intense scrutiny. In their historical German-American comparative study, Adam *et alii*, for instance, describe this phenomenon as a genuine elitist habit and identifying factor for the upper social strata. In this respect, providing help is not only the elite’s historical responsibility or social obligation but also its *sole* prerogative. They interpret philanthropy as a means of elitist networking: Throughout history, the high and eminent have played crucial roles in the establishment and financing of philanthropic organizations and they have frequently been at the very top of these benevolent societies, which can thus be regarded as the most exclusive elitist clubs (Adam et al. 7-14).

The intimate relationship between the powerfully rich in U.S. society and philanthropy has raised certain controversial questions about their motivations to become involved in philanthropic action, as well as about the outcomes of this help. Some researchers have argued that the elite’s ‘dedication’ to the advancement of the common good has been merely encouraged by conservative self-interest and that “philanthropy must be considered as a potential means to gratification, status definition, and power for individuals and social groups” (Robbins 2004: 234). Other scholars have even gone one step further: From their points of view, philanthropy has not only been a conservative but an oppressive force in the United States that maintains certain socio-economic hierarchies and power imbalances rather than attempting to change them. Especially “Critics of Western democratic capitalism,” explains Castle, “see private philanthropy as one of the many ideological means by which the capitalist class maintains its privileged status” (100/101). In our Western societies, which foster and rely on a prevailing set of market values, they argue, supposedly generous donations and efforts to eradicate certain social ills should be seen as odd outgrowths of capitalist exploitation and as mere sedatives that treat symptoms rather than root causes of social problems. According to this critical reasoning, philanthropy is ultimately part and parcel of a system that is held responsible for the problems it is aiming to remedy, and therefore resembles a double-edged sword that oftentimes creates what it is seemingly trying to fight: dependence and subordination (Gomberg 46-48). These mechanisms have been

described as ‘cultural imperialism,’ a belief system that perpetuates conservative ideals and justifies certain social groups’ “cultural and ideological hegemony” (Arnove 2).

Above all, major philanthropic foundations have time and again been accused of running this particular kind of ‘sophisticated conservatism’ and one of their main outlets of financial support – large-scale funding of educational institutions – has been analyzed as their most efficient means to bring about a desired social preservation effect. “Through the education programs they fund,” Robert Arnove contends, “foundations are able to influence the world views of the general public as well as orientations and commitments of the leadership which will direct social change” (17). Their selective support of scientific research, for instance, distributes resources unevenly among universities as well as research centers and, at least implicitly, encourages only some forms of scientific networking. All these efforts, their critics hold, are to effect a guided and channeled social change rather than a dramatic upheaval.

The deep involvement of foundations in African American higher education after the Civil War, for example, can then be seen as a case in point to demonstrate the white elite’s zeal to achieve cultural imperialism. Historically speaking, education has been valued as a potential equalizer among the black population in the United States – probably even more so since many southern states had passed laws that prohibited the teaching of slaves by, for instance, punishing the educators with heavy fines. Fearful of insurrections, slaveholders also perceived literacy among African Americans as a threat, even though the ability to read the Bible as a means of spiritual conversion of black slaves was promoted by Christian missionaries. Reading, the masters reasoned, would only enable their slaves to consume abolitionist texts and writing would only allow them to communicate with each other over longer distances. Frederick Douglass, who was taught the alphabet by his mistress Mrs. Auld and who regarded knowledge as his way to freedom, reports the following words by Mr. Auld that effectively put his formal education to a sudden stop:

‘If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now,’ said he, ‘if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.’
(*Narrative* 33, his emphasis)

Slaves who nevertheless desired to attain an education were left to the whim of their masters. Some former slaves have reported extreme atrocities such as amputations of fingers as punishments. Whether or not these accounts are true, the rumors alone surely created an

intimidating atmosphere and effectively reminded the slaves of the dangers of acquiring an education (Cornelius 173/174).

It is therefore hardly surprising that the Reconstruction South saw a massive upsurge in African American schools and colleges. While some of these institutions were supported by local black communities with whatever means they had and while most of them did not survive for very long due to financial shortages as well as open hostility by white Americans, no small number of these schools were increasingly relying and thus dependent on philanthropic foundations and their money. However, while so-called industrial schools such as Hampton and Tuskegee received the lion's share and had fervent supporters among white elites in both the North and the South, liberal arts colleges such as Fisk and Atlanta University had to work with only scarce resources. It has therefore been argued that money was allocated to the former type of institutions only because white philanthropists as well as the majority of the white population in the South feared a highly educated and potentially militant black avant-garde. Instead of investing in higher education in the liberal arts, then, African Americans were to be trained as skilled laborers and workers – thereby securing white hegemony throughout the South (and in the entire United States, implicitly). White sponsors did not only spend considerable amounts of money on specific schools but also exerted decisive influence over the curricula of the educational institutions that they supported. Their goal was to effect a slow change and guided development in the African American population instead of a more radical and immediate upturn – a process that was met with mixed feelings among the black leadership. The apparent discrepancy in the direction of African American uplift between accommodation as well as racial self-help on the one hand and a radical demand of equality as well as self-determination on the other can then be broken down into the duality between two of the most important African American figures at the turn of the twentieth century: Booker T. Washington, former slave and founder of Tuskegee Institute, and W. E. B. Du Bois, intellectual and founding editor of NAACP's radical journal *The Crisis*. Whereas Washington is renowned (or, as some would have it, notorious) for raising substantial financial support for Tuskegee among white philanthropists – he even was the first African American to dine in the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt –, Du Bois decried the former's enthusiasm, perceived his Tuskegee-students as, in Kenneth King's words, a subservient “breed of philanthropists' Negroes” (42), and promoted instead his ideal of the so-called ‘talented tenth’ – a class of black leadership that has attained a classical rather than an industrial education.

Institutionalized philanthropy has therefore played a dual role in the history of African American education; attempting to evaluate its impact is to narrate a story of “mixed motives and unintended consequences” (Anderson and Moss 12). On the one hand, these efforts have been clearly directed at the maintenance of the *status quo*: The strong support of industrial colleges, for instance, has been seen as a means of “keeping Blacks in their place” (Beilke 17), since its ultimate goal was the training of a submissive, even docile black labor force. Other researchers have claimed that white patronage of black education has effectively prevented a proper emancipation of African Americans since the benefactors saw the beneficiaries as “perpetual child[ren]” (Ryan 2003: 94). On the other hand, however, an immense educational progress in the aftermath of the Civil War cannot be denied: Literacy rates among African Americans soared, many black children were able to at least receive a basic education, and a new intellectual leadership, spearheaded by Du Bois, reached its first peak during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s.

The apparent bipolarity in the research on philanthropy emphasizes this phenomenon’s inherent contradiction. Consequently, Jeffrey Mullins concludes, “anyone engaged in philanthropy and social reform partakes in a complex mixture of both benevolence and social control” (27). The motivations of benefactors, for example, have to be located somewhere between the force fields of altruism and egoism, while the impact of their help on the less fortunate oscillates between oppression and true dedication. On the one side, philanthropy establishes a relationship between donor and donee – however imbalanced –, serves as a means of community building, and has also been regarded as a form of participation within democratic societies. Especially in the United States – a nation that, out of fear of an all too strong cradle-to-grave government, has placed great responsibilities in the hands of its citizens – philanthropy has assumed a crucial role. “American philanthropy is not a matter of the rich helping people in need,” Zunz boldly concludes, “but of a people, rich or not, providing for their own future” (295). On the other side, this idea has been analyzed as a literal haunting presence for black as well as white America and its impact on the beneficiary has been critically questioned. For white Americans – traditionally perceived as donors –, then, philanthropy is equally a constant reminder of and way to assuage their “collective racial guilt” (Ryan 2003: 2), while it may have led to a feeling of eternal indebtedness on the part of African Americans as common receivers of help. As a crucial marker of American identity, white benefactors have also created their own self-image and an imagined blackness/Otherness around this concept. Philanthropy, then, functions as a defining factor of

Americanness and whiteness in general. Hence, Gross states that philanthropy has the ambivalent power to “knit society together or pull it apart” (48).

2.2 Philanthropy in American Literature and Literary Studies

Despite the fact that throughout human history, diverse literary genres have been concerned with philanthropy – and fiction in particular shows a strong philanthropic tradition from the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus to the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke to the sentimental novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – this phenomenon has been virtually neglected by literary scholars and has therefore to be considered an academic void.

Generally speaking, fiction is one arena in which the discourse on philanthropy is conducted. Since philanthropic deeds are usually understood as answers to certain pressing social needs (e.g., poverty, hunger, and inequality), literati have dealt with these subjects in novels, short stories, poems, etc.: They have, for instance, provoked discussions on the nature and impact of means to meet and address these problems. Even if philanthropy is not the most central or obvious concern of many pieces of fiction (which might account for the fact that this phenomenon has received scarcely any attention by literary critics), it is nevertheless a frequent topic in literature and, after all, has at least attracted some scholars’ interests. Their research on philanthropy in fiction is primarily concerned with the “representation of philanthropic acts, or the absence of such representations,” explains Richard Turner, who makes a crucial addition stating that “most works of literature aim to make some lasting impact on the world and so constitute philanthropic acts” (306/307 and 308). Within literary studies, scholars therefore distinguish between a narrow and a broad focus on philanthropy: Whereas the first approach discusses this concept as a pervasive literary motif and genre marker, the second delves deeper and attempts to interpret literature as philanthropy, analyzes fiction’s potential to contribute to social reform, and even perceives literary criticism – in its quest for knowledge and its ambition to further our understanding – as a quasi-philanthropic endeavor. The analytical levels of aesthetics and ethics appear to collapse, especially when following the second strand of thinking, and academics conducting literary studies have to be aware of this complex as well as multi-layered conflict situation and try to negotiate between these force fields – ideally, of course, to the benefit of the results of their research. Additionally, literary critics have almost exclusively commented on the (white) benefactors’ roles and debunked them as pretentious hypocrites with base motives. This, however, seems to be far too lopsided and does not do full justice to the representation of philanthropy as a

complex and intricate social relation. When analyzing the function of this phenomenon, then, one has to literally dig for the deeper and hidden meanings – in other words, the creative as well as the destructive potential of this concept must be taken into consideration.

Especially within American Studies, the disregard or superficial treatment of philanthropy is strikingly apparent, because this concept has not only been a recurring topic in American fiction, but also exerted an immense influence on our understanding of the United States and stimulated a strong academic interest in this phenomenon in other disciplines since at least the 1980s. Consequently, many universities across America today offer undergraduate as well as graduate degrees in philanthropic studies and the University of Indiana at Purdue has even founded the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in 2012, the first school of its kind nationwide. John Simon has therefore polemically decried this apparent discrepancy:

Why is it that what is probably the truly unique feature of the American economy – indeed the distinguishing characteristic of our social order – has been, for a very long time, the least well studied, the least understood aspect of our national life? Why does America’s extra dimension remain, in effect, the dark side of the moon? (67)²⁵

Notable exceptions to this trend are literary scholars who have conducted studies in certain socio-cultural transformation processes in U.S. history, researchers who have interested themselves in literary genres of the nineteenth century, and some academics who have specialized on minority writings such as African American literature.²⁶

The first group discusses periods of the American past that have seen dramatic social change. Catalyzed by either economic factors such as commercialization in the shift from the American Revolution to the Early Republic and the rise of capitalism during the Gilded Age, or social reform movements in the antebellum era, these transitional periods caused veritable “cultural watershed[s]” (Watts 129) and significantly changed U.S. society. These times of unrest and instability are reflected in fiction of the respective eras. Oftentimes, fiction that deals with cultural watersheds is subsumed under the umbrella term of ‘social reform literature’ – works that either ironically engage with certain social imperfections or didactically aim at presenting possible solutions. Steve Watts, for instance, reads Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond; or, the Secret Witness* (1799) as an indictment of the changing conditions in early nineteenth-century America. This novel bespeaks a shift in values with

²⁵ Even though Simon, a researcher in Philanthropic Studies, has made this observation concerning studies on the non-profit sector, his critical observation is equally applicable to research on philanthropy in literary studies.

²⁶ While I do not mean this to be an exhaustive list, it nevertheless presents the major areas of investigation. In this respect it is striking that most of the scholars seem to be concerned with nineteenth-century American fiction and its relationship to philanthropy; more modern pieces of literature are seldom read through the critical lens of philanthropy.

apparently detrimental effects on Americans, which are all comprised in Brown's character Ormond: Distancing himself from the highly appraised revolutionary ideals of fraternity and communalism, Ormond moves to the rather negatively connoted traits of individualism and personal gain (Watts 133-135).

In an analysis of two lesser known and studied novels, John Cawelti contends that these works attempt a literal restoration of the United States to its supposedly ur-American characteristics and its 'true' American identity based on values such as honesty, thrift, and love for democratic principles (278-280). Sylvester Judd's *Richard Edney's and the Governor's Family: A Rus-Urban Tale* (1850) and T. S. Denison's *An Iron Crown. A Tale of the Great Republic* (1885) were both written during times of imminent crises: While the first deals with growing regional tensions and industrialization in the antebellum United States, the latter discusses the effects of capitalism on American society during the Gilded Age – a time that, intriguingly, saw also the rise of large-scale philanthropic foundations initiated by business tycoons. While both authors seem to propagate social reform, it is important to note that Judd's as well as Denison's ideas thereof are clearly limited to white, middle-class, Christian values. Hence, Cawelti claims that Judd's main focus is the restoration of Christian faith, while Denison's novel attempts to give "America back to the industrious, upright native citizens who had once made her great" (286).

Susan Ryan identifies a slightly different genre in antebellum American literature that she termed "charity texts" ("Misgivings" 687). According to her understanding, the pre-Civil War era was characterized by an almost unresolvable tension between the apparent need as well as responsibility to help the destitute on the one hand – as evidenced by the myriad of mid-nineteenth-century social reform movements –, and negative feelings about philanthropy based on the fear of being tricked by 'beggars'' schemes of duplicity as well as on the questionable sincerity of donors on the other. This social discourse was, of course, partially conducted in what Susan Ryan coined 'charity texts.' As a prominent example of this genre, she cites Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). In this satirical novel, Melville explores the points of intersection between the concepts of race and philanthropy. Melville also presents a finely nuanced picture of this complex social relation that neither praises nor rejects said phenomenon altogether. "Instead," Susan Ryan explains, "*The Confidence-Man* problematizes both the donor's intentions and the very notion of benevolence, presenting a series of exchanges in which neither donor nor supplicant looks particularly blameless" ("Misgivings" 697).

A case in point is the Black Guinea episode, in which a supposedly black beggar dances for a white audience and catches their pennies with his mouth. On first sight, Melville seems to offer a severe criticism of the white ‘benefactors’ – as true audience to a spectacle, they become involved in economic transactions trading money for entertainment, pleasure, and sexual exploitation as their return on investment. The character of Black Guinea, however, can also be interpreted as one of Melville’s con men who might not even be black, but only performs a blackface show secretly. Blackness as a legitimate marker of dependence and destitution is employed in a scheme to earn money and the ‘beggar’ thereby flouts and transgresses racial hierarchies. Read in this way, the Black Guinea episode signifies not only the donors’ base motives to help, but also the potential exploitation of philanthropy by impostors and underlines certain racial biases inherent in benevolent interactions. Furthermore, this episode exemplifies that philanthropy is not only a crucial marker of Americanness but also of *whiteness* – the latter, indeed, is in many respects a prerequisite of the former. Susan Ryan therefore says, “access to a white racial designation and its attendant privileges depended to some extent on whether one needed help or was in a position to help others” (“Misgivings” 688).

A second group of scholars discusses certain nineteenth-century genres of fiction and their relationship to philanthropy. According to Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi, the sentimental novel, for instance, can be analyzed as an important counterforce to other contemporary literary movements in America such as romanticism and transcendentalism. To begin with, these distinct literary genres show gender specificity: Whereas women primarily wrote sentimental novels, the other two genres are clearly male-dominated (e.g., Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, etc.). As examples, Bergman and Bernardi cite Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) – probably the best-known work in this category –, and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) (1-19). These female authors stressed the importance of community in the self-actualization of their characters as well as the responsibility for self and others in their works, whereas their male contemporaries focused on self-reliance and rugged individualism. Sentimental novels negotiate between the individual and the community by placing the ‘Self’ in relation to others, by putting emphasis on the ‘we’ instead of the ‘I.’ Gillian Silverman therefore claims that these works have an almost didactic dimension offering “pedagogical tools, teaching their readers how to interact and establish community with others” (5).

Most important, however, is that sentimental novels place emotions and emotional responses by their audiences above action – closely following Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), their ultimate goal was to evoke a sense of sympathy in their readership. Smith described the capacity to recognize emotions of other people (an idea which would nowadays be more accurately called empathy instead of sympathy) as a basic human characteristic and necessity (*Theory* 2/3). According to his reasoning, people are able to change situations with others imaginarily: This way, positive feelings are amplified and the impact of negative feelings is reduced when shared.

Silverman takes this even one step further and identifies a democratic impulse in sentimentalism and sentimental fiction. “For the sentimentalist,” she explains, “all men are created equal not because they are endowed with certain inalienable rights, but because all have the same ability to grieve and to love intensely” (5). Even though sentimentalism seems to be deeply rooted in a rhetoric of egalitarian beliefs, it is equally based on certain socio-economic hegemonies and heavily relies on social imbalances – the “paradox of sentimentalism” (Silverman 6) is, then, that a sense of community is only achieved through difference. In this respect, sentimental fiction can be interpreted as negotiator between nineteenth-century white middle-class inconsistencies: While purportedly aiming at eliciting sympathy with the sufferer and thereby creating community, this genre may have solidified social hierarchies by satisfying its readerships demand of spectatorship and voyeurism. Attempting to bridge the gulf between the seemingly irreconcilable antinomies of egalitarianism and middle-class domination, “sentimentalism was a way for the American bourgeoisie to consolidate and obscure its power” (ibid. 7). Sentimental novels, however, should not be regarded as dogmatic or ideological pieces of literature; rather, the most elaborate ones clearly emphasize fluidity, instability, and transition in their depiction of interpersonal relationships that are highly characteristic of the conflict-laden antebellum era. Moreover, in accordance with the dominant concept of separate spheres in nineteenth-century America, the female authors were able to project the supposedly civilizing effect of women in their families onto the larger public in a socially accepted and sanctified way – philanthropy and sentimentalism are therefore inextricably intertwined in sentimental fiction.

Other scholars claim that there is an even closer relationship between genre and philanthropy in nineteenth-century literature. In their British-American comparative studies, Frank Christianson and Amanda Claybaugh argue for a systematic form-to-function mapping: At that time, philanthropy and social reform required certain literary genres and styles; this, in

turn, gave rise to, for example, realism (Christianson 2007: 1-22) and the novel of purpose (Claybaugh 31-51). Christianson, for instance, cites Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) as a paragon for the ambivalent treatment of philanthropy in nineteenth-century literature, depicted in the antagonism between philanthropy as practiced at the Blithedale community and the modern philanthropist Hollingsworth: While this work tends to evaluate interpersonal philanthropy as positive, institutionalized philanthropy, by contrast, is blamed as a cold, machine-like force. Hawthorne's narrator Coverdale, however, is unable to distinguish between these two sides – the novelist thus raises a crucial epistemological question and his novel has been seen as a transitional piece of literature located somewhere between 'old' sentimental fiction and 'modern' realism (Christianson 2003: 253-261). The treatment of philanthropy in mid-nineteenth-century American fiction exemplifies a crucial characteristic of this time – namely, 'the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous,' to borrow a phrase from the German historian Ernst Bloch: fundamental contradictions such as social reform and oppression, egalitarian beliefs and hegemony, past and future coexisted and created an atmosphere of mutability.

The relationship of especially African American literature with philanthropy is also highly complex: While the genre of the slave narrative, for example, shows an ambivalent connection to this phenomenon, twentieth-century fiction seems to critically engage with and question America's supposedly philanthropic tradition. Following literary critics such as the above-mentioned Turner or essayist Lewis Hyde, who both claim that literature can be interpreted as a philanthropic gift, the slave narrative as such has indeed made a positive impact on its authors and the wider American public.²⁷ Its strong autobiographical impulse creates an individual self through the act of writing one's life story and it thereby liberates the former bondsmen from the shackles of slavery. The famous phrase 'Once you learn to read, you will be forever free,' for example, is attributed to Frederick Douglass, bestselling author of the narrative of his way to freedom, who did not tire to stress the importance of literacy and knowledge to slaves. Moreover, writing and telling this personal narrative re-creates and restores – *re-members*, in the truest sense of the word – an identity and firmly anchors the writers in time and space. The author's will to write is her will to power – slave narratives thus offered African Americans a large platform in abolitionist circles and encouraged their participation in U.S. society. Finally, this genre can be interpreted as a negotiator between

²⁷ Approximately two hundred slave narratives were published between the early eighteenth and the mid nineteenth century (even though some scholars estimate the number to be significantly higher, still). Consequently, this genre has a rather broad scope. I therefore limit the following assertions on slave narratives to those written in the antebellum era, a time that saw this genre's heyday.

sentimentalism on the one hand and American Romanticism on the other. Modeled after the sentimental novel, slave narratives were designed to elicit a sense of sensation and sentiment in their readership. Simultaneously, however, the writers' struggle to bring order to chaos and to make sense of her life adheres to the typical American theme of the common man as hero. Therefore, this genre is deeply embedded in nineteenth-century literary traditions.

The slave narrative's impact on the larger society is twofold: Firstly, as propaganda literature dedicated to the idea of abolitionism it provided white northerners as its typical target audience with a new worldview and stressed the common humanity between the races. Since these pieces of literature circulated widely in antebellum America and since their writers toured the United States on the abolitionist lecture circuit, secondly, this genre functions as a blueprint and its authors serve as positive role models for the free black community in this day. Slave narratives are therefore intimately connected to one of the most prominent and influential social reform movements of the mid nineteenth century.

While most critics do not deny these positive impulses of this genre, they nevertheless put emphasis on certain distinctly negative effects – in this respect, they discuss the dark side of the connection of the slave narrative with philanthropy, namely paternalism, condescension, and racism in disguise. Deeply rooted in an almost exclusively white discourse, the stories and their authors ran the risk of becoming mere tokens in an abolitionist economy trying to put an end to the peculiar institution – but not, in the same moment, to inequity and racial prejudice. Consequently, the narratives are highly conventionalized; there are even certain set pieces and formulaic expressions that appear in virtually all of the pieces published prior to the Civil War. This almost led to the interchangeability or arbitrariness of the slaves' experiences, since the stories as such were primarily designed to accommodate their white audience. John Sekora, for instance, claims that “narrators as individuals with particular stories were thus situated at the intersection of collectivizing forces” (500). Moreover, the accounts of the former slaves apparently needed authentication to their authenticity by white authorities in order to appeal to a rather tepid white northern readership, which resulted in the attachment of numerous of such affidavits before and after the narration proper. Time and again, illustrious abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, and Lydia Maria Child attested to the truth of a given slave narrative. Some of these judges claimed that they had watched the author write or that the former slave had dictated them her story. Others even apologized to the intended white audience for the ‘lack’ of sophistication in style and language of the black authors – which they reinterpreted as yet

another sign of the depravity of African Americans caused by slavery. Lastly, the black authors were susceptible to their white audience's voyeurism and have undoubtedly been seen as a form of consumable entertainment – especially on the lecture circuits, for example, when former slaves had to expose their bodies on stage and were literally paraded around with their scars.

Viewed in this light, the real beneficiary of the slave narrative is not clearly identifiable. Abolitionism as “an end in and of itself” (Sekora 504) seems to be primarily directed at the betterment of the white American population. Slavery was seen as a moral degradation of the slaveholders and abolitionists needed to abolish the peculiar institution if the United States were to fulfill its founding documents' principles. Wendell Phillips, one of the leading figures in antislavery circles, summarized this social reform movement's most fundamental goal in the following way: “If we never free a slave, we have at least freed ourselves in the effort to emancipate our brother man” (qtd. in Martyn 240). The highly conventionalized and heavily regulated genre of the slave narrative has therefore been analyzed as another way of white America to assert cultural imperialism: “In literary condescension,” explains Sekora, “begins cultural dominance and political hegemony” (511). Even though black Americans authored these stories, they were clearly dependent on WASP standards and designed for a WASP audience – slave narratives are thus deeply embedded in a power play that was disguised as philanthropy.

Twentieth-century African American academics as well as fiction writers have been, and unquestionably continue to be, greatly concerned with history. Leading black intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Ellison and Cornel West have stressed time and again that for them history is not over. Likewise, Toni Morrison highlights the importance and responsibility of African Americans to remember in both her novels and in her pieces of social criticism. It has been argued that due to the historical neglect of the black side in the American grand narrative, African Americans now make their way into U.S. history and try to negotiate the limits of the historical canon (O'Meally and Fabre 3-8). Eminent authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright, to name just a few, have devoted their works to a literal reinterpretation of the historical record. Applying an idea for which Morrison coined the phrase ‘unspeakable things unspoken,’ they attempt to fill in the blanks, correct and revise the American narrative, and give a voice to the formerly silenced. In this respect, philanthropy as an inter- as well as intraracial social relation is subjected to close scrutiny: Its destructive and its creative potential for the black community as well as for the larger U.S. society is

evaluated and crucial moments of America's philanthropic history are reanalyzed. I will now briefly consider two historical novels by African Americans to further exemplify this point: Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing* (1997).²⁸

Invisible Man has been read as "a social protest novel" (Nash 351) calling for reform and change of the American society in general, because the unnamed protagonist not only encounters racism and social alienation but also violence and ignorance along his path to an identity, maturation, and knowledge. In Ellison's novel, philanthropy functions as a means of identity formation – certain expectations are tied to the philanthropic gift that carefully assign distinct social roles to the parties involved.

As an interracial relationship, philanthropy depicts "how 'black' becomes the social place to disguise [the white character's] own desires and hate them as other[,] a safe place for hiding self-referential statements" (Steele 484/485). Especially the novel's Norton episode underlines these inherent discrepancies. Norton's, outward appearance, for instance, highlights his role as symbolic gift-bringer: He is portrayed in close analogy to Saint Nicholas, the blueprint for present-day Santa Clause (*Invisible Man* 37). His motives to become engaged in black education, however, have to be subjected to questioning. For one thing, his help is primarily motivated by self-interest; his philanthropy, then, is a means of ego reinforcing. Quite unabashedly, Norton states that his 'dedication' to the education of African Americans grants him the "power of a king, or in a sense of a god" (*Invisible Man* 45). The white philanthropist therefore acquires an almost godlike power that solidifies white supremacy. Others argue that this businessman is prompted to philanthropic work by his strong sense of paternalism or even by his allegedly incestuous desires for his late daughter (Kim 316). Norton's explanations of his commitment to the black college are laden with numerous sexual connotations and metaphoric insinuations to human reproduction: "[His] money, [his] time and [his] hopes have been fruitfully invested" since the "barren clay [of the school was turned] to fertile soil" (*Invisible Man* 45) – in this respect, he symbolically fathers the school and its students.

The Norton episode has a lasting influence on the Invisible Man. He is deeply convinced to "do [Mr. Norton's] bidding and teach others to rise up as he wished them to" (*Invisible Man* 99). In short, the unnamed protagonist has completely internalized his white benefactor's values and is unaware of his state of dependence. The internalization of Norton's (or white America's) values even reaches a point where the protagonist sees a father figure in him and

²⁸ Again, I obviously do not mean this to be an exhaustive list or discussion.

is ashamed of his past and his people: Traditional black music and food are now a mark of incivility to him. As a result, Norton's impact on the Invisible Man leads to a veritable identity crisis upon the latter's expulsion from school. Ironically, the crazy veterans in the Golden Day are the only ones who see Norton and his fellows for what they really are – they mockingly name Norton “Thomas Jefferson,” “John D. Rockefeller,” “Messiah,” and “the Creator” (*Invisible Man* 77-79) in analogy to the supposedly great and long Christian tradition of philanthropy in America – and unsuccessfully try to warn the Invisible Man.

By contrast, philanthropy as an intraracial interaction stresses the importance of racial solidarity as a means to overcome oppression and tries to unite African Americans in Ellison's novel. The beneficiary, however, is under the obligation to assume responsibility for her community no matter what. This becomes clear in the Invisible Man's encounter with Mary Rambo. Her name alone allows for at least two interpretations that each cast a different light on her relation with the protagonist: On the one hand, there is an obvious connection to the biblical Virgin Mary, the very embodiment of benevolent motherhood. Close to her biblical namesake, Mary Rambo houses the Invisible Man, provides for the weak adolescent, and offers her seemingly unconditional love to him after the hospital scene. As a result, the protagonist perceives her not only as a community caregiver but also as a surrogate mother, guiding ancestral spirit, and maybe even a guardian (angel). The rhyme of the orthographic neighbors Rambo and Sambo, on the other hand, gives a different twist to her maternal philanthropy. As a symbol of an African American collective conscience and in a sense the living reminder of the black *herstory*, she represents the overwhelming and suffocating effect of the community on the individual. Mary Rambo becomes an embodiment of the traditional ‘mammy-figure:’ the rather masculine maternalist, the center of the community, and overpowering wirepuller. Consequently, the young man has to experience that she has a quite demanding way to remind the Invisible Man of her expectations for him and that she outlines a clear picture of what he is to become. In short, her philanthropy – just like Norton's – is by no means disinterested and the Invisible Man is “torn between resenting her for [her urging] and loving her for the nebulous hope she [keeps] alive” (*Invisible Man* 258). Mary's ideal is ultimately a threat to the protagonist's individuality. Philanthropy in *Invisible Man* is thus used to assert power over the inferior Other and to bring subordination to an end; it is both a liberating and oppressing force. Hence, Roberta Gibboney contends that the “reader discovers that philanthropy is a basic human and social impulse that shapes the way individuals and groups relate to each other and offers possibilities for change” (193).

Primarily set in epidemic-struck Philadelphia – literally the “city of brotherly love” (*Cattle Killing* 149) –, *The Cattle Killing* engages critically with a time in U.S. history that is greatly responsible for the common belief in the nation’s supposedly inherent philanthropic tradition: the genesis of the American republic. Wideman’s novel has been read as an attack on the glorified founding myth of the United States: The nation’s motto and its lofty principles are called into question, the near apotheosis of the Founding Fathers is ridiculed, and the complicity of Enlightenment philosophy as well as Christianity in racism is unveiled (Byerman 2005: 185). In contrast, the black community and storytelling surface as counterparts to white hegemony. Just as historical ‘truths’ are challenged, the very nature of philanthropy as a social relation is questioned.

Modeled after Benjamin Rush, Dr. Benjamin Thrush is clearly designed to highlight the discrepancies between America’s revolutionary principles and its practices. Characterized as “An enlightened, principled man, [he appears to be] a man perfectly suited for this new age, this new country and new century soon to dawn” (*Cattle Killing* 167). Thrush’s principles are, however, presented through two diametrically opposing views: While Thrush and his wife boast about his generous fervor in a self-congratulatory tone, the itinerant preacher and Thrush’s black maid Kathryn paint a completely different picture of his ‘dedication.’ Thinking of himself as a God-fearing Christian, a man of science, an ardent patriot as well as a statesman, Thrush almost naturally becomes *the* great benefactor and father figure for the African American community in Philadelphia. He, for instance, generously sponsors a separate black church and proudly stylizes himself as an angel heralding in a glorious future at its roof-raising (*Cattle Killing* 165). His philanthropy is purportedly motivated by enlightened principles, a sense of Christian duty, and a sincere conviction about human equality. The effect of Dr. Thrush’s philanthropy on the black characters is dramatic since he is the “man who [holds] in his hands the power of life and death over the city’s entire African community” (*Cattle Killing* 166). Hence, he takes up a godlike, distant position that echoes the near apotheosis of the Founding Fathers. Humbled in front of Thrush and his wife, the itinerant preacher, for example, loses his dignity and questions his very identity – the ultimate sign of this degradation is that he even develops a temporary speech impediment.

The itinerant preacher and Kathryn, however, correct Thrush’s jubilant self-image. While the main protagonist reveals that the new black church is indeed a hastily and poorly constructed makeshift, his maid confesses that he has secretly raped and even impregnated her. Telling the itinerant preacher about the sexual assault, Kathryn debunks the great

benefactor, humanist, and devoted Christian Thrush as a lecherous hypocrite who is against ‘African bondage’ while “making himself master of” (*Cattle Killing* 201) her. Thrush’s motives to help African Americans are therefore turned upside down – the corrected version of his portrait shows that he acts out of carnal desires, in order to present himself in a better light, and to display his supposed sophistication as well as power.²⁹

Through Thrush’s philanthropic engagement, African Americans are turned into ultimate sacrifices of an oppressive, colonial system. Generally speaking, then, interracial philanthropy creates distance and difference between its actors; quite contrary, intraracial philanthropy establishes close human bonds in *The Cattle Killing*. Jennifer Douglas contends that this novel “exposes the impaired vision existing between black and white people, [...] and the possibility of keen insight among black people” (218). Storytelling seems to be of particular importance here, since mutuality, reciprocity, and interconnectedness surface as fundamental qualities. Throughout the novel, the itinerant preacher is involved in several different occasions of storytelling that are all connected to healing and helping. The story itself is narrated to a mysterious sick black woman whom the protagonist tries to cure. Eventually, he realizes that they are both engaged in a mutual effort of call and response that simultaneously furthers her healing and his knowledge. Likewise, the storytelling between him and Kathryn reduces the rape victim’s psychological burden. Moreover, the protagonist’s two-year long stay at the Stubbs’ place is another case in point: This triangular relationship is characterized by role exchanges between the parties involved, which signify the indeterminacy between the categories of helper and helped. On the one hand, the itinerant preacher becomes a younger self of the old man in both his and his wife’s eyes and he thereby restores their love. The old interracial couple, on the other hand, turns into the protagonist’s family – through the father figure Liam, the black adolescent is able to identify with his African roots, while Mrs. Stubbs shows typical life-saving, if not life-giving, maternal characteristics and offers the young man useful insights into how white society works.

Having analyzed philanthropy’s role in American fiction, I have shown that this phenomenon is an integral part of literature and should receive more attention in literary studies – both as a recurrent motif in fiction as well as an almost didactic tool to bring about and further social change. Parallel to the historical importance of this phenomenon in the

²⁹ Parallel to Benjamin Thrush, his wife’s engagement in an orphanage and her relation to Kathryn need to be read *cum grano salis*: Again, the itinerant preacher’s and Kathryn’s correction reveal a different picture and show that her philanthropy is primarily directed by self-interest, hidden sexual desires, and a need to exert power over other people.

United States, philanthropy has been a concern of various writers and literary genres – from John Winthrop’s Puritan sermon to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to more recent works by Ralph Waldo Ellison or John Edgar Wideman. Especially within African American literature, this concept keeps surfacing repeatedly – admittedly, though, mostly not as the authors’ main concern. Consequently, philanthropy has not been the critics’ primary interest either. I read many of their criticism against the grain in order to excavate important findings on related issues and I extend the scope of studies on philanthropy to neighboring disciplines such as history, philosophy, or social studies. My discussion will now turn to its main focus, that is Toni Morrison’s approach to philanthropy. Beforehand, I should state that her oeuvre offers certain new and exciting outlooks on this concept, while simultaneously showing an ambivalent relationship to philanthropy, too – a stance which is central to African American literature and culture.

3. 'A House Divided' – Toni Morrison's Journey from House to Home

Having underlined the importance of philanthropy for the United States – a nation whose (self-) image heavily relies on this phenomenon and whose history is repeatedly interspersed with references to it –, I will now turn to a powerful motif in literature that has been interpreted as a clear symbol for the nexus of philanthropy and America: the house. Repeatedly, the U.S. nation has been depicted as a house, a metaphor for the concrete manifestation of the nation's strong belief in union and its supposedly inherent philanthropic foundations. Yet, the United States has also been seen as a 'house divided against itself.' Apparently threatened by internal divisions and contradictions such as slavery, philanthropy has often been utilized to bridge the gap between the disparate parts of the nation-house. Hence, the question needs to be raised whether American philanthropy can be seen as a means to repair the defects of the American house or merely as an instrument to conceal them. In the ambivalent metaphor of the house, then, the inherent contradictions at the very root of philanthropy come to surface.

In the following chapter, I will take a deductive approach to the motif of the house: After sketching the role and importance of the house for human imagination and for a specific American context (3.1), I discuss the house as a recurring motif in literature across time and cultures (3.2). In the largest part of this chapter, however, I carry out an in-depth analysis of houses in five selected works by Toni Morrison (3.3). Throughout these pages, I will argue that Morrison contrasts the flawed American house with the ideal concept of home. As an alternative place to the house, Morrison's idea restores the United States to a place that is indeed characterized by love for humankind and that allows for true philanthropic relations. In this process, Morrison's novels attempt a reinterpretation of American philanthropy: Changing emphasis from the stereotypical benefactor to the entire social relation, from money to other, more intimate, forms of help, and from strictly vertical to rather flat hierarchies between the parties involved, Morrison arrives at a more literal sense of the word philanthropy and breaks certain systemic barriers of the United States. My reading of her novels will therefore uncover certain parallels, indeed, between the American house and American philanthropy.

3.1 The Significance of Houses

The house has occupied a place of special importance in human imagination and culture throughout all ages. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard introduced his notion of

“topoanalysis” (8)³⁰ – literally the study of place – and dwelled on the intimate connection between mind, memory, identity, and the house. To underline its preeminence in everyday life, he stated, “our house is a corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (4). Bachelard discussed the house as a place of safety, stability, and protection: He claimed that it “shelters daydreaming” (6) – in his terminology the nexus of memory and imagination –, offers physical protection against the threatening forces outside as well as natural forces, such as winter and storms (see 41-48), and represents a ““psychic state”” that stands for “intimacy” (72). Also, there seems to be a close connection between houses and their inhabitants’ identity: Especially one’s house of birth – the place Bachelard termed the ‘first house’ – represents a formative experience for children. To him, this house “is a large cradle” where “Life begins well, [...] begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (7). The intimacy between the first house and human beings clearly brings to mind the relationship between mother and child. The strong analogy between the mother-figure, maternal care, and even the womb as life-giving organ and the image of dwelling places in Bachelard’s theory shows that the house is, at least to some extent, a feminine space. The philosopher also drew a parallel between the verticality of the house and the human body and mind (25): In this respect, the attic resembles human imagination and is characterized as a bright and inspiring room. The “*dark entity*” (18, his emphasis), which is the cellar, in turn, is seen as an uncanny, almost eerie place of fear, insecurity, and irrationality. According to Bachelard, houses are therefore protective and supportive places that are intimately connected to human imagination and identity.

In an American cultural context, the categories of ‘place’ and ‘identity’ are closely intertwined. Traditionally, scholars have emphasized the role of Manifest Destiny, the frontier spirit, and the sheer vastness of the country in the formation of a distinct American identity. Accordingly, U.S. culture is oftentimes characterized by a supposedly social upward mobility and the stereotypical (WASP) American is depicted as ideal pioneer who constantly adapts to *his* surroundings – closely connected to R. W. B. Lewis famous concept of the ‘American Adam.’³¹ Despite this apparent emphasis on mobility, movement, and flexibility, the house as

³⁰ Taking Bachelard’s concept of topoanalysis as their point of departure, Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, for example, have started a discussion that eventually culminated in a paradigm shift in social sciences and cultural studies known as the spatial turn. While Foucault introduced his notion of heterotopias – literally other spaces –, Lefebvre elaborated on this thought and framed his dictum of space as a social production: “(*Social space is a (social) product*)” (26, his emphasis).

³¹ This traditional view has not only left an impact on American autostereotypes but has also greatly influenced other nation’s perceptions of the United States. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, for example, the German banker Ludwig Max Goldberger published a book about the United States titled *Das Land der*

a place of rest and stability is of special importance to the United States – a nation frequently depicted as a metaphorical house, which offers and guarantees its inhabitants, that is its citizens, the Constitution’s paradigmatic promise of ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’

The nexus between house and U.S. nation has most famously been phrased in Abraham Lincoln’s “A House Divided” speech (1858): Competing against incumbent Stephen Douglass for Illinois’ state senator seat, the later president underlined the importance of the issue of slavery for the future course of the United States:

‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*. I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved* – I do not expect the house to *fall* – but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided. It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other. (461, his emphasis)

At a time that saw a dramatic regional fragmentation, overall sectionalism, and increasingly violent tension among North and South, free and slave states, Lincoln’s address called emphatically for national cohesion. Expressing an unshakeable belief in the utmost importance of the Union, he drew an analogy between the figure of the house and the American nation, and thereby also stated that the integrity of the United States as a whole is more sacred than any sectional interests. While the growing antagonism between North and South eventually culminated in the Civil War as the ultimate test for the American house, this process led also to a deeper understanding of union: From that point in time, the United States has been predominantly treated as a singular noun directly replicating its indivisible union and oneness – manifested in Lincoln’s metaphor of the U.S. nation as a house. Ever since, political rhetoric, stereotypical depictions, and understandings of the United States have reverberated this house metaphor: Danielle Russell, for instance, explains, “the ‘American Dream’ is after all to own a home” (121). The very ethos of America – a nation supposed to have been founded as and destined to become *e pluribus unum* – is inextricably linked to the house symbolism and people across the world are attracted by the possibility to hold property and make a better living in the United States. Also, there is of course one particular house that is frequently used as a metaphor for the American government and the country as such: the White House as the United States’ political center, the seat of its presidents, and its literal powerhouse.

unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten (1903). The title translates to ‘America, the land of unlimited possibilities’ – a well-known saying in Germany that continues to shape the German imagination of America.

In feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern thought, however, the nation-as-a-house metaphor becomes a complex category laden with problems, a formerly unshakeable ‘truth’ that needs to be deconstructed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Carolyn Martin, for example, discuss the elusiveness and ambivalence of home:

‘Being home’ refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (90)

While uncovering the ‘illusion’ of home seems to be a necessary step to a deeper knowledge and self-understanding, it is also a hurtful one, since self and identity are closely interconnected with understandings of home. Mohanty and Martin state that this bitter realization can cause great personal trouble since “the giving up of home will necessarily mean the giving up of self and vice versa” (103). It becomes clear that home is not an indisputably given factum – just as our understandings of identity are not stable and fixed, so community and home are in flux, inherently performative, and essentially open to change: “Community, then,” Mohanty and Talpade assert, “is the product of work, of struggle; it is inherently instable, contextual; it has to be constantly reevaluated in relation to critical political priorities; and it is the product of interpretation, interpretation based on an attention to history, to the concrete” (104). Erica Johnson, in turn, states that home and empire/nation are inseparably related to one another. Describing a “nation-based model of home” (2003: 14), she remarks that traditional narratives envision imperial nations as homelands imagined and defined against the foil of their colonies, that the center becomes center only in opposition to its peripheries. Thus, Erica Johnson states, “home has been understood as an exclusive, mythically ‘pure’ place in space and history” (ibid. 16); a difficult and unpalatable idea for most ‘eccentrics’ – that is, people writing from the margins, from the peripheries –, since the traditional understanding of home as well as of nation/empire appear to enunciate and reverberate certain gendered/raced discourses (ibid. 18).

As a result, Lincoln’s above-mentioned metaphor did not only pave the way for the strong and pervasive concept of America as a house, but also foreshadowed certain tensions in U.S. society that can still be felt today. The tenth president saw the integrity of the American house greatly endangered by slavery and quoted from a well-known Jesus-parable (Matt. 12:25 and Mk. 3:25) to bring an end to this mounting conflict. Predicting imminent self-destruction if the Union could not be preserved, Lincoln characterized the United States as a nation plagued by many internal divisions and contradictions. The growing North/South antagonism found

expression in insurmountable social, economic, and political differences that finally all amounted to the question of slavery. However, while the watershed of the Civil War eventually caused the abolition of the peculiar institution, it did not solve all these tensions and it did not overthrow the well-established social hierarchy of the U.S. altogether. Deeply entrenched in the very substance and foundations of the United States by at least 250 years of American slavery (and probably several hundred years of Western thought), certain capitalist and racist paradigms have prevailed until this very day. Key indicators such as unemployment rates, income, and educational success still reveal a dramatic imbalance between white and black America: Recent statistics by the United States Census Bureau, for example, show that white households had a net income approximately thirty percent higher than that of black families in 2009 (2010: 5). In many respects, the American house indeed remains ‘a house divided against itself’ – a metaphoric building interspersed with and eroded by fissures caused by racism and racial discrimination.

In order to hold the disparate parts of this house together and to conceal the gaping fissures of its neat façade, a very specific type of cement has often been employed: American philanthropy. As a means to blur the dividing lines between rich and poor, high and low, white and black, this phenomenon has indeed united different and at times contradictory forces under one roof for large parts of the nation’s history. Through their dedication to many philanthropic endeavors, for example, women were able to transcend the narrow confines of a patriarchal society in nineteenth century America, to develop effective political skills, and to finally advocate female suffrage. However, philanthropy has not yet filled all the cracks in the American house. In fact, I argue that, quite to the contrary, philanthropic efforts have time and again only been used to cover up said fissures: While large-scale financial support of black education indeed caused a marked increase in literacy rates among African Americans in Reconstruction America, critical observers have scrutinized these efforts closely and concluded that they also functioned as a means of cultural imperialism. Viewed in this light, philanthropy has perpetuated a system that it ostensibly attempted to change and philanthropists – more or less consciously aware of their doing – have maintained and secured their control over the American house. The United States is an ambivalent place for most minorities, the traditional recipients of philanthropy: Attracted by its lofty promises and high aspirations, many still find themselves unwelcomed here.

As the greatest racial minority in the United States, African Americans have had a considerable impact on the makeup of the American house. Yet even though their unfree

labor significantly contributed to building it, they have been denied a room of their own inside it. Their story in the New World is a story of exclusion – a story that describes the discrepancy and stark contrast between center (the master’s manor house) and periphery (the slave’s cabin), between extraneousness and belonging. Dislocated and uprooted by slave trafficking, African Americans have been considered a diaspora people. As ‘eccentrics,’ literally people without a stable center, a home (let alone a coherent identity), spaces have held an important role within the black imagination: Africa as the mythical motherland; the Atlantic as the site of their dislocation, the Middle Passage; and America as an ambivalent place of both bondage and freedom. Consequently, black Americans have developed an always unfulfilled longing for a true home (Africa), contrasted by a highly ambiguous and complex relationship with the United States, which constantly oscillates between attempting to belong to U.S. society and trying to become independent from it.³² Philip Page traces this condition of forced instability and unrest back to the fact that “African Americans have been on the move, seeking a place within the American geographic and cultural space” (17) throughout American history.

Having a house, a place to call one’s home and one’s own, to finally belong to America, has been one of the major concerns among the African American community. Historically deprived of the right to property, citizenship, the vote, and, most detrimentally, to equality among the races, homeownership and self-determination were the primary needs of the newly liberated black population after the American Civil War.³³ Valerie Sweeney Prince claims, “The search for justice, opportunity, and liberty that characterized the twentieth century for African Americans can be described as a quest for home” (1). The house has consequently had a heightened political dimension for African Americans – for both black Americans who advocated integration and those who favored resistance to white society. In an essay titled “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” bell hooks states, “Throughout our history, African-Americans have recognized the subversive value of homeplace, of having access to private space where we do not directly encounter white racist aggression” (47). Within the ‘black house’ – as opposed to the *White House* (as political center of the United States) and the *white house* as metaphor of Eurocentric America –, African Americans have been able to resist the

³² This duality between assimilation and integration on the one hand and independence on the other can be traced throughout African American history – not least since W. E. B. Du Bois’ attack on Booker T. Washington’s politics around the turn of the century, to Marcus Garvey’s UNIA in the 1920s, and to black nationalist movements in the 1960s and 70s.

³³ The American government unsuccessfully attempted to address this need with an agrarian reform and the famous dictum of ‘forty acres and a mule’ that the Freedmen’s Bureau were supposed to distribute among the former slaves in the South after the Civil War.

dominant white society's racism and create a separate space. These places, hooks remarks, have most often been run by women: They "were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place" (41). As community networkers and caregivers, women have created truly philanthropic dwelling places; sites of psychological as well physical healing: There, hooks experienced "the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There I learned dignity, integrity of being; there I learned to have faith" (41/42).

The United States has thus occupied an ambivalent place in African American imagination: On the one hand, it has been the site of their socio-political exclusion; on the other hand, paradoxically, it is also the one place to which they belong by right of birth. Denied access to the American house, this nation has indeed never been a proper home to black Americans; yet *this* house has always been the only home they have known from first-hand experiences.

In her essay "Home," Toni Morrison discusses exactly this apparent discrepancy and describes black America's difficulty with the nation-house. Throughout her life and her career as a novelist, as Morrison explains, she has encountered certain problems concerning the metaphor of the house and imagines instead the concept of 'home' as a potentially liberating counterforce. Perceiving race as a pervasive thread of humankind, an idea that shapes languages, social relations, and laws, Morrison concludes that she "ha[s] never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter" ("Home" 3). Even our understanding of houses is deeply affected by race; consequently, a house is always an already raced category that operates within the system of racial hierarchy. To counter the inherent racism in the metaphor of the house, Morrison introduces her notion of 'home' as "a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter" (ibid., her emphasis). Her idea, however, does not imply a colorblind, race-free society, nor does Morrison advocate for cultural amalgamation or homogeneity. Rather, she imagines 'home' as a place that both appreciates and encourages diversity and equality, a safe place for different people without one group dominating the other.

In order to design and conceptualize such a highly politicized concept of home, Morrison had to come to terms with certain crucial questions such as: "How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling?" ("Home" 5). Since these questions "have troubled all of [her] work" and her artistic imagination has been literally haunted by these contradictions, I read Morrison's oeuvre as a negotiation of what she terms "house/home

antagonism” (ibid.). Ever since the contrast between the ideal white primer home and the bleak black reality in her very first novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has continued creating several memorable and highly ambivalent dwelling places: Eva Peace’s chaotic and buzzing house in *Sula*, Macon Dead II’s impressive but sterile mansion in *Song of Solomon*, the mystic Convent in *Paradise*, and Bill Cosey’s famous ‘Hotel and Resort’ in *Love*. Even her second to last novel up to date, tellingly entitled *Home*, is preoccupied with Frank Money’s epic quest to save his sister and to find a secure place for them to stay. Morrison’s novels attempt to negotiate between these irreconcilable opposites and sketch the path of transformation from the ‘unhomely’/*unheimlich* house to the livable home. According to Morrison, then, this alternative “new space” (“Home” 12) is characterized by contradictory properties that, however, account for the home’s heterogeneity as well as ambivalence and potentially prevent totalizing as well as racializing effects that the house has fallen victim to. She perceives the home as a place that “is formed by the inwardness of the outside, the interiority of the ‘othered,’ the personal that is always embedded in the public. In this new space one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged” (ibid.).

However, Morrison’s notion of home is *not* a utopia, since she does not conceive of it as a bright and shiny counterpart to the flawed, exclusivist house of the United States. Instead, her concept of home is rather an ideal toward which one should strive; a place that one has to work for and not a given spot on the map. In this sense, it is potentially an indeed alternative, new space that has the power to break the United State’s racist and capitalist paradigms. Home can also become a place that is characterized by a flat social hierarchy in which the community is organized horizontally rather than vertically – a place, after all, to which the most basic definition of the term philanthropy can be applied. In this respect, I consider Morrison’s idea of home a corrective to the American house and to American philanthropy.

Despite the fact that the indivisible oneness and integrity of the United States has found its most vivid expression in the metaphor of the house, the very substance of that construction shows certain weaknesses. Divided against itself, America has been a place characterized by ambivalence for most minorities and the nation-house remains unfinished. While philanthropy has oftentimes been employed to bridge the gap between the competing forces within this structure, it has also perpetuated some tendencies in U.S. society that greatly endanger its foundations. Hence, the American house is only a proper home to the select few. This, then, is exactly where Morrison’s concept of home comes into play: As an ideal, it can be interpreted

as an alternative to the ambivalent American house and can also be seen as a restoration of the most literal sense of the term philanthropy.

3.2 House Imagery in Fiction

Before concentrating on the ‘house/home antagonism’ in Morrison’s oeuvre, I will briefly comment on the motif of the house in literature. This excursus is intended to provide a frame for the later discussion of houses in Morrison’s fiction.

The house occupies a central place in human imagination. It is therefore hardly surprising that it features prominently in fiction across time and cultures, that this motif is present in all genres and throughout all eras as well as movements, and that houses are employed as powerful symbols by various kinds of authors regardless of their race, class, gender, sexuality, et cetera. For all its pervasiveness, however, the house is also never an exclusively positive concept – meaning and use of this motif consequently vary.

On the one hand, the image of the house functions as a crossroads between the imagination of the writer and the reader; it is a common point of reference that relates to the experience of the author and her audience and thereby resembles a door to their imagination and memory. Bachelard explained:

It therefore makes sense from our standpoint of a philosophy of literature and poetry to say that we ‘write a room,’ ‘read a room,’ or ‘read a house.’ Thus, very quickly, at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is ‘reading a room’ leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past. (14)

As common ground between author and audience, text and context, houses are frequently used as representations of family and community. In the Bible, for instance, houses signify the strong communion of believers symbolizing their unshakeable faith in God and the church as a place of communal worship. It is both a spiritual home as well as a material place for Christians. Likewise, fairy tales often portray houses as places of family, comfort, and safety. Even though the protagonists have to leave home temporarily, encounter literal anti-homes on their journey (e.g., the witch’s place in “Hansel and Gretel”), or the house is invaded by evil (e.g., the wolf that takes over grandmother’s house in “Little Red Riding Hood”), the end of most stories sees the restoration of the nuclear family and closes with the paradigmatic line: ‘They lived happily ever after’ (presumably in their houses). Both abstract and concrete, Erica Johnson asserts, the house is “an architectural as well as psychological, geographical as well as social concept” (2003: 13) in our human imagination. As a symbol, then, a house clearly

defines its inhabitants, represents certain beliefs and conditions of the outside world, and is definitely more than just a structure.

On the other hand, it is also intriguing that houses surface repeatedly as ambivalent places. Starting at least in the late-eighteenth century with Gothic novels, there has been a trend in literature across the globe that has cast a dubious light on the formerly rather positively connoted symbol of the house. From Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to Charles Dickens' novels, houses are used as uncanny places – places that signify the utmost depravity of humankind and the darkest recesses of the human mind. The strong if, at first sight, strange connection between the house and the uncanny becomes more apparent when one takes into consideration Siegbert Praver's deliberations: for him, "the term 'uncanny' [...] constitutes [...] no more than a pale and approximate translation of the German word that is really in [his] mind" (6), which is *unheimlich*. Literally 'unhomely,' the very negative of our understanding, then, the house as the one place in our imagination that appears to be farthest away from the uncanny, may yet, ironically, be the place where evil resides: "To be *unheimlich*," Praver explained, "a work need not provide shocks of horror [...]. To be *unheimlich*, a work need not introduce supernatural agents" (7, his emphasis). Instead, he stated, "you start with the commonplace and find yourself suddenly confronted with something that gives you the shivers" (19). 'The commonplace,' the house or *Heim*, can be one of the most obvious and most basic representations of the duality of the meaning of the German (*un*)*heimlich*,³⁴ it is also the best and most natural stage for what Praver termed "the evil of banality" (7). Seemingly sharing Toni Morrison's position that "Evil hogs the stage" ("Goodness" n. pag.) in literature, Praver also says that the uncanny often deeply probes into human nature and eventually even triggers certain cognitive processes. Through alienation, for example, it holds up a mirror to our understanding, to hitherto unquestioned truths and it can cause a reevaluation of these: Representations of the uncanny in fiction, Praver remarked, "afford sensations of descent [...]: descent into the depths of the mind (and beyond) where we are faced with truths of which we have never had such knowledge; truths, certainly, of our own nature, and truths, perhaps, of something more" (8). An unflinching discussion of the darker sides of houses/homes can therefore be seen as a penetrating critique of society, nations, and human

³⁴ In his famous essay "The Uncanny" (1919), Sigmund Freud commented on the near interchangeability of the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Discussing the two distinct but related meanings of the former – "the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden" (132) –, the psychoanalyst concluded: "*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*" (134).

nature – a painful process that can ultimately light the way to a deeper understanding of the ideas of house/home.

As I have already stated above, mainstream U.S. culture is predominantly concerned with a firm belief in movement and progress. As a result, American narratives are traditionally concerned with mobility; stories of expansion and conquest feature frequently. “Migration and freedom of movement often receive the most attention,” contends Russell; yet, she adds: “but the importance of a home (literal or longed for) is also vital to the definition of American fiction” (2). The reader will therefore also find narratives that focus on the home, a sense of permanence, and a stable, safe center as balancing counterforces to the afore-mentioned notions of mobility in U.S. fictional writing. Consequently, “American literature in particular [...] devotes a great deal of attention and narrative space to houses” (Russell 120). Yet, the motif of the house is used to ambivalent ends in American fiction and research on its exact role is equally varied.

Scholars in the fields of psychology and literary studies commonly hold that the home is a feminine place: Even though the house is a space *owned* by men, women turn it into a *living* place. In accordance to the then dominant concept of separate spheres, for example, large parts of nineteenth-century American imagination created an intimate connection between women and houses – especially an intimacy with certain rooms within them such as the kitchen. This belief, however, confines and restricts women’s roles to the domestic sphere, and often turned the house into a suffocating place for male protagonists. Twentieth-century scholarship has therefore vigorously contested this narrow juxtaposition: Cynthia Dobbs, for instance, claims that feminist critics have stressed that “houses have historically served as both solace and prison” (111), while postcolonial theorists have argued that they do not guarantee safety to all.

Nevertheless, the house imagery has been a pervasive motif in U.S. literature because it relates to certain crucial characteristics that are usually believed to be quintessential American such as self-reliance: From the Gothic stories such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s antislavery sentimental novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) in antebellum America; from Thomas Sutpen’s ostentatious mansion in William Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) to Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980) to Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984) in more recent American fiction. Even though varied in both form and substance, all of the afore-mentioned houses and mansions function as aesthetic as well as ethic statements about certain periods in U.S. history

– the different houses thereby represent different power discourses. “Houses are cultural artifacts,” explains Bruce Collins, “drawing together various interests, each of which is affected by matters of social aspiration and perception, economics, politics and taste” (29/30). These houses also establish an intimate connection between the constructions and their owners. According to Dell Upton, then, a thorough examination of houses furthers a deepened understanding of “the social experience of architecture” (122). The humble but neat cabin in Stowe’s novel, for instance, matches Tom’s piety and clearly contrasts with the luxurious and pretentious plantation mansions, which represent the slave owners’ inherent depravity. Thus, the novelist envisions the slave-protagonist as moral center parallel to his cabin as backdrop for the other houses; both are constant frames of reference for the audience, points of departure from where they can judge other characters in Stowe’s novel.

This cursory and by no means exhaustive overview over significant houses in American fiction also indicates that the uncanny has time and again been utilized as a mirror image and complementary to the “American dream of innocence and rationality” (Praver 20) – a discrepancy that can best be observed in fictional writings by people from the margins of U.S. society such as African Americans and women.³⁵ Hence, I will now discuss Morrison’s use of this motif in detail.

3.3 Contested Space: The ‘House/Home Antagonism’ in Toni Morrison’s Works

Toni Morrison’s oeuvre is anything but simplistic in the choice of her style, her motifs, and her topics. One constant force in her fiction, however, is the importance of setting. In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison comments on her “strong sense of place not in terms of the country or the state, but in terms of details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town” (“Intimate Things” 10). Next to the American Midwest as a recurring locale in several of her novels, Morrison has created a host of striking spaces such as the tropical forest in *Tar Baby* or ‘the City’ in *Jazz*. In both examples, “Setting is not just a physical place, but a living presence in Morrison’s writing,” explains Russell and further states: “Place can be a character and/or catalyst; it has both an identity of its own and an impact on the identities of those experiencing it” (4).

A very specific type of settings that has clearly influenced and shaped Morrison’s fictional world is the motif of the house. In her novels, houses are employed to different ends: They are

³⁵ Sweeney Prince, for examples, claims: “So much of African American literature has been represented as a quest for home. I could have chosen any number of texts” (145).

either the sites of healing, nurturing, and care; or of death, violence, and oppression. Russell observes that the house is a “complex place [in Morrison’s fiction]; it confines, constricts, contains, comforts” (103). Furthermore, houses are used to characterize their inhabitants; by extension, they, too, serve as emblems for the relationship of the individual to the community. Lastly, Morrison utilizes the motif of the house to discuss certain social conditions and race relations: In her fiction, houses become powerful metaphors for the United States. Terry Otten, for instance, identifies significant dwellings in Morrison’s oeuvre as ambivalent places that signify the potentially detrimental effects of an oppressive white society upon African American identity:

[Morrison] transforms the orthodox garden in the conventional fall myth into settings that describe or caricature the white-constructed world where black characters are physically or psychologically bound and maimed: the Dick-and-Jane house in *The Bluest Eye*, the ‘Wright’ home in *Sula*, Macon Dead’s urban kingdom in *Song of Solomon*, L’Arbe de la Croix in *Tar Baby*, Sweet Home in *Beloved*. Each is a reflection of warped morality, of misplaced values that inhibit the assertion of self and racial consciousness of black characters. (96)

In the following discussion, I focus on the role of houses/homes in five selected works by Toni Morrison: Starting with her paradigmatic debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), my analysis includes two works out of the middle of her oeuvre, *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1987), and two of her more recent novels, *A Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012). Throughout this chapter, I will argue that dwelling places in her writing function as one means to destabilize the traditional depiction of America as a nurturing and welcoming house and to imagine an alternative place that truly fulfills America’s promises: Envisioning home as a new space, Morrison’s novels attempt to literally renovate the American house and to restore American philanthropy to its etymological origins. Hence, Tessa Roynon claims that in her fiction Morrison seeks “to transform the ‘house’ that is flawed, exclusivist America – that is its national ideology, historiography, and literary canonicity – into the better versions of reality that she conceives of as ‘home’” (*Classical Tradition* 22).

In this respect, I read *The Bluest Eye* as a diagnosis of the *status quo* of the United States: Here, Morrison describes the dire consequences of white cultural imperialism on African Americans, which finds expression in the motif of the house. Her debut novel makes clear that this house is not home to all and that an alternative place – a real home – needs to be imagined. In her very first work, Morrison sketches out the house/home antagonism – a problem that would eventually engage her throughout her entire oeuvre –, and begins to develop her idea of home as a place with truly philanthropic characteristics. Elaborating on

these thoughts, I perceive *Tar Baby* as a developmental step: On the one hand, Morrison attempts a deconstruction of the imperial mansion and U.S. philanthropy by considering these phenomena in isolation. *Tar Baby*, on the other hand, also raises crucial questions about the nature of a potential home for African Americans: Is it rooted in the past or rather future-oriented? Is it a segregated, exclusively black place, or a place characterized by integration and racial coexistence? Can this place be reached at all? With this novel, Morrison seems to suggest that home is not a fixed place on the map; rather, just like philanthropy, it has to remain an ideal. With a clear focus on the motif of the house, *Beloved*, then, attempts a reevaluation of the American house as well as of American philanthropy: As a white house, 124 Bluestone Road is owned by a rich, white, and educated man – traditionally the model champion of philanthropy in nineteenth-century America. By contrast, emphasis is put on black women and the larger African American community – the stereotypical recipients of philanthropy – when 124 is under control of three generations of Suggs women. *Beloved* provides a contrastive view on the American house and thereby also juxtaposes diverse kinds of philanthropy: inter- and intraracial philanthropy, respectively. Constructing an alternative, maybe even a revisionist founding narrative, I interpret Morrison's *A Mercy* as a thought-experiment in U.S. history. As an allegory for colonial America, Jacob Vaark's farm could have been a real home for its racially diverse inhabitants – it represents a road toward true philanthropy not taken, a literal paradise lost. Yet, certain shortcomings of the supposedly New World are also already present in the character of Vaark: Greed, racism, and thinking in terms of status are encapsulated in the metaphor of his terminal disease, a sickness that has had a detrimental impact on the future course of the United States. I read Morrison's penultimate novel, *Home*, finally, as a conclusion to her oeuvre-wide concern with the house/home antagonism: The protagonist's odyssey across the United States thereby mirrors her own journey from house to home. This novel also underlines the fact that home is not a utopia – quite to the contrary, it represents an ideal that can never be reached in its entirety, but also an ideal that has the potential to change America for the better. Hence, I analyze Morrison's way home as an attempt to restore the true promises of the American house and to lead the nation back on its path to a more basic understanding of the term philanthropy.

3.3.1 Ideal White Standard vs. Bleak Black Reality: *The Bluest Eye* as Paradigmatic Text for Morrison's Oeuvre

Toni Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* had to be literally excavated from the dust heap of history after the author's subsequent novels attracted a wide readership. As a result,

this novel has elicited an ever-increasing number of critical scholarship that has addressed, for instance, the destructiveness of the white gaze toward black Americans (Stein 40/41), the significance of the title (Surányi 11/12), and the complicity of the African American community in Pecola Breedlove's downfall (Roynon, *Classical Tradition* 53).

Because of the prominence of the Dick-and-Jane-primer, which precedes the narrative proper and heads significant chapters of the novel, critical emphasis has also been put on white standards that have been superimposed upon African Americans throughout U.S. history such as gender roles and concepts of beauty. In this respect, then, I discuss the motif of the house as an agent of cultural imperialism. I hold that *The Bluest Eye* diagnoses the constructional defects at the very foundations of the American house: Built on racism and racial discrimination, the United States is going to remain a nation based on exclusion of certain minorities – a nation that, without willingness to change, will forever fall short of its lofty principles and high aspirations. Furthermore, this novel describes the destructive effects of the nation-house on the black community in Lorain, Ohio, and on Pecola Breedlove in particular. Through the contrast between white houses and black houses which is accentuated by the primer, Morrison's first work portrays African American houses as very emblems of internalized racism – they are the sites of colorism, deep depression, victimization, and domestic violence as a form of misdirected resistance against racial oppression and marginalization. Despite this apparently negative view of houses, Morrison (however subtle) also gives a more positive outlook on this motif by the example of the MacTeer household – her very first and tentative realization of a home as an alternative place that allows for truly philanthropic interpersonal relations. Even in her first novel, Morrison chose to pursue a path – admittedly though, a long and at times winding route – that would lead through her entire oeuvre: namely, the negotiation between the uncanny *house* and the familiar *home*.

In the beginning, there is the primer. Before Claudia MacTeer, one of the main characters in the novel and its narrator,³⁶ introduces the narrative of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison opens her narrative with a part of what might have been a basal reader, designed to teach children to read in elementary school. This textbook extract presents a typical American family: father, mother, two children (Dick and Jane), a dog, and a cat. The family seems to live a life full of bliss and joy – Jane wears a “red dress,” mother “is very nice” and “laughs,” and father “is big and strong” (*TBE* 3) and smiles. Most important, however, is that this ideal family lives in a perfect house, which is said to be “very pretty,” with its “green and white” paint and “red

³⁶ See chapter 4.2.1 for a more detailed analysis of *The Bluest Eye*'s narrative situation.

door” (ibid.) and which almost instantly invokes pictures of suburbia – the typical twentieth-century enclaves of the white middle class. In fact, the family’s dwelling appears to be so essential that it opens and dominates the primer as well as our understanding of it: “Here is the house” (ibid.) is its very first sentence and reads like a definitive, unshakable statement of truth. While many readers are surely puzzled by Morrison’s decision to start her debut novel with an extract of an elementary textbook that supposedly shows the happy life of white families, they probably would not have expected this very reading primer to disintegrate shortly thereafter. Having introduced the textbook reader, this extract is repeated twice; each time, however, the primer loses some of its linguistic properties: First, Morrison drops the punctuation and then she omits the spacing between individual words (*TBE* 4). Below, I will analyze the reasons for Morrison using this primer as an opener of her novel and the breakdown of its linguistic integrity. I argue that this primer functions as epigraph for the novel, since sections of it are again used as titles of or introductions to later chapters in *The Bluest Eye*.

The Dick-and-Jane-primer is a constant frame of reference for the novel’s African American protagonists – the black reality is relentlessly measured against the yardstick of white standards. The differences between Dick and Jane’s world on the one hand and Pecola’s experiences throughout her life on the other could not have been sharper: While the primer family apparently presents the ultimate epitome of an ideal family – with the man being the protective father and breadwinner, and the woman the beautiful housewife and caring mother – Charles ‘Cholly’ and Pauline ‘Polly’ Breedlove, Pecola’s parents, cannot match their paragons and role models to even some extent. Likewise, the ‘very pretty’ house that Dick and Jane’s family live in exerts a decisive influence upon the African American population of Lorain: While some of the black characters seem to have completely internalized the dominant society’s norms and desperately try to imitate them as best as they can (e.g., Geraldine who will be discussed later on in detail), others are just utterly crushed under its oppressive weight (e.g., the Breedloves who will also come into focus later on). Thus, the house is not a safe harbor for many characters in *The Bluest Eye* – it does not measure up to the positive role that it assumes for the white primer family; rather, it becomes a symbol of oppression, alienation, and exclusivism.

Through the primer, then, Morrison exposes white American society’s cultural imperialism, its firm belief in the superiority of white values as well as the inculcation thereof in non-white people – a destructive process that is initiated in elementary school education

and further enshrined in white and black psyches by, for instance, Hollywood's movie industry.³⁷ This mechanism causes racism and intolerance in white Americans and a sense of vulnerability, thirst for revenge, and intraracial violence among African Americans in *The Bluest Eye*. Consequently, the linguistic disintegration of the primer, which makes it increasingly hard – or even impossible – for the audience to actually *read* this text, indicates Morrison's attempt to dismantle this powerful white myth. She provokes her readers into carefully and closely thinking about the significance of the primer's destruction and thereby their own sentiments. Through effectively rendering the primer meaningless, Morrison also underlines the inapplicability of white standards to African Americans. Since white norms are hollow and insignificant to her novel's black community, other points of reference will have to do. She imagines, for example, an alternative space, a home, within her novel, and equally allows her readership to visualize this different concept in their very heads and hearts. Below, I will address the destructive impact of the primer house on *The Bluest Eye's* black community and on the Breedlove family in particular. Further, I will analyze the MacTeer house as a more positive, alternative space.³⁸

The Breedloves storefront dwelling, a place that they had to move to after Cholly burnt down their house, is the very antithesis to the apparently benevolent, inviting primer home. Several years after Pecola's family has lived there, the "abandoned store" (*TBE* 33) has acquired a dubious reputation through its numerous tenants and it appears to be rather repulsive to any foreign or local onlooker's aesthetic sense. Consequently, this place is described as an eyesore:

It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmony with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy. Visitors who drive to this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighborhood, simply look away when they pass it. (*ibid.*)

The store's "large plate-glass window" (*TBE* 34) effectively breaks down the private/public barrier that Bachelard, for instance, perceived as one of the main characteristics of the house –

³⁷ Editors and publishers of these textbooks have reacted to the one-sided and potentially destructive racially pure, homogeneous white family – in both first and second language acquisition. Valerie Smith, for example, remarks, "These primers both taught generations of children to read through the introduction and repetition of simple words, and also established as normative an idealized vision of a suburban, nuclear, middle-class white family" (20). Today, students will encounter heterogeneous textbook families with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, divorced or single parent families, impaired and even homosexual characters.

³⁸ This interpretation of the primer deviates slightly from what Carl Malmgren perceives as consensus: "The standard critical reading of the three versions is that the first represents the life of white families, orderly and 'readable'; the second, that of the MacTeer family, confused but still readable; and the last, that of the Breedlove family, incoherent and unintelligible" (257).

it cannot be a retreat for its inhabitants, it cannot protect them from the outside. As a result, the Breedlove family and the shame that they brought on themselves as well as on the entire African American community is constantly on display for everyone to see. On the one hand, then, even long after the family has moved out, the Breedloves and their house remind the black Lorain population of their own plight – which repels them –; on the other hand, however, they also function as foils for their lives – which makes them look better.

The community reacts violently toward Pecola's family: They shun Cholly and Polly Breedlove, Pecola's brother Sammy is a notorious runaway, and the eleven-year-old girl is finally turned into a scapegoat. Years later, a grown-up Claudia therefore reflects on the events and accepts hers and the community's responsibility for Pecola's tragic fate: "All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. [...] We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (*TBE* 205). The eyesore of the storefront house is thus not only a reminder of the Breedloves' shame, but also of the culpability of the black community, who are at least partly responsible for Pecola's destruction and the disintegration of her family: Being exposed to the sight of this place and its high visibility – after all, it is located on Broadway, presumably Lorain's commercial center (*TBE* 33) – causes the community significant inner turmoil; their unwillingness to even *look* at it symbolizes their refusal to recognize their part in the Breedlove's history or to even assume responsibility for what has happened. Forsaken and denied help, the Breedloves, and especially Pecola, become pariahs in Lorain.

Next to the exterior appearance of the storefront and its peculiar place within Lorain's community, its interior is of special importance: Both the layout of the house and its furniture underline the provisional state of this dwelling, a makeshift that is anything but *heimlich*. Designed for a completely different purpose, the storefront does not only turn the Breedlove's 'home' into a rather transparent and lucent one, but it also effectively forecloses the possibility of intimacy *within* the building. Hastily erected walls made of "beaverboard planks that did not reach the ceiling" (*TBE* 34) divide one large storeroom into a living and a bedroom. Involuntarily, the children witness their parents' sexual intercourse, which is performed as routinely as their fights and which Pecola connects with "sounds as though [her father] were in pain" (*TBE* 57) and a terrible silence of her mother. Whereas the Breedloves at least have a separate kitchen, their storefront has "no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl, inaccessible to the eye, if not the ear, of the tenants" (*TBE* 35). While improvisations and cramped living conditions were surely not uncommon among many people, especially not

among African Americans, in the early 1940s, the temporal setting of *The Bluest Eye's* plot, this forced closeness of the family members and the absolute absence of privacy eventually causes problems and the Breedloves try to flee from their house and their bleak reality: Cholly increasingly comes under the influence of alcohol, Polly enters her Hollywood-induced dream world through her position as a maid in the Fisher's house, Sammy is a runaway, and Pecola is always on the drift looking for an anchor that would ground her and offer her protection.

Additionally, the Breedloves' furniture proves that they do not have any personal attachments, no feelings of belonging, of safety, no recollections of good times, bad times, of joy, and of sorrow connected with their storefront dwelling; in short, this makeshift house is certainly not a proper *home* and appears coldly impersonal: "The furniture had aged without ever having become familiar. [...] There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished" (*TBE* 35/36). Two pieces of furniture are finally the ultimate symbols for the dysfunctional Breedlove family and their intolerable living conditions: Firstly, the sofa – though bought brand-new and on credit – which is delivered with a split that over time "became a gash, which became a gaping chasm that exposed the cheap frame and the cheaper upholstery" (*TBE* 36). Just like the lucent storefront with its large front window exposes the Breedloves and their troubles to any passerby, the broken sofa reveals its cheap making and signifies the family's internal conflicts. Secondly, the coal stove is presented as the only living thing in their house; ironically, however, it is quite uncontrollable and "lived independently of everything and everyone" (*TBE* 37). This, at once, symbolizes the uncontrollable emotions of Cholly and Polly who frequently fight each other, mistreat their children, and the fact their house remains largely a cold, *unheimlich* place.³⁹

Within the Breedloves' storefront, their kitchen assumes a role of special importance. Traditionally, this particular room is closely associated with women in fiction and household chores such as nurturing, cooking, and cleaning take place here. Kitchens are also typically seen as gathering places, especially so in African American culture: Here, the family gets together to prepare food, while the (female) community assembles to perform certain tasks. These parallels have above been sufficiently outlined by both Gaston Bachelard (on a more universal level) and bell hooks (within a narrower African American context). The Breedloves' kitchen, however, is a site of violence: It is here, where Pecola's parents

³⁹ In *Paradise*, Morrison eventually returned to the motif of the stove – in this case, the oven – as a rather misdirected center of the community. Once again, the place that is to provide physical and psychological sustenance becomes a site of bitter controversy that eventually foreshadows the disintegration of Ruby's community (*P* 287).

‘perform’ their habitual and ritualistic fights; and it is here, where Pecola is raped by her father.

Above all, this brutal incest, which leaves Pecola pregnant and psychologically damaged, is one of the most revolting and controversial scenes throughout Morrison’s oeuvre: In a vain attempt to ‘love’ his daughter and motivated by contradictory feelings that oscillate between the contrasting pairs of attraction/repulsion and tenderness/violence (*TBE* 161), Charles Breedlove – an orphan who has been raised by his aunt, has never known his mother, and was rejected by his father – forces himself upon his daughter and severely violates her twelve-year old body and psyche. The rape represents an incidence of misdirected anger and frustration, and closely resembles a reenactment of an earlier episode in Charles’ life: Instead of attacking a pair of white men, who once found him and a girl named Darlene having sex in the woods and who humiliated the black teenagers, he projects his hatred onto his sexual partner since she has witnessed his weakness (*TBE* 147-151). Both scenes are futile attempts to prove Charles’ manhood: In order to demonstrate that he is powerful, masculine, and virile, he attacks the only weaker group in society – black women.⁴⁰ His desperate situation turns Pecola’s father into a “dangerously free” (*TBE* 159) predator; he therefore becomes the embodiment of the ‘bad nigger’-archetype; the amoral, violent anti-hero of African American folklore and music (Bryant 2003: 3) – a man who, in fighting for his very masculinity, blurs the boundaries between good and bad, God and the devil: “If the devil did look like that, Cholly preferred him” (*TBE* 134). As a result, Charles Breedlove becomes an indecipherable character, as evidenced by his ironic nickname ‘Cholly’ that is homonymous with ‘jolly’ (Bjork 47): An enigma to himself and his surroundings, the character of Pecola’s father can only be identified by a skillful blues musician – just like other famous folk figures such as Stagolee (*TBE* 159). In any case, not even the usually safe, female zone of the kitchen can keep him from doing harm – as a male intruder, he violates the sanctity of the kitchen (and thereby the house) just as much as his daughter’s body.

Hence, there is a stark contrast between the primer house and the Breedloves’ storefront, which exposes the deep divisions of U.S. society along the color line. The motif of the house signifies the chasm between white suburban bliss and bleak black reality in the early 1940s.

⁴⁰ Scenes of extreme violence against black women by black men constitute a recurring topic in Morrison’s fiction. The slaughter of the Convent women by the hands of Ruby’s male leaders in *Paradise* and the violent reaction of a man on a train in *Home*, who is assumed to beat up his wife who has tried to rescue him from a racist posse, are further examples to be found in her novels.

The ideal picture of the American house that offers its inhabitants/citizens not only safety from outside forces, but also gives them joy seems to be an exclusive white privilege.

While the Breedloves are crushed under the pressure of an unattainable white standard, other members of Lorain's black community react differently: Some have totally internalized dominant society's dictum by despising or hiding their very blackness, others attempt to resist by creating alternative spaces. In this respect, houses in *The Bluest Eye* function equally as very emblems of psychological domination as well as sites of resistance.

Embedded within a story about young black women from the American South, for example, is the episode when Pecola is tricked by Junior into his mother Geraldine's house and both abuse her physically as well as verbally. Apparently, Geraldine is such a "girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken" (*TBE* 86) who has been taught to subdue everything black about her. During their formal education, they have learned to despise and hide the "Funk" (*TBE* 83) – stereotypical black characteristics such as overly emotional behavior and certain physical traits –, only to fit into a society dominated by racist thinking, only "to do the white man's work" (*ibid.*). Further uprooted by the Great Migration, Geraldine and women like her are *homeless* people: "they don't have home towns, just places where they were born" (*TBE* 81). The pun on Mobile, Alabama, as one of their places of origin ridicules their alleged upward mobility and raises the crucial question of the costs of their flight from the South. Geraldine, then, desperately tries to approximate or imitate white society's standards – the only frame of reference that she, as a cultural orphan, can rely on – as best as she can and this particular 'girl from Mobile' as well as her house closely resemble the primer ideal in Pecola's imagination.

The young girl is awed when she first enters Geraldine's place: "How beautiful, she thought. What a beautiful house" (*TBE* 89). Diametrically opposed to her family's chaotic, makeshift storefront, Pecola is astonished at the sight of this house's cleanliness and order; she immediately recognizes the exhibited Bible and Jesus-figurine, the neat decorations and ornaments, and the family's cat – ostensibly, Geraldine attempts to reproduce the neat, white primer house. Even after Pecola has to leave Geraldine's place, she is still "staring at the pretty milk-brown lady in the pretty gold-and-green house" (*TBE* 92).

To Pecola, Geraldine and her house are just like the textbook's paragons. However, the supposedly well-behaved, but simple, 'girls from Mobile' show an unexpected side and become protective, even violent controllers of their dwellings: "What [her potential husbands]

do not know is that this plain brown girl will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world, and stand guard over every plant, weed, and doily, even against him” (*TBE* 84). As a result, their houses become literal fortresses not against the racist society, but against the despised black ‘Other;’ the part of themselves that they have learned to hate, which, allegedly, still lingers in them and their families as well as in every other African American. Geraldine’s approximation of the primer house – the ultimate epitome of orderliness, cleanliness, and neatness – therefore appears affected and artificial to the reader. It is a sterile, cold, and unloving place; a fact that is mirrored in the rearing of her only child Junior.

Accustomed to a lifelong battle against ‘the Funk,’ Geraldine subdues any emotional responses toward her child. Parallel to her lifeless house, then, the mother-child relationship is strangely impersonal: “As long as [Junior’s] needs were physical, [Geraldine] could meet them – comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled” (*TBE* 86). Instead of loving her son or her husband, she develops a peculiar relationship to the family’s cat that borders on sexual intimacy. Due to Geraldine’s unloving bond to Junior as well as her almost sodomitical relationship with the pet, her son develops a sadistic character trait: Junior takes pleasure in harming the cat, domineering other children on the playground, and humiliating girls. His mother, a girl from the South who has supposedly been trained to show and to promote “thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners” (*TBE* 83), has therefore raised a child who shows anything but these aforementioned characteristics.

Her house, her education of Junior, and her very person strongly call into question the white standard the black Americans in *The Bluest Eye* are expected to live up to. Geraldine has completely internalized white society’s values and racial prejudices; she does not only imitate the primer house and family, but she also reproduces the dominant culture’s racism. Having inculcated a firm belief in colorism in Junior, Pecola’s appearance in her house ‘violates’ Geraldine’s racially pure fortress: The poor African American girl presents a threat to her very self-conception and subconsciously reminds her of her despised blackness, ‘the Funk’ that could erupt any minute in her or her family, if not constantly and viciously fought. With her utterly racist discriminatory formula – “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (*TBE* 87) –, Geraldine expresses an unshakeable conviction in colorism, a form of intraracial racism based on color differences between light- and dark-skinned

African Americans: Whereas the former group approximates the desired white society not only in hue, but also in character traits such as efficiency, uplift, and high morals, the latter is its complete antithesis, as it is characterized by promiscuity, idleness, and insouciance. Through Geraldine's eyes, then, Pecola embodies her derogatory understanding of 'niggers.' While looking at the young African American girl, she can clearly see the signs of Pecola's neediness but she cannot properly read them:

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. [...] She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "Shet up!" (TBE 91/92)

The Breedlove girl's dirt – in stark contrast to Geraldine's cleanliness – is not a sign of a structural poverty of African Americans to her; instead, it becomes a clear marker of everything that she despises, that she has been taught to subdue, and that she has been running from ever since she left the South. As an intruder in her perfect nest, Pecola is turned into a scapegoat for various things by Geraldine: She is unrightfully blamed for the cat's injury, which was actually done by Junior; she becomes a foil on which the despised black side of Geraldine can be projected onto; and she is finally expelled from her white-washed, primer-like house with the words: "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (TBE 92). A trespasser among the supposedly righteous, Pecola is kicked out with white values at Geraldine's side; even Christianity seems to comply with her violation: When Pecola leaves Geraldine's place, she sees "Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes" (TBE 92).⁴¹

Potentially even more destructive than Geraldine's outward-directed hatred is Pauline Breedlove's loathing for her own family and herself. The former's disgust at Pecola resembles a remarkable process of psychological outsourcing that eventually leads to her firm belief in colorism, a mimetic form of racism that replicates the latter's premises. Just like 'the girl from Mobile,' Pecola's mother has also completely internalized racist assumptions about black people, as she desperately attempts to emulate the dominant society's values and standards. Whereas Geraldine, by contrast, directs her hate and unease toward other people, Pauline's

⁴¹ In later novels, Morrison returns to the dichotomy between a neat, but oppressive, and a chaotic, but liberal, house. The differences between the Wright (right) house and Eva Peace's rather violent house in *Sula* as well as the opposition between Macon Dead II's sterile mansion and his sister Pilate's vibrant but decrepit (wine) house in *Song of Solomon* are just two examples.

self-loathing is directed inwardly – she sincerely believes in her and her family’s ugliness and their apparent unfitness for white norms.

Pauline Breedlove has never really belonged to anybody or anyplace: Born in rural Alabama, she has had an unpleasant childhood and later in life migrated North with her husband Cholly in a vain attempt to pursue work, money, and better living conditions. The ninth out of eleven children of the Williams family, she has had to suffer from a crooked foot since the age of two; a physical disability that she makes responsible for her “general feeling of separateness and unworthiness” (*TBE* 111). She even seems to have been ‘unworthy’ of her family’s love and care: Unlike her siblings and other people she knew, there was no nickname for little Pauline, there were “no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; [...] no one ever remarked on her food preferences [...] nobody teased her; [therefore,] she never felt at home anywhere, or [...] belonged anyplace” (*ibid.*). Altogether, her family simply did not provide her with security and stability. Its house is not a protective shelter; rather, it’s a shameful, impersonal hiding place for Pauline’s deformity and inadequateness, a prison-like “cocoon of her family’s spinning” (*ibid.*), where she was relied on to take care of the household, but in which she did not really feel at home; an isolated, lonely place that she is more than willing to leave behind with Cholly. Having never had the comfort and pleasure of what Bachelard has termed ‘the first house,’ Pecola’s mother has felt uneasy about herself ever since early childhood.

Her deep sense of personal shortcomings was accentuated further upon her northbound migration and amplified by Hollywood-images that she is exposed to in movies: Without the many chores in the household that kept her busy in Alabama and unable to blend into the northern lifestyle of her black female neighbors, boredom and isolation made her spend her days at the movie theatre. It was there where she received her “education” (*TBE* 122) – parallel to the indoctrination of schoolchildren by means of the Dick-and-Jane-primer, white values and concepts, for instance, were superimposed upon Pauline’s ‘poor’ black self. Here, the omniscient narrator remarks, she was introduced to the notions of “romantic love [and] physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (*ibid.*). Images of white norms as transported by Hollywood movies are a major point of Pauline’s self-contempt and they eventually lead to a total neglect of her family and her house – her futile attempt to match these white ideals causes them a deep depression; she, her family, and their storefront can simply not compare with these standards. She confesses: “*Them pictures gave me a lot of*

pleasure, but it made coming home hard” (TBE 123, her emphasis). Both the negative example of her childhood home, the complete absence of a supportive, stable ‘first house,’ and the destructive inculcation of white standards through her unreflective, uncritical consumption of mass media ultimately result in everything the Breedloves’ storefront is and, more importantly, is not. Ironically, then, Pauline duplicates what has caused her troubles throughout her life – a cold, impersonal, *unheimlich* home – and neglects what she has learned to despise – her own, supposedly ugly family. Taking the path of least resistance, then, Pauline Breedlove escapes her bleak reality and seeks refuge in a parallel universe, “a private world” (TBE 128) that she keeps to herself: As a maid in the well-to-do white Fisher family, she can literally live out her ideal picture of a family life, of a house – she is even ‘awarded’ a nickname there, Polly.

The cleanliness, order, and luxury of the Fisher’s suburban mansion, a “large *white* house” located in a section of the town adjacent to a recreational area where “Black people were not allowed” (TBE 105, emphasis added), fill Pauline with inner joy. Completely wrapped up in what appears to be to her the ultimate fulfillment of her most desirous dreams, “She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it” (TBE 127). At first glance, the “Power, praise, and luxury [that are] hers in this household” (TBE 128) seem to rub off on Pauline and her personality changes dramatically: Whereas she enters conversations even with white people with assertiveness and self-confidence as the Fisher’s maid, thereby becoming a respected and apparently equal person while running their errands, she accepts a menial role and resorts to submissiveness when talking to the same people as Mrs. Breedlove: “The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man’s face if he sent it to the Fisher house” (ibid.). The rich white family and their suburban mansion, however, are only counterfeits: In her desperate attempt to meet white standards, in literally entering the primer house, Pauline does not find a (foster) home in the Fisher’s house; rather, without realizing it, she discovers a modern version of the slave master’s ‘big house’ – the Fishers are not her surrogate family as she likes to think of them, but they are more or less her owners. Consequently, her role within the white world resembles that of the house slave and the Fishers quite unabashedly ‘complement’ their maid with the words: “‘We’ll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will not leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant’” (ibid.).⁴²

⁴² In this respect, Polly resembles the mammy stereotype – a common character in nineteenth-century American fiction that eventually even developed into a cultural icon and the advertisement face Aunt Jemima. Literally selling the South (Morgan 107), this stereotype was employed to justify slavery and vindicate the Old South after

This bizarre situation has detrimental effects on Pauline, which is signaled by her split personality of ‘Polly’ on the one hand and ‘Mrs. Breedlove’ on the other, as well as on her family and house, which she increasingly neglects since both cannot measure up to the Fisher’s ideal. While her black children address their mother as Mrs. Breedlove, the nickname that even the Fishers’ “little pink-and-yellow girl” (*TBE* 109) is allowed, and presumably even encouraged, to use gains special significance: For one thing, Pauline herself is fond of her nickname since she has never had one and rejoices in the intimacy and closeness this name seems to suggest. The diminutive – a noun that shares a common root with the English verb ‘to diminish,’ whose meaning ranges from “to make (or cause to appear) lesser or smaller” to “to lessen in importance, estimation, or power; to put down, degrade, humiliate; to detract from, disparage, belittle” (*OED* s.v. “Diminish”) –, however, bears the mark of at least latently racist condescension on the part of the Fishers. In their home, the utilization of the nickname ‘Polly’ does not only reduce Pauline Breedlove’s name, but also metaphorically lowers her very personhood. Unknowingly, she is restricted to the role of their maid – or even their slave – and a rigid hierarchy between black and white is established.⁴³ Furthermore, the name Polly itself is oftentimes associated with parrots, pets that are held in cages and are said to imitate the speech of their masters; clearly, then, the Fisher mansion is not the place Pauline has longed for.⁴⁴

These almost schizophrenic tendencies, her obsessions with the white family, their house, and their wealth, finally result in an utter disregard of her own family. Under the spell of the Fishers’ primer-like mansion, Pauline develops a growing contempt for her children and Cholly – negative feelings that are projected onto their storefront. As the very antithesis to the rich, clean, and neat ‘white house,’ the Breedloves’ makeshift dwelling becomes a depressing place to her that she eventually evades by stopping to tend to it:

The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the dark

the abolition of slavery as a society based on family values. In black discourse, however, the mammy can be interpreted as female counterpart to Uncle Tom: As subservient, meek, and humble characters, both uncritically operate within an oppressive white system, accommodate to their environment, and thus perpetuate racism in the United States. Just like Uncle Tom has been used as an epithet for moderate politicians and race leaders such as Booker T. Washington, so the mammy becomes equally negatively connoted (Mgadmi 42-45).

⁴³ Besides the obvious rhyme of the misleading nicknames, there is yet another parallel between Cholly and Polly Breedlove: both violate their daughter Pecola in a kitchen. Before the rape takes place, the young black girl is severely beaten by her mother in the Fisher’s kitchen after accidentally knocking over a pie (*TBE* 109).

⁴⁴ Quite remarkably, only Claudia MacTeer seems to see right through this situation and responds almost violently toward Pauline’s role within the Fishers’ place: Watching “[the Fisher’s girl] calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her” (*TBE* 108).

edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely.
(*TBE* 127)

Against the foil of her own black family, their destitution and poverty, which is vividly symbolized by their storefront, Pauline's second life, her dream world that she enters in the Fishers' 'white house,' becomes even more desirable to her. What she apparently does not realize, however, is that her dream is in fact a nightmare. By exposing the Fisher mansion as a big house of present-day slave masters, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* also comments on the negative influence of white standards that are transported through the primer ideal in children's education and which seem to be deeply implemented in U.S. society: The dictate of the beautiful, luxurious, exclusively white house leads not only directly to a perpetuation of white supremacy and black subordination but also to a state of uninterrupted psychological enslavement of African Americans. In any case, it thoroughly enshrines and cements the *status quo* in the United States.

Perceived from a different angle, however, the oppressiveness of white ideals and their detrimental influences on black people underline their meaninglessness to African Americans – they simply do not suffice as useful frames of reference, they represent nothing that black people can healthily relate to. Ultimately, the black Lorainites in *The Bluest Eye* have to carve out and imagine their *homes* differently from white doctrine. In this respect, the inherently philanthropic role of the house can be restored. The importance of homeownership among African Americans and especially the MacTeer home in Morrison's debut novel will now prove that point.

The black community of Lorain has developed an acute sense for property and a very intimate relationship to their houses. Especially the fear of the non-place called 'outdoors' – "the real terror of life" (*TBE* 17) – exerts an immense influence on them and the young Claudia MacTeer remarks, "Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition," a state of existence that marks "the difference between the concept of death and being" (*ibid.*). It is exactly this dire condition that the Breedlove family is in after their father Cholly accidentally burnt down their house in a drunken stupor. 'Outdoors' also graphically refers to African Americans' state of homelessness and uprootedness. The fact that their ancestors had been kidnapped from their homelands, from their 'first houses,' and violently displaced during slavery has left a deep impact on the black psyche and imagination – an apparent void that, as Morrison shows in *The Bluest Eye*, can be filled with homeownership and that explains the historically strong

desire of black Americans to possess a house: “Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in [African Americans] a hunger for property, for ownership” (*TBE* 18). Consequently, those among Lorain’s black population fortunate enough to be able to afford a house show a firm devotion to it:

Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests. Like frenzied, desperate birds, they overdecorated everything; fussed and fidgeted over their hard-won homes; canned, jellied, and preserved all summer to fill the cupboards and shelves; they painted, picked, and poked at every corner of their houses. (*ibid.*)

They sincerely tend to and guard their hard-earned possessions, which is especially important and understandable since property has been seen as an important means of ascertaining subjectivity and individuation for African Americans, a people who, historically speaking, have been a dispossessed and disfranchised caste within U.S. society. In this respect, the verbs in the quote above signify the pride and the pleasure that *The Bluest Eye*’s African American characters take in their houses – the alliterations and rhythmic sound patterns that they show further underline the significance of certain household chores and put emphasis on the homeowners’ self-importance. The close analogy between their individuality and their dwelling, the fact that these places are not only *homes* to the body, but also to the psyche, demonstrates a closer, more intimate relationship between black people and their houses – their hearts and minds are proverbially where there home is.⁴⁵

The home of Claudia MacTeer’s family, then, further elaborates on the parallel between houses and inhabitants and embodies Morrison’s first conception of an alternative space, a home in her understanding. At first *sight*, the MacTeers’ house seems to be closer to the Breedloves’ storefront, another place that can simply not measure up to the primer ideal. Its outward appearance, its residents, even its ‘pets’ are apparently antitheses to Dick and Jane’s ‘pretty’ dwelling. Claudia describes their home as follows: “Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions” (*TBE* 10). Even though both houses are green, the young girl’s ‘first house’ is not the warm, welcoming house of the

⁴⁵ Admittedly, the preoccupation of Lorain’s black population with their houses can also be read as some kind of compulsive overcompensation and may therefore be taken as yet another example of the rather negative effects of the house as part of the American Dream narrative and concepts such as the primer house. In this light, the almost perverse relationship with their houses, the absolute centrality of possession as well as materialism, and their near maniac obsession with their property seem to outdo interpersonal relationships such as neighborliness, care for family, et cetera. It could then be claimed that the house and the retreat into the private sphere contributes to the ‘unnatural’ disintegration of the traditionally strong African American community. This line of thought is further evidenced by the differentiation between the artificiality of “hothouse sunflowers” as symbols for owner-occupied houses and the natural, if plain “rows of weed that [are] the rented houses” (*TBE* 18).

primer on the surface. Instead of patient, loving adults, her parents appear to be rather unfeeling and the MacTeer's place is not inhabited by cats and dogs, but by vermin – literal pests. While a quick glance at the MacTeers and their house suggests many parallels to the utterly dysfunctional Breedlove family and their *unheimlich* storefront, the reader has to look beyond her first impressions: In a novel that is predominantly concerned with the destructive, racist gaze and equally threatening concepts of beauty, the importance of delving deeper and probing into the façade of people and things is imperative.

Compared to the “very nice” primer mother and the “big and strong” (*TBE* 3) primer father, Mrs. and Mr. MacTeer are lacking: While Claudia's mother appears to be hard-hearted and cold, her father is hardly ever present and has no voice throughout the novel. In a section of *The Bluest Eye* narrated by the nine-year-old Claudia, for instance, the young girl vividly recalls her mother's reaction toward a disease that she had contracted earlier in life. In a harsh tone Mrs. MacTeer accuses Claudia and fusses about her sickness: ““You must be the biggest fool in this town”” (*TBE* 10). When she treats her child with some kind of lotion, Claudia describes her hands as “large and rough” (*TBE* 11). This unusual reaction of a mother to her sick child causes feelings of “guilt and self-pity” (*TBE* 10) in young Claudia and she states that her “mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying” (*TBE* 11). Yet, Mrs. MacTeer is still a loving and caring mother; however, she expresses her feelings in a different way – differently perhaps from the primer ideal and differently from the reader's expectations. Claudia also remembers a feverish night when “feet padded into the room, hand repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn,” she remarks, “I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die” (*TBE* 12). Claudia's mother has made her child learn love the hard way: In a racist society that rejects, oppresses, and violates African Americans systematically – and black women most of all –, Mrs. MacTeer's lesson to her daughter becomes clear. While this conduct greatly troubled a younger Claudia, it still established a strong emotional bond between her and her mother. In fact, she has never questioned her love and later in life appreciates Mrs. MacTeer's reaction: “But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup,” which Claudia “could smell [...] everywhere in that house” (*ibid.*).

The highly visual absence of Mr. MacTeer and the fact that he does not speak a single word in Morrison's debut novel contrast him starkly with the overly present primer father. His ‘nonappearance,’ however, does *not* symbolize a want; rather, it can be explained by his self-

sacrificing devotion toward his family and an intimate connectedness to nature that does not need words to express feelings. Claudia describes her father by employing metaphors from the realm of natural elements: In her imagination, he is associated with seasons, “trees,” the “winter sun,” and “[Lake] Erie” (*TBE* 61), for example. The strong parallels between Mr. MacTeer and nature/Nature, as well as the fact that Claudia even perceives him as a reincarnation of the Roman god “Vulcan” (*ibid.*), establish him as a strong and protective father figure and guardian. Further, he is also the stereotypical breadwinner of the MacTeer family: “Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills” (*ibid.*).

The MacTeers and their house therefore differ greatly from both the primer ideal and the Breedloves as their antithesis (“Foreword” xii). Whereas Claudia’s family seems to share certain beliefs with the primer, certain values that are supposedly transported by that image, they undoubtedly express them independently from the white standard. They do not negotiate between the ‘good’ white ideal and the ‘bad’ black reality, but rather take a different route. Similarly, they almost naturally share certain conditions with the Breedloves: While Claudia and her family are subject to the same destructive society and its dictates, they, however, do not get crushed under its oppressive weight. Consequently, their house is turned into a truly philanthropic *home* – a safe place for Claudia and her sister Frieda, a site where family relations as well as gender roles are largely intact.⁴⁶ As a result, their parents’ guardianship, care, and love are projected onto their house; its sanctity is fiercely protected against potential aggressors – as evidenced in the episode of the MacTeers’ lecherous and probably pedophilic roamer Mr. Henry (*TBE* 100) –, it serves even as a temporary shelter for Pecola, and their kitchen, most of all, becomes a special place within Claudia’s imagination.

After Cholly Breedlove has burnt down their house and his family is put ‘outdoors,’ they do not have any place to go. Pecola and her older brother Sammy are sent to other families in Lorain to live until the authorities have decided where to place the Breedloves permanently. At the MacTeers’, the young girl spends only a “few days” (*TBE* 18), but it is in their *home* that she experiences the comfort of peers and female companionship: The trio Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola do not only share a bed with each other, but are also even more intimately connected since they witness the latter’s first menstruation – a significant point in a girl’s life marking the physical transition from child- to womanhood. When Pecola suddenly feels a

⁴⁶ Herein lies another distinction between the MacTeers and the Breedloves: While Claudia’s father *is* the ultimate symbol of the male breadwinner, Cholly is his opposite. Emasculated by society, he turns to alcohol for comfort and it is up to Polly to earn her family’s living.

pain and the other two girls see blood running down her legs and staining her dress, the former is shocked and does not know what to do. Frieda, the most experienced of the three, however, knows that it had to be “ministratin” (*TBE* 27) – a misnomer for menstruation – and takes charge of the situation. Under her command, the MacTeer sisters try to hide Pecola’s shame by washing the stairs and burying her soiled underwear and they try to comfort and soothe her. Frieda, for example, assures the shocked girl that she will not die, that her menstruation only signals her entrance into full femininity, by saying: “[...] It just means you can have a baby!” (*TBE* 28). This scene of female help and support is finally complete when Mrs. MacTeer’s attention is finally aroused and she realizes what is going on. After comforting both Pecola and Frieda in a warm embrace, she takes the former to the bathroom where she would not only wash her, but presumably also instruct her. The MacTeer sisters, Mrs. MacTeer, and Pecola share and exchange help, knowledge, and solace; ultimately, however, they cannot save the Breedlove child – a fact that is foreshadowed by Pecola’s unanswered question: “[...] How do you get somebody to love you?” (*TBE* 32).⁴⁷

Moreover, I interpret the episode that features Pecola finding shelter at the MacTeers’ as a comment on diverse kinds of philanthropy and on people’s motivation to help others in need. Since the economic situation in Claudia’s family is anything but pleasant, her mother bemoans the new circumstances in her house. Having found out that Pecola has drunk a large amount of milk, she laments: “... I don’t know what I’m suppose to be running here, a charity ward, I guess. Time for me to get out of the giving line and get in the getting line” (*TBE* 24). Financially not much better off than the Breedloves, Mrs. MacTeer is drawn apart between her and her families’ obligation to help the needy and their own precarious situation with yet another mouth to feed. Her indecision and inner turmoil results in a rambling monologue in which she relates her situation to “Henry Ford” (*TBE* 24/25) and “Roosevelt” (*TBE* 25) and pictures herself as some kind of mythical gift bringer in the vein of “Sandy Claus” (*TBE* 26). She thus refers to one of the epitomes of institutionalized philanthropy, the initiator of New Deal state welfare policy, and the personification of Christian ideals. While all of the afore-mentioned real or fictional characters are inspired by a sense of philanthropy and giving, there is also an ironic discrepancy between them and Mrs. MacTeer: All being rich, white, and influential men, they are the very opposite to Claudia’s mother. Hence, she does not perceive them as role models and cannot draw her motivation to help from their examples.

⁴⁷ The only other place where Pecola experiences safety is – tellingly – a brothel or *whorehouse* located above the Breedloves’ storefront. There, Miss Marie, one of the prostitutes, addresses her with kind nicknames that all refer to food and tells her humorous stories about love, men, and history (*TBE* 51-55).

Additionally, the contrast between Mrs. MacTeer on the one hand and the stereotypical philanthropists on the other resembles the contradiction between what Lewis Hyde describes as the barrier between the gift economy and the market economy: Whereas the former is characterized by isolation, lack of emotions, and individualism, Hyde states that the latter is marked by social cohesion, “a feeling-bond between two people” (72), and community spirit. He also explains that contemporary Western societies seem to be dominated by free-market ideology, in which the self is valued more than the other or the community – an interpretation that can very well be applied to the United States. This trend, however, poses an imminent threat to the social cohesion: If the individual’s profit is placed over the community’s gain, gifts are more likely to be treated as mere commodities, even though Hyde reminds his readers that they are something “we prize and yet say ‘you can’t put a price on it’” (78). The barrier between the gift and market economy dissolves. Accordingly, the emotional ties between individuals are loosened and the social fabric of a society will disintegrate in the long run. As a potential remedy, Hyde stresses the crucial social function of the gift economy: It brings “people together and mak[es] one body out of several” (73). Apparently, then, Mrs. MacTeer’s help for Pecola is not motivated by American philanthropy, in which Hyde sees nothing more but an “alluring imitation of gift exchange” (179) that solidifies hierarchical relationships between the parties involved, instead of eradicating rigid boundaries. It is rather inspired by a more ancient, more basic interpretation of philanthropy closer to the etymological origin of the word: Claudia’s mother is indeed driven by her love for humankind as she consequently shelters Pecola and treats her like she was her own daughter.

Lastly, Claudia’s experiences with kitchens in general, and with her mother’s especially, are completely different from Pecola’s: While the latter is caught in a destructive downward spiral of hate, violence, and rejection, culminating in her father’s rape, the former’s picture of this singular room is closely associated with women, community, mutuality, and knowledge. As a typical female place within the house, the MacTeers’ kitchen is intimately linked to women and her mother singing the blues in Claudia’s imagination. The young girl clearly remembers an episode when several of the community’s female members gathered in her mother’s kitchen and started gossiping. Presumably preserving food for winter as it is already canning season, the women engage in a reciprocal communal ritual or performance and through Claudia’s eyes “Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop” (*TBE* 15). Even though she and her older sister do not understand everything her mother’s friends are saying, they still “watch their faces, their hands, their feet,

and listen for truth in timbre” (ibid.). By closely observing these women, Claudia and Frieda gather information and piece together the puzzle that the world must be to them. The kitchen is therefore not only a place of female networking, but also a classroom for the inexperienced and young, a truly philanthropic site where they can obtain crucial knowledge through observational learning. Claudia’s fondest memories of her mother also picture her singing the blues in the kitchen. While doing her household, Mrs. MacTeer “would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty” that Claudia longs “for those hard times, yearning to be grown without ‘a thin di-i-ime to my name’” (*TBE* 25). The almost therapeutic power of blues to transform negative experiences, first into an artistic outlet and then into more positive feelings, is one of its most striking characteristics. Together with the laconic attitude of Lorain’s African American women toward life, Mrs. MacTeer’s blues offers the young Claudia a different outlook on the world: Accepting pain as an integral part of life, her songs contradict the white primer myth with all its sheer bliss. Through her mother’s song and female gossip, Claudia is introduced to a more thorough knowledge and evolves into a stronger person. Her mother therefore literally prepares her daughters for life inside the kitchen. It is not surprising, then, that Claudia’s dearest wish for Christmas is also connected to this special site within the house. Instead of white baby dolls, which she passionately hates and dismembers in an attempt to dismantle their secret attraction (*TBE* 21), she wishes for an experience that engages all her senses: In her grandmother’s house she would feel the “lowness of the stool made for my boy, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and [...] the taste of a peach” (*TBE* 22). The engagement of all her sensory organs signifies Claudia’s deep and intimate connection with kitchens and further underlines this room’s inherently benevolent characteristic.⁴⁸

The house metaphor in Morrison debut novel *The Bluest Eye* thus functions as a comment on the racist, exclusivist, and oppressive United States – a nation that is oftentimes depicted as a house. Claudia and Frieda therefore rightfully conclude: “This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (*TBE* 206). Because of this, Patrick Bjork claims that the primer ideal, which dominates the entire novel

⁴⁸ Claudia’s impressions about her mother’s kitchen clearly bring to mind Paule Marshall’s childhood memories that she has put to paper in an essay titled “From the Poets in the Kitchen” (1983). For both, this particular room bears a special importance and is closely connected to certain formative experiences. The kitchen is also the place where they witnessed female strength and creativity – things that would have been almost impossible in an otherwise racist and sexist United States.

and always looms large in the background of the events, is employed as a reminder to “the reader of the undeniable contrast between this pervasive white, middle-class myth and the tragic desolation of the novel’s central character, Pecola Breedlove and her family, who are incapable of attaining this dream myth” (32).

Morrison’s premier novel, however, is not only an indictment of white America, its standards, and its biases, but it also questions the responsibility of the African American community. Their docile acceptance and reproduction of racist assumptions – powerfully depicted in Geraldine’s colorist house and the Breedloves’ storefront – draws the reader’s attention. By contrast, the MacTeer’s dwelling, this first *home* in Morrison’s terms, represents an alternative place relatively independent from the destructive and rather meaningless white standards. *The Bluest Eye* therefore is the author’s first contribution to her oeuvre-wide discussion of the ‘house/home antagonism’ as well as her first attempt at restoring the American house to a place that would indeed be characterized by love for humankind.

3.3.2 Of Imperial Mansions, Urban Apartments, and Rural Shacks: The Futile Quest for ‘Home’ in *Tar Baby*

Tar Baby is a novel that is in many ways unique within Toni Morrison’s oeuvre: While racial tensions are a constant backdrop in most of her works, the dominant white society – epitomized by Valerian Street – is foregrounded, large parts of the narrative are told from the white characters’ perspectives, and there is a head-on confrontation between white and black in her fourth novel. Its conflict-laden plot takes the reader on a journey to a fictive Caribbean island where inter- as well as intraracial fights erupt violently. While *Tar Baby* is therefore Morrison’s only novel set outside the United States, it also represents a development on the ideas put forth in *The Bluest Eye* and its island setting invites an isolated consideration of the American house as well as of American philanthropy.

The character of Valerian and his imperial mansion L’Arbe de la Croix are deconstructed. Competing ideologies, generational gaps, and class conflicts all surface and collide in Valerian’s island retreat, turning it into a literal site of contestation and eventually causing its disintegration. Likewise, his role as benefactor of the Childs and their granddaughter is critically questioned. *Tar Baby*’s peculiar setting forces William ‘Son’ Green and Jadine ‘Jade’ Childs, the novel’s main protagonists and ill-fated couple, to come to terms with certain pressing questions about their identities, histories, as well as convictions. Both are constantly drawn apart between irreconcilable antinomies such as black/white, past/present,

male/female, and segregation/integration. Trying to negotiate between these opposing poles, both seem to lend support and stability to each other at first. Consequently, they embark on a quest to find a home, a place that L'Arbe de la Croix is certainly not. Mounting tensions between Son and Jade caused by their highly divergent lifestyles and worldviews, however, prevent them from arriving at a safe harbor where both can be happy: Neither Son's nostalgically cherished rural hometown of Eloë, Florida, nor Jadine's expensive New York City downtown apartment offer what *both* need. Apparently incompatible with each other, the one-time lovers separate and Morrison's *Tar Baby* leaves the reader with an unresolved ending: Son and Jadine's quest to make a home remains as incomplete as the question of the true nature of home for African Americans remains unanswered.

Morrison opens her fourth novel with an epigraph from Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you" (1 Cor. 1:11). In his epistle, the apostle bemoans the increasing trend of factionalism between the church members in one of early Christianity's centers, the Ancient Greek city of Corinth. Most striking about *Tar Baby's* epigraph is that it foreshadows the crucial role of the house throughout this novel, both in its literal and figurative meaning.⁴⁹ Used metaphorically, the Pauline notion of the house refers to the ancient concept of an extended family that included not only basically all of one's relatives, but also one's slaves and dependents. Within Morrison's work, this situation is duplicated in Valerian Street's Caribbean retreat L'Arbe de la Croix, a luxurious mansion on a private island, where the white candy manufacturer lives with his wife and his black servants. The head of the mansion does not only house his servants' niece Jadine during winter and has paid for her education, but also offers shelter to a stranded black sailor who has jumped ship. The different residents and guests disagree over many issues and the internal divisions that appear to threaten the integrity of the Corinthian church are also replicated in Valerian's house as master fights their servant, black fights white, old fights young, and male fights female. Read against the grain, however, Paul's letter provides a powerful formula of unity in Christianity, instructing Corinth's believers to practice a more strict faith, free from paganism, false teachings, and immorality. Likewise, the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix have to come to terms with the friction caused by their different worldviews, beliefs, and

⁴⁹ The reference to the otherwise unknown Chloe signifies the exceptional role of *Tar Baby* within Morrison's oeuvre (since it was clearly an exception to the rule that a woman headed a house/family in patriarchal antiquity), the novel's foregrounding of different concepts of femininity (e.g., the novel's dedication to various women in Morrison's life), and potentially even Morrison's biography (Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford).

convictions on this isolated island, a struggle that eventually results in the downfall of the house of Valerian Street.

The “oldest and most impressive” (*TB* 10) mansion on Isle de Chevaliers, *L’Arbe de la Croix*, is clearly marked as special not only by its impression on spectators, but also by its name and its location on the island: Its French title was presumably adopted to provide this place with grandeur, sophistication, and almost regal dignity, and its exposed position on a hill far above the other “magnificent winter houses” (*TB* 9) strongly calls to mind John Winthrop’s notion of America as a ‘City upon a Hill.’ Its owner, Valerian Street, apparently named after a Roman emperor, has built a palace that parallels and reflects his royal postures. This imperial mansion, however, is a rather incoherent place, characterized by many inconsistencies concerning its very name, architecture, and overall appearance.

While most visitors are awed by the sheer beauty, neat design, and luxury of Valerian’s house, they still comment on “the unfortunate choice of its name” (*TB* 11): Its title is written in French, the language of the prototypes of absolutist monarchy, and literally translates to ‘the tree of the cross.’ The ease and lightness of this “wonderful house. Wide breezy, and full of light,” (*ibid.*) is clearly contradicted by the reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross, then, signifies the burden that God’s son had to shoulder – the ultimate symbol for human sins and his sacrifice for the redemption of all humankind. Symbolically, then, the name of Valerian’s mansion seems to suggest that the inhabitants have to take an equally painful route as Jesus’ had to take toward Golgotha during the Passion: They have to assume responsibility for their past actions and to come to terms with their histories. *L’Arbe de la Croix* is therefore not a joyful island retreat where Valerian, his wife Margaret, and Jadine spend their unburdened holidays, nor is it the stable and dignified place of employment that Sydney and Ondine Childs, Valerian’s servants, dream of, nor the desired “safe port” (*TB* 135) that William ‘Son’ Green has been searching for.

This impression is further underlined by the many ironic deficiencies in the very substance of this mansion:

It had been designed by a brilliant Mexican architect, but the Haitian laborers had no union and therefore could not distinguish between craft and art, so while the panes did not fit their sashes, the windowsills and door saddles were carved lovingly to perfection. They sometimes forgot or ignored the determination of water to flow downhill so the toilets and bidets could not always produce a uniformly strong swirl of water. But the eaves were so wide and deep that the windows could be left open even in a storm and no rain could enter the rooms – only wind, scents and torn-away leaves. The floor planks were tongue-in-groove, but the hand-kilned tiles from Mexico,

though beautiful, loosened at a touch. Yet the doors were plumb and their knobs, hinges and locks secure as turtles. (*TB* 10/11)

Even though “Every effort had been made to keep it from looking ‘designed’” (*TB* 11), the reader comes to realize that, despite its rich ornaments, luxurious furniture, and expansive material, L’Arbe de la Croix is an utterly misconstrued building with dysfunctional windows, toilets, roofing, and tiling. It’s imperial aura, then, is nothing but a mere façade in the truest sense of the word, a pretense that cannot survive closer scrutiny. Valerian’s mansion is a lifeless, unhomely place, a house that has “a hotel feel about it – a kind of sooner or later leaving appearance” (*TB* 12). Additionally, its owner has added a greenhouse to the main building – yet another useless piece of construction right in the middle of the tropics, as Ondine insightfully remarks (*TB* 13). Listening to classical European music (e.g. Bach and Haydn), Valerian spends most of his days in solitude trying to raise his beloved hydrangeas there, a plant that is alien to the otherwise biodiverse tropical flora. A vain attempt to create “a place of controlled ever-flowering life” (*TB* 53), the greenhouse functions as a compensation for the things that have been and still are beyond Valerian’s control, such as his prodigal son Michael, and establishes the head of the mansion as alleged culture-bringer, a man that cultivates a supposedly uncivilized island.

Valerian’s mansion and his greenhouse, then, function as metaphors for capitalism and imperialism. His profession as a former candy manufacturer further underlines this and Karen Stein remarks, “Candy and sugar are signifiers of imperialism. Sugar cane was a main crop in the Caribbean, and a key factor in the slave trade” (98). However, the highly visible inconsistencies and contradictions of these houses, Joyce Scott contends, revise the “capitalistic discourse of ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ with the alternative definitions of violation and destruction of the natural environment” (35). Built on shaky foundations, L’Arbe de la Croix cannot offer its dwellers the urgently needed stability; as an unnatural, artificial place, it causes pain and frustration instead of healing for both humans and the island itself.

Mirrored in its inhabitants’ numerous conflicts, the paradoxes of L’Arbe de la Croix expose Valerian’s claim to imperial reign as mere pretense. Likewise, his role as philanthropist needs to be critically questioned. Ironically, the neat façade of the house and its dwellers collapses at Christmas, as the mansion is “prickly with tension and unanswered questions” (*TB* 142). A commemoration of the birth of Christ, God’s only son and symbolic gift to humankind, this most important and popular Christian holiday is traditionally seen as

the season of families, reconciliation, and joy. The exchange of Christmas gifts – an analogy to God’s ultimate gift and the presents offered Jesus by the three Magi – symbolizes the closeness, mutuality, and reciprocity among people. In Valerian’s house, however, this tradition is reversed and the whole order of his empire is challenged.

Instead of the advent of their son Michael, William ‘*Son*’ Green arrives on the scene a few days earlier. Having jumped ship, he has been foraging for food in and around the house for at least a week and has hidden himself in Margaret’s closet where Valerian’s terrified wife finally discovers him. To the great anguish of all other characters – above all Margaret, who holds the racist assumption that Son wanted to rape her –, the retired candy manufacturer invites him to stay at L’Arbe de la Croix instead of turning him over to the local police. While it initially seems that this ‘son’ may be the redeemer that the other characters are in need of – Son is successful in establishing friendly relationships with the Childs, Jadine, and the Streets, resulting in the blossoming of Valerian’s plants and a rekindling of the Streets’ sexuality –, his presence is actually the straw to break the camel’s back: the strange atmosphere of lingering violence, suppressed emotions, and hatred causes a literal collapse of Valerian’s house of cards at the infamous Christmas dinner (*TB* 201-209).

Following a minor dispute about responsibilities and the distribution of powers between Valerian and the Childs, between master and servants, after the former reports that he has fired the native helps without informing or asking the latter about their thoughts on this issue, Son understands the complete dimension of the class conflict which underlies the initial quarrel and fully exposes Valerian’s – and thereby white America’s – imperial exploitation of African Americans and third world countries:

[Valerian] had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child’s play and had no value; but he turned it into candy, the invention of which really was child’s play, and sold it to other children and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of, the jungle where the sugar came from and build a palace with more of their labor and then hire them to do more of the work he was not capable of and pay them again according to some scale of value that would outrage Satan himself and when those people wanted a little of what he wanted, some apples for *their* Christmas, and took some, he dismissed them with a flutter of the fingers, because they were thieves, and nobody knew thieves and thievery better than he did and he probably thought he was a law-abiding man, they all did, and they all always did, because they had not the dignity of wild animals who did not eat where they defecated but they could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land and that is why they loved property so,

because they had killed it and soiled it defecated on it and they loved more than anything the places where they shit. (202/203, her emphasis)

This long, hypotactic sentence, which consists of almost three hundred words and fills approximately two-thirds of a page, shows Son's growing anger at Valerian's posture, a mounting inner tension that he can no longer control: Revealing the supposedly sophisticated and kind candy manufacturer as "one of the killers of the world" (*TB* 204) and reinterpreting his mansion as an *outhouse*, a "civilized latrin[e]" (*ibid.*), Son risks a head-on confrontation at the dinner table and directly attacks the master of the house, who remained up to this point unquestioned. Their opposite standpoints are not only highlighted by the opposite sides that they occupy at the dinner table and their different outlooks on the world, symbolized by their eyes (*TB* 205), but also by their contradictory convictions about the genesis of *Isle de Chevaliers*: While both are reminded of horsemen, the eponymous cavaliers, Valerian believes in the 'white' story about French horse riders, whereas Son retells the 'black' story about survivors of a slave ship (*TB* 206). Despite Valerian's desperate attempt to regain control of the situation – he voices a last royal claim to power by saying, "I am being questioned by these people, as if, as if I *could* be called into question!" (*ibid.*, her emphasis) – Son's serious challenge to the former's responsibility for his actions and to his authority over people, deprive the head of the house of his god-like position.

Finally, this attack gives way to a third, deeper level of the dispute at the dinner table: A bitterly hurt Ondine informs the shocked audience of Margaret's habitual abuse of Michael as an infant; by revealing the true reason for the Streets' son's estrangement from his parents, she also reveals "the crime of innocence" (*TB* 242) that all of the main protagonists are guilty of: Valerian has not been able to decode Michael's crying; Margaret has conferred her insecurity onto Michael; Ondine has hidden Margaret's abuse; Sydney has internalized parts of Valerian's racism and transcended it to colorism; Jadine rejects black history in order to make it in the white world; and Son longs for a nostalgic place in his past that cannot, however, provide a future. *L'Arbe de la Croix* is thus not the biblical cradle, the place where different people meet and engage in a philanthropic act of life- and gift-giving. Rather, it is a battleground that greatly troubles the characters, leads to a separation of the three couples, and eventually causes the disintegration of the house of Valerian Street.

The destruction of *L'Arbe de la Croix*, then, symbolizes the downfall of Valerian's – and by extrapolation white America's – imperialism and shows that the empire eventually strikes back: Metaphorically, the 'emperor' is left without dominion as Valerian is utterly unable to

control the events. Also, a literal reconquest of space by nature takes place as “Isle de Chevaliers filled in the spaces that had been the island’s to begin with” (ibid.). Following what Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber interprets as an “explosive Christmas dinner” (137), the grandeur and sophistication of the imperial mansion is completely eroded: L’Arbe de la Croix is described as a “demoralized house” (TB 217), a dwelling that further develops into a dark place, “a house of shadows” (TB 235). Quite significantly, its downfall is first signaled by the total desolation of the candy manufacturer’s formerly beloved greenhouse in which the “air was so charged with pain the angel trumpets could not breathe it. Rows of them wrinkled on the vine and fell unnoticed right in Valerian’s sightline” (TB 231). By drawing an analogy between the rotting of the plants and the decay of the house of the Street’s – referring to both the construction work and the family –, Morrison’s novel seems to argue that the time of self-deception of L’Arbe de la Croix’ inhabitants is over and that a more appropriate approach to solving their conflicts needs to be taken, if their lives are to continue: After the neat façade of Valerians artificial empire has crumbled and collapsed, each of the characters finally have to face their ghosts. *Tar Baby*, however, leaves open the outcome of this process as nature wages war against L’Arbe de la Croix and severely threatens its structural integrity (TB 274 and 284/285).

By extension, the very inconsistencies that characterize this supposedly imperial mansion parallel the inherent contradictions of its owner’s personality. Commenting on his ambiguity throughout *Tar Baby*, Karen Carmean states, “Valerian is perhaps the most paradoxical [character], split between being admirable and awful” (65). His first name alone lends further credibility to this assumption: On the one hand, it underlines his and his family’s self-conception. As financially successful industrialists, they claim an exposed position in society in analogy to ancient Roman emperors. On the other hand, however, Valerian is ultimately an ‘unfortunate choice of name’ – just like L’Arbe de la Croix is. His namesake was defeated and taken captive by the Persian king Shapur I, causing instability within the Roman Empire. It is reported that the Roman emperor had to suffer from many indignities during captivity, such as being used a human stepping-stool, and his body is said to have been skinned, stuffed, and dyed red (Reiner 325-329). Instead of lending its bearer imperial dignity, the name ironically highlights Valerian’s inability to control his dominion. Moreover, a piece of candy was named after him when he was born. The Valerians, however, “turned out to be a slow but real flop” (TB 50), a sweet that could only be sold to black people in the American South without making any financial profit. Apparently doomed to fail in life, Valerian Street resembles an almost tragicomic anti-hero to some extent.

Since his imperial mansion L'Arbe de la Croix and especially his greenhouse represent a violent and destructive intrusion into an otherwise intact ecosystem, Valerian's character and the authenticity of his seemingly philanthropic commitment to the education of Jadine Childs are consequently strongly called into question. A historically well documented phenomenon, white philanthropic engagement in black higher education has been surrounded by controversial debates throughout American history. A plethora of scholarship as well as fictive writings by African Americans has dealt with this issue – stressing both white philanthropy's positive and negative impact (see chapters 2.1.3 and 2.2). Many critics have pointed out that, next to these supposedly concrete manifestations of white superiority (the mansion and the greenhouse), Valerian's philanthropy is just another way of superimposing white values on black people. Scott, for example, analyzes Jadine as “a peculiar kind of accomplishment for [Valerian]” (33), whereas Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems interpret her as “a complete product of [his] program and culture” (83). His allegedly selfless commitment, then, becomes a means of ego-reinforcement, attesting to his god-like creative power and imperial self-image, as well as a convenient way of transmitting *his* values, *his* culture, and ultimately *his* hegemony. Read in this light, Valerian's philanthropy is nothing more than cultural imperialism and he becomes something of the villain of Morrison's *Tar Baby*.

Jadine Childs name further testifies to this plight. Her first name, frequently shortened to Jade, has the meaning “to fatigue, weary, tire” as a transitive verb and “to become tired or worn out; to grow dull or languid; to flag” as an intransitive verb (*OED* s.v. “Jade”). While the first meaning of the word foreshadows her detrimental impact on Son and her role as the mythic Tar Baby, the second meaning signifies her state of subordination and infatuation with Western culture (Jennings 123). Her family name *Childs*, then, further underlines this interpretation, indicating that, as long as Jadine does not come to terms with her African heritage, she will ultimately remain in a condition of perpetual childhood (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 85). Through Valerian's sponsorship of her education, Jadine is effectively turned into a “yalla” (*TB* 155) – a hybrid being that has lost connection to its cultural roots signaled by her strained relationship with her grandparents and her love-hate relationship with Son. Even though she may be educated, symbolizing black progress in some ways, Jadine nevertheless becomes a cultural orphan. Having received a formal education in one of the temples of Western thought, the Sorbonne at Paris, and having reached a degree in art history, she lavishly praises European art and devalues African craft (*TB* 74). Apparently differentiating between (white) high culture/Culture and (black) low culture, Jadine neglects

her own cultural heritage, tradition, and history. As the uprooted ‘product’ of Valerian Street’s philanthropy, she finally chooses white values, symbolized by her expensive sealskin coat and her choice to live in Paris, and leaves Ondine, Sydney, and Son behind.

The haunting image of the black woman in her yellow dress and Jadine’s nightmare about the “night women” (*TB* 262), however, are clear indicators for her unstable identity as well as the inner turmoil and disjointedness caused by Valerian’s philanthropy. Caught somewhere between the black and the white world, Jadine’s concept of femininity and her very own female identity are severely challenged by these black female dream images: Apparently, Ondine, her own late mother, and several women from Son’s hometown Eloë have retained their “ancient properties” (*TB* 305), and seem to propagate a more traditional notion of womanhood centered on procreation and fertility. In vain, Jadine tries to assert her own version of femaleness – one clearly influenced by Western thinking – against theirs: “‘I have breasts too,’ she said or thought or willed, ‘I have breasts too.’ But they didn’t believe her” (*TB* 258). Experiencing these night women as a threat to her personality, to “the person she had worked hard to become” (*TB* 262), Jadine finally rejects their version of femininity for a more individualist one based on materialism, financial success, and “originality” (*TB* 269).

Moreover, she becomes the very emblem of the folkloristic Tar Baby, a trap designed and laid by the white farmer Valerian, to catch Br’er Rabbit Son (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 85/86). Already a product of her white “patrons” (*TB* 118) and their philanthropy, Jadine’s transformation into this mythic figure is completed when she falls into a swamp on the island and is literally covered in a sticky black substance that closely resembles tar (*TB* 182-184). Her influence on Son, then, is decisive. Son pretends to have come to the house in search of food and tries to persuade himself that he “had not followed the women” – a phrase that is repeated five times from page 133 through page 138 –, until he finally ‘surrenders’ to her enticement and falls in love with her. Distracted by the mere looks of Jadine, Son can no longer trust his senses and his discernment: “He thought the love thing with Jadine must have thrown his sensibilities off, derailed his judgment” (*TB* 217). The most detrimental impact on him, however, is that Jadine holds him in a sort of harmful limbo between attraction and repulsion that effectively prevents his progress: On the one hand, Son is disgusted by Jadine apparently quite consciously acting the Tar Baby and defending Valerian and Margaret at the Christmas dinner (*TB* 204/219). On the other hand, he imagines her as a long desired dream come true and is willing to take care of as well as protect her (*TB* 217). Son’s contradictory feelings toward Jadine and his uncertain state of mind are vividly expressed in the line “It was

all mixed up,” which is repeated four times on pages 299 and 300. The gaping chasm that separates these two young African Americans is increasingly widened by their ideological conflict, which is located somewhere between the apparently binary oppositions of future/past, urban/rural life, ahistoricity/tradition, and progress/nostalgia.

Fired by Valerian Street’s double-edged philanthropy toward Jadine, who has been taught to neglect her origins with his money and turned into a Tar Baby, and toward Son, who has been provided for with the allegedly warm hospitality of L’Arbe de la Croix, only to be caught in a trap, the tension between them becomes unbearable. Fights over Valerian (*TB* 263) and whether he or Sydney and Ondine are to be credited for Jadine’s education (*TB* 265), over “school” (*TB* 264/265), and “work” (*TB* 265/266), erupt frequently and become gradually more violent. The mounting friction between Son and Jadine eventually culminates in a scene of abhorrent intraracial violence: the rape scene (*TB* 270/271). In order to prove his manhood and to demonstrate it to her and him, Son rapes Jadine and thereby reveals his impotence, his weakness, and inconsistencies. Valerian Street’s supposedly enlightened philanthropy has therefore created an African American generation characterized by binary opposition, young adults whose life scripts are seemingly incompatible to each other:

Each was pulling the other way from the maw of hell – its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (*TB* 269)

Before Son and Jadine eventually separate and move in different directions, they both attempt to rescue the other and embark on a futile quest to find a home: Ostensibly pretending to save their partner, they, however, merely defend and justify their own worldviews and concepts of life. Son, on the one hand, allegedly attempts to lead Jadine from cultural oblivion, ahistoricity, and subjugation to independence, stating: “He saw it all as a rescue: first tearing her mind from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from the plantation” (*TB* 219). Equating Valerian Street with slave masters and thoroughly believing in the incompatibility of black and white, Son propagates a disintegrationist approach that separates the races from each other (*TB* 210/269). He tries to teach the educated but unknowing Jadine the ‘right’ things by effectively replacing her ‘white knowledge’ with a supposedly deeper ‘black insight’ into the world, into the United States, and into men such as Valerian. Jadine, on the other hand, professes to free Son from his nostalgia for Eloë, from its desperation and destitution, as well as from the past that keeps him back and to direct him into a future

marked by successes and upward social mobility: college degrees, well-paid jobs, and accessibility to the whole wide world: “She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him” (TB 269).

Their highly divergent worldviews crystallize in the symbolic pictures of white and black America, respectively. While Son perceives the former as a plantation, a place in which white ‘masters will keep African Americans in subordination and eternal servitude,’ Jadine sees the latter as a cradle, a place in which a process of maturation and personal improvement is blocked by nostalgic and anachronistic beliefs. These opposing images emphasize that both Son’s and Jadine’s experiences in life are characterized by lacks: Whereas Son has had to live the life of “that great underclass of undocumented men” (TB 166), which parallels that of slaves, and has not been able to find a stable income, the orphaned Jadine has never had a cradle and went to boarding schools far away from Sydney and Ondine, her only living relatives. By projecting their insecurities concerning their own identities onto the other, then, they both try to hide and disguise their apparent vulnerability.

The attempted rescue of the other resembles a literal missionary work – instead of saving their counterpart, Son tries to remodel Jadine according to his own image and standards, and vice versa. Accepting help from the other means agreeing to the terms of the implied contract; their seemingly altruistic motivation (rescue) is therefore strongly directed by self-interest (transformation). Though aware of the situation, they are unable to find a satisfactory solution for their impasse, and cannot reach a compromise as the following conversation illustrates:

‘Why do you want to *change* me?’ [Son]

‘Why do you want to change *me*?’ [Jadine] (TB 266, her emphasis)

Whereas Son can simply not comprehend Jadine’s motivation to alter him and is unable to read her actions (therefore, the emphasis on the verb), Jadine likewise cannot understand Son’s reasons for trying to remodel her personality and identity (therefore, the emphasis on the personal pronoun). Their flight from Valerian’s mansion and search for a comforting, stabilizing place is doomed to fail from the very beginning. While one is trying to reenter his long lost comfort zone, the other is unwilling to quit her jet set life – both Son’s hometown and Jadine’s New York City are ultimately no ‘homes’ where both can prosper simultaneously.

Leaving L’Arbe de la Croix, “the master’s house” (*Circles* 80) in Gurleen Grewal’s terms, and its inhabitants behind, the couple moves to New York City and later on to Eloe, Florida,

and their love relationship seems to run counter to the destruction of Valerian's house at first: As opposing poles concerning their lifestyles, worldviews, and experiences they do not only attract each other but also appear to lend support to each other, and provide the other with what he/she needs. Their reactions to the urban and rural locales, respectively, are, however, characterized by an antithetical dynamic: Whereas Jadine flourishes in New York City and is suffocated in Eloe, Son's response to his surroundings is diametrically opposed to hers. It is therefore imperative to analyze the manifestations of Jadine's and Son's concepts of home and their impact on them: the metropolitan apartment and Eloe's yellow houses, respectively.

Arriving at New York a few days before Jadine, the city triggers contradictory feelings in Son and greatly troubles him; it leaves him vulnerable and utterly dislocated. As an insurmountable obstacle, New York threatens his conceptions of the relationship of old age and youth (*TB* 216), masculinity and femininity (*TB* 220), and therefore becomes an unnatural place for him: Consequently, Son wonders, "where were the trees" (*TB* 221)? His isolation and loneliness is further pronounced by the place in which he stays the first couple of days: Significantly, he lives in a Hilton hotel and not at a friend's place. Though luxurious and comfortable, it highlights the general feeling of unfamiliarity that Son has without Jadine in New York and shows that he is completely at the mercy of her and her "city-sense" (*TB* 218); without Jadine as his only anchor and stability, Son is not going to make it in New York. Jadine's perceptions of the city, on the other hand, are completely different from Son's: "Unlike the anxiety-ridden man in a Hilton bathtub, she wanted to giggle. New York made her feel like giggling" (*TB* 221). At her ease entirely in the city as well as in good spirits, Jadine naturally not only blends but fits in, and confidently states: "This is home" (*TB* 222).

Upon her arrival at New York, the couple moves into "Dawn's apartment" (*TB* 223), a flat of one of her friends, who is apparently moving upwards on the social ladder with full speed attempting to be an actress. This apartment functions as a temporary 'home' for them and supposedly underlines the material success and progress that Jadine so firmly believes in and stands for. Strikingly, however, this episode is set in winter, the season that is oftentimes linked to notions of death, decay, and stillness. As a result, the couple wastes away in this place: They spend money on useless things and frequently get drunk; there is no real and steady job for either of them; they do not socialize; and their relationship eventually sours (*TB* 223-230). Finally, the irreconcilable differences between Son and Jadine surface: "Four months in that apartment of long and bristling winter days when he slowed her down to the speed of a tulip. Murky New York days when she spun him like a top until he slammed into

the headboard” (*TB* 223). Highly symbolic for their deteriorating relationship is the short but nevertheless important Nommo-episode: In an act of kindness, Son takes in a confused and deeply hurt girl, Nommo, who does not only leave the couple without any words of gratitude or of farewell, but also steals from them (*TB* 228). In African theology, ‘nommo’ refers to ancestral spirits as well as to the creative power of words (Hayes 675 and Morrison “Unspeakable” 229). Apparently, then, words have left Son and Jadine and they hardly communicate with each other any more. The *apartment* therefore fulfills its literal sense: It keeps them apart from the world and from each other; it becomes a prison, an isolated and secluded place:

They didn’t go to parties anymore – other people interfered with their view of each other. They stopped going to Suggs and Across 110th Street. They stopped laughing and began to smile at each other. From across the room, across the mattress, across the table. Their language diminished to code at times, and at others ballooned to monologues delivered while cradled in the other’s arms. They never looked at the sky or got up early to see the sunrise. They played no music and hadn’t the foggiest notion that spring was on its way. (*TB* 229/230)

Together in Dawn’s apartment, Son and Jadine no longer support each other or draw strength from their differences. As a result, Son conceives of Eloë as an escape from their dire situation and another shot to be attempted at their fortune: He repeatedly and ostensibly insists on going (back) to his hometown with Jadine from page 223 through page 228. Son’s nostalgic view of Eloë and his rose-colored glasses through which he perceives the longed for yellow houses of his youth, however, are in direct opposition to Jadine’s bleak picture of his hometown and her unforgiving camera lens.

Continually recurring in his dreams, Eloë is intimately linked to experiences of comfort and familiarity that Son has missed on his voyages across the globe: “He woke thinking of a short street of yellow houses with white doors which women opened wide and called out, ‘Come on in here, you honey you,’ their laughter sprawling like a quilt over the command” (*TB* 6). Time and again, images such as the yellow houses and the quilt, descriptions of food, and especially his impression of Eloë’s women keep appearing – and right from the beginning of *Tar Baby*, the contrast between them on the one hand and Jadine and Margaret on the other could not have been more pronounced: While the latter only warm their food and do not really excel as cooks in the kitchen (*TB* 8/200), the former’s heavy bodies and their pies testify to their roles as community caregivers and nurturers. Thus, Son thinks of Eloë as his home, the place where his ‘first house’ is and boldly exclaims: “‘Nothing’s better than Eloë’” (*TB* 173). Especially his father’s house – one of the yellow houses of his dreams –, which “had [once]

seemed so large and sturdy,” but is in fact not “as big as Ondine’s kitchen” (*TB* 246) in *L’Arbe de la Croix*, reminds Son of the comfort and safety of his close-knit, extended family: “They had all been in this house together at one time – with his mother” (*TB* 247).

This experience in and by itself is clearly different from Jadine’s who has been an only child and orphaned since the age of twelve. She, in turn, is greatly disgusted by Eloë’s blackness and nothingness – neither can she relate to its inhabitants, their lifestyles, and language, nor to Son’s longing for what seems to her a lifeless, “burnt-out place” (*TB* 259). As a consequence of the Eloëites’ stern religiosity, Jadine cannot sleep in one house, let alone room, with Son – she is placed with his aunt Rosa. Almost suffocated in the little bedroom, significantly a room without windows and a symbol for the apparent forlornness and stagnation of Eloë, she has to go through a life threatening episode in which she experiences “the blackest nothing she had ever seen. Blacker and bleaker than Isle de Chevaliers, and loud” (*TB* 251). Also, Son’s supposedly generous and inviting yellow houses give Jadine the impression of being buried alive and she thinks that she “might as well have been in a cave, the dark womb of the earth, suffocating with the sound of plant life moving, but deprived of its sight” (*TB* 252). It is no wonder, then, that it is exactly here where the ‘night women’ haunt Jadine’s sleep and attack her identity, her concept of femininity (*TB* 257-259). As a result, Eloë and its yellow houses become a non-place to her, “rotten and more boring than ever” (*TB* 259), a “dump” (*TB* 264) that is physically as well as psychologically inaccessible to her (*TB* 244). Her disgust in and disbelief of what she has experienced as the backwardness of a small town and its rural people, their simplemindedness, and their confining rigid moral beliefs crystallizes in the recurring exclamation “God. Eloë” (*TB* 246, 263; and earlier 173). The word ‘Eloë’ bears a remarkable orthographic and maybe even phonetic resemblance to the Aramaic/Hebrew term ‘Eloi.’ According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus cried “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34; also a direct quote of Ps 22:1) on the cross, which roughly translates to ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ These passages of the Bible signify the unrightful suffering of Christ at the hands of the Romans, His role as a redeemer for humankind, and stand for the temporary separation of father and son. Hence, her words underline the almost physical pain that Eloë causes Jadine and further hint at the couple’s impending breakup.

Finally, their diametrically opposed views on Eloë are vividly symbolized in the pictures that Jadine takes with her camera. Bored by the conversations with the town’s young women, she leaves Son’s friend’s house and photographs his hometown and its inhabitants (*TB*

250/251). Even though she takes great delight in this and thoroughly enjoys herself, this short episode raises one crucial question: Who is being exposed to whom? On the one hand, Son's nostalgic and glorifying perception of Eloë is almost shattered when he looks at these photos, when he sees his hometown through Jadine's eyes: "Out came the photos she had taken in the middle of the road in Eloë. Beatrice, pretty Beatrice, Soldier's daughter. She looked stupid. Ellen, sweet cookie-faced Ellen, the one he always thought so pretty. She looked stupid. They all looked stupid, backwoods, dumb, dead ..." (TB 272/273). It is only much later, only when Jadine has already left him, that Son is able to add his background knowledge to Jadine's unflattering perspective of his beloved hometown – with these additional pieces of information, things that Jadine as an outsider cannot know or perceive, Son is able to recast a different, more positive light on Eloë and its people (TB 294/295). On the other hand, the taking of the photographs may not only expose this small-town's alleged backwardness but also Jadine as a person. While being in the streets, she is under the *gaze* of Eloë's men who greedily examine her body (TB 250). An attraction to them, Jadine becomes a mere object for their sexual pleasure. Consequently, Eloë threatens her individuality and personality just as much as New York City endangers Son's and neither of these places is a true home for either of them. The novel thus ends with their unsuccessful quest to find such a comforting and stabilizing place: While Son is supposedly returned to a mythic home, the 'black part' of Isle de Chevaliers and the African horsemen, Jadine, flying to Paris, leaves the United States, the Streets, and her aunt and uncle behind. Whether either one of them eventually succeeds in finding a home is left unanswered.

Morrison's *Tar Baby* comes full circle and ends where it began: with contentions among the 'house of Chloe,' with irreconcilable differences between Morrison's characters and their worldviews that are vividly depicted by Valerian Street's inconsistent house L'Arbe de la Croix, and with Son's and Jadine's incompatible concepts of home. I have interpreted Valerian and his mansion as metaphors for American philanthropy and its inherent dangers as well as shortcomings. The island setting in *Tar Baby* allows for an isolated consideration of both owner and construction – of philanthropist and philanthropy, by extrapolation. Following this argument, L'Arbe de la Croix functions as an allegorical reference to the United State's self-image: While this picture traditionally portrays the U.S. as a benevolent, welcoming, and open nation – after all, Valerian's mansion is a reconfiguration of the inn of the Nativity –, it is also an exclusive, decidedly white concept that is transported to other parts of the world and forcefully superimposed on non-white people. Its inconsistencies, shaky foundations, and literal insubstantiality, however, reveal the root of all evil within its very construction.

Moreover, Roynon remarks that Valerian “clearly embodies the fulfillment of the American dreams of prosperity and power” (*Classical Tradition* 29). Presenting himself as the welcoming biblical innkeeper (Jones 121) and generously opening his house – and his purse – for Jadine and Son, Valerian’s *acts* correspond to the ancient tradition of philanthropy. His *thoughts*, however, may be completely different: The education of Jadine effectively uproots and distances her from black tradition and history. She is thereby turned into the mythic Tar Baby, a white product designed to catch Br’er Rabbit Son. He, in turn, runs into Valerian’s trap by being enticed by both his mansion and Jadine. The two young African Americans are pushed to extremes: While Son thoroughly rejects white values and attempts to retreat into a glorified past, Jadine wholeheartedly embraces white standards and is obsessed with her supposedly bright future. However, neither the former’s nostalgia, nor the latter’s *Geschichtsflucht*, are stable foundations upon which to build a strong identity. As a result, their quest to find a home in either New York City or Eloë is unsuccessful. Morrison – instead of giving a simplistic answer to this complex problem – thus leaves the tensions that have pervaded her fourth novel from the epigraph onwards unresolved.

3.3.3 ‘Neither Sweet, nor Home,’ Neither Utopia nor Dystopia: *Beloved* and the Ambivalence of the American House

Toni Morrison’s best-known and most influential work up to date, *Beloved*, has been discussed controversially ever since its publication in 1987.⁵⁰ While most literary critics praised her work and scores of scholarly essays and books about this novel have been written in the past two and a half decades in the field of literary studies, it has also been banned by many boards of administration of schools and universities across the United States for its graphic depiction of violence, for its alleged profanity, and its explicit sexual content, to name just a few. While black America mostly celebrated the novel, large parts of white America were shocked, and rejected it.⁵¹ The ambivalent stance toward Morrison’s novel is to some extent reflected in the multifaceted and at times contradictory readings of her work: *Beloved* has been analyzed as a ghost story as well as a neo-slave narrative, emphasis has been put on

⁵⁰ See for example Dennis Hevesi’s *New York Times* article on *Beloved* winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

⁵¹ There are, of course, notable exceptions such as the African American poet, essayist, and cultural critic Stanley Crouch who chided *Beloved* upon its publication and rejected it as “a blackface holocaust novel” (40) that betrayed the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

the Christian as well as African religious influences, and the importance of memory and trauma has been investigated.⁵²

Likewise, Morrison's conception of the home has been dealt with extensively. Whereas most literary scholars have primarily commented on the irony of the Sweet Home plantation due to its symbolic power for the United States (e.g., Parker Rhodes), however, the house on 124 Bluestone Road has been relegated to the margins, and the intimate connection between space and identity has received little attention so far. By analyzing the interaction and close relationship between house and owner, I will address place as a defining factor for Morrison's characters in the following discussion. As a result, I consider 124 Bluestone Road to be a 'white' and 'black house' simultaneously: First, I will read it as a manifestation of the Bodwins' concept of their alleged philanthropy and its inherent contradictions. Following this step, I am about to trace the parallel developments of the Suggs women and 124 Bluestone Road. In the following chapter, I argue that this particular house is a highly ambivalent force that is and is not a home for the novel's black population. Hence, "124 is a point of intersection for powerful antithetical forces: North and South, black and white, past and present, this world and the other" (410), as Carol Schumde explains. I will also show that there is a close proximity between the American house and American philanthropy in *Beloved*: By juxtaposing a white and a black version of 124 Bluestone Road as well as the different owners of these houses, Morrison's novel contrasts different versions of philanthropy and differentiates between an inter- and intraracial type, respectively.

The intimate connection of a person to a house can be observed vividly in the case of Edward Bodwin's relationship to his birthplace on 124 Bluestone Road. His alleged generosity as a landlord parallels his firm belief in Enlightenment ideals and his commitment to abolitionism: Both establish him as philanthropist and lift him almost to the place of a patron (saint) of the black community of Cincinnati, Ohio. Stamp Paid, a former slave and one of the community's leaders, thus praises his service to African Americans, stating: "He's somebody never turned us down. Steady as a rock" (*B* 312). Other members of the free black population of Cincinnati, however, are more skeptical about Bodwin, his sister, and their commitment to anti-slavery. Following their laconic view, the Bodwins' motivation to help slaves and freedmen can be explained with a simple equation: "they hated slavery worse than they hated slaves" (*B* 162). Hence, Bodwin and his house on 124 Bluestone Road, the literal

⁵² For a thorough and fairly recent, if by no means comprehensive, bibliography on *Beloved* see for example: Justine Tally. *Toni Morrison's Beloved. Origins*.

embodiment of his lofty principles, high ideals, and enlightened sophistication, have to be critically examined.

Even though the house on Bluestone Road is Bodwin's 'first house' and many childhood memories are attached to this place, he has "not seen [it] for thirty years" (*B* 305). In the meantime, following his supposedly firm belief in human equality, he has rented this place to African Americans, among them a black preacher with his eighteen children, Baby Suggs, and Sethe. Under close scrutiny, however, the neat façade of Bodwin and his house on Bluestone Road shows certain undeniable cracks: His apparently extraordinary generosity – he boldly states that "he rented it for a little something" (*ibid.*) and claims that "it didn't trouble him to get no rent at all" (*B* 306) – is seriously undermined. Moreover, a reinterpretation of 124 as a slave cabin, howsoever comfortable and special, as well as the many analogies between its owner and the cruel schoolteacher expose the inherent discrepancies of Bodwin's philanthropic abolitionism.

For one thing, the glaring inconsistencies of the Scottish abolitionist's personality, expressed in his striking outward appearance and his shallowness, clearly contradict his apparent sincerity that he purportedly demonstrates toward the cause of African Americans in nineteenth-century America. Bodwin and his sister are physically marked by premature aging: When Baby Suggs meets them for the first time, for example, she realizes that their "faces [are] too young for their snow-white hair" (*B* 170). Ironically, their hair is neither a sign of wisdom of old age nor authority; rather, it is an expression of a physical deficiency or even a disease. Coupled with their barrenness, the elderly bachelor and spinster are clearly connected to the Garners, owners of the Sweet Home plantation: Their diseases – premature aging, infertility, and Mrs. Garner's tumor – can thus be interpreted as a symbol for the devastating influence of racism and slavery on white people. The "theatricality of his white hair" (*B* 306) also underlines the fact that Edward Bodwin has used – or abused – his work in the anti-slavery society and the Underground Railroad as mere projection planes, stages on which he could perform: Apparently, then, his looks, his feelings, and his pride are more important to him than the cause and "it was as though his coloring was itself the heart of the matter" (*ibid.*). Additionally, his looks have earned him the epitaph of "bleached nigger" (*ibid.*) by pro-slavery advocates, a name of honor among anti-slavery circles and his *nom de guerre*.

While his appearance characterizes him as an outstanding figure, his strangely porous memory further exposes Bodwin's tainted humanitarianism. Even though he proudly remembers and deeply longs for the "stimulating [...] old days of letters, petitions, meetings,

debates, recruitment, quarrels, rescue and downright sedition,” he cannot recall the name of “a runaway slave woman” (B 307) that the society defended in court – despite the fact that he is on his way to this former slave and his long-time tenant, Sethe, in order to pick up her daughter Denver to work for him. His commitment to abolitionism and especially to the Suggs women is strongly put to question since his motivation appears to be primarily directed by self-interest and employed as a means of ego-reinforcement. It is striking that the Bodwins remain absolutely unaware of these contradictions: Squarely believing to do good, they do, however, not reflect on their beliefs and attitudes – the Scottish abolitionists can thus be seen as symbols for the fact that racism has entirely permeated the American society and that even supposedly progressive circles have not been free from racist discrimination.

This observation is further supported by the many contrasts between his two houses: While the one on Bluestone Road can be interpreted as a slave cabin, his current dwelling on Court Street becomes, by contrast, a plantation house. Comparable to the spatial composition of a plantation, these two houses are marked by the antithesis of center and periphery: Whereas the ‘master house’ is presumably located in the downtown area of Cincinnati “on a noisy, busy street” (B 297), the other one is in an all-black neighborhood on the outskirts of this buzzing city, not far away from the stench of the slaughterhouses and meat packing plants that gave Cincinnati its nickname ‘Porkopolis.’ The highly symbolic names of the streets further underline this spatial divide by adding a cultural dimension: *Court* Street, on the one hand, appears to denote a legal and regal place, a place of power and decision-making. ‘Blue’s tone,’ on the other hand, signifies the blues as a music genre that originated among African Americans, that has its roots in spirituals and work songs, and that frequently tells about the hardships and difficulties that the black population in the United States had to endure: Thus, the former place is deeply embedded in traditional white cultural terms, the latter in its typical black counterparts. The impression that the Suggs women’s house on 124 Bluestone Road is indeed a slave cabin is additionally strengthened by the work that they do: Baby Suggs is employed to do the Bodwins’ laundry, Sethe gets a kitchen job at a restaurant through Bodwin’s arrangement, and Denver becomes their night maid (B 171, 240, and 297-300, respectively). Washing, cooking, and housekeeping, in turn, are the traditional occupations of female house slaves; it is not surprising, then, that Denver and, before her, Baby Suggs have to commute from their home to their work in the ‘plantation house’ regularly.

Moreover, both are expected to enter the supposedly enlightened abolitionists’ house through the backdoor. Historically, this has been the only entrance into a white house that

black people were allowed to use. The backdoor symbolizes the difference between black servants and white masters and is consequently a pervasive metaphor throughout the novel that underlines African American subordination. It also clearly describes the line of demarcation between the house on Bluestone Road and its opposite on Court Street: While Baby Suggs boarded up the backdoor of her own house because “she didn’t want to make that journey no more” (*B* 244), Denver is reminded by Janey Wagon, the Bodwins’ other black maid: “First thing you have to know is what door to knock on” (*B* 298). Years after the peculiar institution has been abolished, the white brother and sister still seem to practice customary discrimination and segregation in their own house, despite the fact that they have fought against slavery. Even with a due amount of cultural relativism – in nineteenth-century America, anti-slavery rhetoric and campaigns did by no means equal, nor even entail anti-racism, and even abolitionist organizations were caught in the dichotomy of black inferiority and white superiority – this, then, clearly exposes their supposedly enlightened mindset as mere pretense.

A repelling racist statue that is tellingly located next to the backdoor in the Bodwins’ house further underlines this. It depicts a black servant in a defamatory way:

His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins or crab-apple jelly. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words “At Yo Service” (*B* 300).

This particular coin bank fully reveals the Bodwins’ condescending attitudes toward black people and further underlines their uncritical, non-reflective mindset: Cast in a pose of subordination, it repeats a stereotypical picture of African Americans that caricatures and debases them – from certain racist assumptions of ‘their’ appearance to supposedly common language use among ‘them.’ This statue “embodies nineteenth-century white Americans’ hatred of and fetishistic attachment to the black body” (109), as Arlene Keizer notes, and it seems to suggest that black necks need to be broken first before black people can participate in a white world. The ambiguity of the Bodwins’ stance toward African Americans, Edward Bodwin’s inconsistencies, and the dichotomy of the houses on Bluestone Road as well as on Court Street all result in Denver’s growing uneasiness. The night before she is to start her work at the white people’s place, “she woke up crying from a dream about a running pair of shoes” (*B* 303), which can be interpreted as a symbol for the eternal servitude and thereby

inequality of black people in an oppressive white society – a state of dependence and subservience that the Bodwins ironically and uncritically perpetuate.

Almost of greater importance, however, are the parallels between Edward Bodwin on the one side and schoolteacher on the other – characters that appear to be incomparable to each other at first sight. “[T]each[ing] the hidden subtext of Garner’s limited and hypocritical social vision” (86), Parker Rhodes states, the latter character of schoolteacher reveals the irony and danger of Sweet Home’s ‘humane slavery.’ Yet, schoolteacher functions not only as a foil for the Garners but also for the Bodwins – and especially for Edward Bodwin – as three highly significant intersections between them illustrate.

First, Baby Suggs’ memory of her first encounter with the Bodwins is tellingly embedded within the episode in which the events that lead to schoolteacher’s fateful arrival at 124 Bluestone Road, the first of two intrusions into Baby Suggs’ sanctuary by white men, are narrated: After Sethe’s successful flight from slavery and the joyful reunion with her children, Baby Suggs decides to celebrate a feast in honor of her daughter-in-law’s strength. This party, however, offends the other free African Americans – they misinterpret Baby’s overflowing joy at her family’s escape from slavery as “uncalled-for pride” (*B* 162) and “excess” (*B* 163). Consequently, the “scent of their disapproval” (*B* 162) is heavy the day after the celebration and nobody warns 124’s inhabitants that schoolteacher and a posse of slave catchers are attempting to regain his ‘property.’ This enforcement of the Constitution’s so-called Fugitive Slave Clause eventually causes the horrible infanticide at the heart of *Beloved* and establishes a first (tentative) link between schoolteacher and the Bodwins: The rift between the free black community of Cincinnati and the Suggs women, the breach of their communal bond which is at least partly responsible for schoolteacher’s violation of Baby’s supposedly safe house, triggers the old woman’s memory of her arrival at the Bodwins’ place. This scene thus seems to suggest that pro- as well as anti-slavery, South and North are responsible for black Americans’ destitution: Even though on free soil in Ohio, it was still legal to return fugitive slaves to bondage before the Civil War and the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1864.

The second ‘intrusion’ of a white man into 124 Bluestone Road, secondly, makes the connection between schoolteacher and Edward Bodwin more than obvious. In a literal reenactment scene, Sethe mistakes the Scottish abolitionist for the cruel slave master come to take *Beloved* away from her. Whereas the first intrusion, however, resulted in the terrible blood spilling in the shed and the ensuing death of her baby daughter, the desperate black mother now attacks the alleged perpetrator and directs her hatred at the white man. The

parallels between these two scenes and men are apparent: The scenery, for example, is exactly (and verbatim) the same in both instances:

Baby Suggs, holy, looked up. The sky was blue and clear. Not one touch of death in the definite green of the leaves. (*B* 162)

Sethe feels her eyes burn and it may have been to keep them clear that she looks up. The sky is blue and clear. Not one touch of death in the definite green of the leaves. (*B* 308)

Moreover, the combined impression of schoolteacher's and Edward Bodwin's clothes seems to complete the picture of *one* stereotypical Puritan: While the former is said to wear "a collar, even in the fields" (*B* 44) and "high-topped shoes" (*B* 163), the latter has a "wide-brimmed" (*B* 308) hat. *Beloved's* depiction of these two white men as deeply religious persons functions as a critique of Christianity's complicity in American slavery.⁵³ By extension, another parallel between Bodwin and schoolteacher is almost forced onto the reader: Their belief in Christianity seems to be closely related to their alleged sophistication and enlightened convictions. Both make claims to humanitarianism, for example, and are portrayed as highly educated people – schoolteacher's name and his obsession with his notebook and Sethe's ink (*B* 44) demonstrate this just as much as Edward Bodwin's leading role in an unspecified anti-slavery society and his Scottish heritage (*B* 307). The repetition of Sethe's trauma, which may contribute to a cure of the psychological wounds inflicted upon her by American slavery (Levy 228-230), casts Mr. Bodwin in the role of schoolteacher and thereby establishes a strong connection between characters formerly believed to be absolutely unrelated to each other. "In his desire to return to the pre-Civil War condition of slavery," concludes John Duvall, "Bodwin's complicity with schoolteacher is underscored, for both schoolteacher's punishment and Bodwin's (preferably infinitely deferred) liberation of African-American bodies depends on a white male authority" (129).⁵⁴

Thirdly, the formal schooling that Denver receives by the hands of Miss Bodwin further underlines the analogies between schoolteacher and the supposedly generous white siblings. When Paul D meets Sethe's daughter in the streets, she informs him that she is being taught by the female abolitionist with the telling words: "She's experimenting on me" (*B* 314). Apparently, Miss Bodwin is trying to see how much education a black person is, in their deeply racist perception, 'able' to receive. The former slave is instantly alarmed by this

⁵³ The allegedly deep religiosity of schoolteacher is further underlined by Sethe's laconic remark that he is "the kind who know Jesus by his first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face" (*B* 44). Likewise, Bodwin's father is said to have been a pious believer who taught his children in Christian doctrines (*B* 307).

⁵⁴ For a detailed analysis of schoolteacher and Bodwin see Gordon (151-164).

strange connotation and draws a parallel to Sweet Home and slavery, thinking: “Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher” (B 314). The analogies between the sadistic slaver and the Scottish abolitionists undermine the latter’s high principles and egalitarian beliefs. It is hardly surprising, then, that Sethe, for instance, is greatly troubled by the dangerous intangibility and unreliability of non-black persons and wonders about the differences between the white people she knows and whether or not there even are any ‘good’ whites at all:

Once, long ago, she was soft, trusting. She trusted Mrs. Garner and her husband too. She knotted the earrings into her underskirt to take along, not so much to wear but to hold. Earrings that made her believe she could discriminate among them. That for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy, that for every pupil there was a Garner, or Bodwin, or even a sheriff [...] But she had come to believe every one of Baby Suggs’ last words. (B 222)

Disillusioned by white America even after the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and the formal end of racial discrimination, Sethe now gives credence to her late mother-in-law’s bitter deathbed words: “There’s no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (B 105).⁵⁵

The dubious impact of both owner and construction on the African American characters, and especially the Suggs women, throughout *Beloved* is revealed by the intimate connection of the Bodwins to their house on Bluestone Road. As a ‘white house,’ as the Bodwins’ property, then, it cannot really fulfill the role of the stable and comforting home that Baby, Sethe, and Denver are in need of. Just like the Scottish abolitionists’ engagement in anti-slavery, which ironically prevented a proper emancipation of the former slaves, it resembles a dystopian picture of a home that only pretends to offer more to them.⁵⁶ Parallel to their house, the Bodwins’ commitment is also exposed as mere façade. Even though Edward Bodwin, for example, rents his “old homestead” (B 306) to black people, he ultimately remains the *landlord*, the person who has the say. This can be seen in his recurrent dreams of his hidden and buried treasures: a “box of tin soldiers” and a “watch chain with no watch” (B 307). His dream image of 124 Bluestone Road symbolizes a rediscovery of Bodwin’s *self*, *his* childhood, and a strong claim to *his* property – it will remain the place “where *his* treasure lay” (B 307, emphasis added) and where the Suggs women will only be temporarily accepted and tolerated tenants. Therefore, he can safely grant a small amount of participation in society

⁵⁵ This ‘insight’ into the latently racist character of nineteenth-century white America applies to many minor characters throughout the novel: Sawyer pays Sethe less than what he pays his white employees and Phelps’ grocery store does not allow African Americans in the store but, nevertheless, sells their goods to them through the backdoor (B 223-225).

⁵⁶ In this respect, it is remarkable that the Latin term *emancipatio*, from which emancipation is derived, was used to refer to both liberation (e.g., of slaves) and proforma sale (*Stowasser* s.v. “Emancipatio”).

to African Americans, but nevertheless stays in control and even distances himself from them spatially as well as mentally. Through this example, American philanthropy is portrayed as top-down process that clearly differentiates between the parties involved and that assigns certain highly visible (social) roles to them: On the one hand, Mr. Bodwin is able to present himself as the powerful, generous sponsor and he can thereby assert his claim to belong to an educated, white, ruling class. The ‘beneficiaries’ of his philanthropy, on the other hand, are only seen as a formless mass of recipients. As interracial social interaction, then, American philanthropy paradoxically perpetuates what it seemingly tries to eradicate: namely, dependence, subordination, and strictly vertical hierarchies. It thus attempts to conceal the fissures in the façade of the American house – the problems embedded within its very construction, however, remain unsolved.

While 124 Bluestone Road, as a ‘white house,’ is yet another of Morrison’s unhomey places, a haunted mansion even in the tradition of the American Gothic (Bryant 446-551), it also possesses the potential to be a truly philanthropic home for the Suggs women. In this respect, 124 must, by my reading, be reinterpreted as a ‘black house’ – a space run and operated by Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver. Thus, the parallelism between owner and building as well as the overall significance of homeownership for African Americans has to be addressed.

Under the reign of three consecutive generations of Suggs women, 124 undergoes decisive changes – and, more significantly, the transformations of this house reflect the respective reigning Suggs woman’s personality and character: It functions as the very center of the black community under Baby Suggs who, in turn, is the embodiment of the communal caregiver in her role of the woodland preacher; it becomes the site of social ostracism, seclusion, and isolation under Sethe, who can be characterized – and, in fact, perceives herself – as a strong, almost rugged individual who can do without the community’s support; and finally, it witnesses the reconciliation of the Suggs family and the larger black community of Cincinnati under Denver, whose narrative reads as an initiation story. The exposed position of 124 Bluestone Road among the other houses of the black neighborhood of Cincinnati also signifies the central problem of intraracial philanthropy in *Beloved*: namely, the proper place of the individual within a functional larger community. The stories of the Suggs women illustrate this discrepancy, which is at times glaring: For various reasons, Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver are outstanding – a fact that the community tolerates only to a certain degree. Paradoxically, then, their singularity facilitates both social cohesion and social ostracism.

Late Baby Suggs, for one thing, assumed the role of the spiritual leader of the African American community of Cincinnati. Right after being bought out of slavery by her youngest son Halle, she became “an unchurched preacher [...] and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (*B* 102). Every Saturday afternoon she was followed by many of the black people to the Clearing where they performed a therapeutic ritual of laughing, crying, and dancing. Here, she “offered up to them her great big heart” (*B* 103) and preached her gospel:

She did not tell them, to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, the inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (*ibid.*)

Instead, she told the woodland parishioners to claim and love themselves – urging them to struggle for individual liberation even after slavery and to lead an independent life. She decided to employ the two things that were not destroyed: Her ‘big heart’ and “the Word” (*B* 209) that was given to her to speak. Thus, she was named Baby Suggs, *holy*, in admiration and respect by the community since she did not accept “a title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it” (*B* 102). Parallel to Baby’s position within the African American community is the position of 124 Bluestone Road: When the ex-slave moved in, the house became a busy way station of the Underground Railroad “Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long,” where “strangers rested,” and where “Messages were left” (*ibid.*). Many of the black characters in the novel have pleasant childhood memories of Baby Suggs’ place where they danced, played, and ate (*B* 304). Nancy Jesser thus concludes, “124 is the nerve center and the heart of the black community” (334).

The above-mentioned party in the yard of 124 Bluestone Road, however, marks the beginning of the rupture between its inhabitants and the community – it is here where Sethe, for example, turned their help and support down when she was taken to prison. When her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter were brought to Baby Suggs’ house, the older woman was overjoyed and forgot for a brief moment her modesty – her profound understanding that “‘Everything depends on knowing how much’” (*B* 102). With her family being almost complete, Baby Suggs decided to give a party to share her joy with her black neighbors that “grew to a feast for ninety people” (*B* 161): “Baby Suggs’ three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe’s two hens became four turkeys. The one block of ice [...] became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug” (*ibid.*). The “excess” (*B* 163) of her party, however, offended the black community. This time, the woodland preacher had simply overstepped the mark and got carried away by her feelings. Consequently, the

community mistook her joy for pride and was annoyed by the “reckless generosity on display at 124” (B 162) that established an unbalanced or even hierarchical relationship between Baby Suggs and them: The former assumed the role of the almighty black patroness who is “always the center of things,” whereas the latter felt rather unimportant and unneeded since Baby “always knows exactly what to do and when [...] loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (B 161). Her joy made Baby Suggs flout one of the main principles of gift-giving (and community building) – namely that giving and getting are inseparable. Her ‘excessive’ philanthropy resulted in “the scent of disapproval” (B 162): The community’s “meanness – that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves that somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house on Bluestone Road” (B 185) that slave catchers had been seen in town; their envy of the Suggs family that finally led to Sethe’s killing of her own daughter and Baby Suggs’ withdrawal from society.

In the aftermath of the infanticide, “124 shut down” (B 105) and became the symbol of the Suggs women’s social ostracism – a place local people felt necessary to pass in a gallop, because they feared it and its inhabitants (B 5): Baby Suggs secluded herself from other people in her bedroom, concentrated on colors, and died a lonely person; Sethe withdraws from the outside world here, even quits her job, and “locked [the door] tight behind her” (B 234) when she recognizes Beloved as her baby daughter returned from the dead; and Denver is kept in isolation by her over-protective mother in the house/prison, she lacks the contact with her peers, fears to leave the yard, and does not grow up. While the old woodland preacher’s offering of *too much* help turns reciprocity into a one-way street and thereby causes a rift between the women of 124 Bluestone Road and the community, Sethe’s *refusal* of communal help and support cuts the last cords between them and leads to hers and Denver’s social ostracism.

Baby Suggs’ daughter-in-law had experienced the healing potential of the community during her “twenty-eight days [...] of unslaved life” (B 111) at 124 Bluestone Road, between her successful flight from slavery and schoolteacher’s arrival. The black population of Cincinnati had welcomed and comforted her and Sethe had felt the almost therapeutic effect of reciprocity – of “feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better” (ibid.). Like Baby Suggs before her, she had apparently understood and appreciated what it meant “to belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed” (B 209). Yet, after the party at 124 Bluestone Road and the following ‘meanness’ of the community that contributed

significantly to the bloody infanticide, Sethe deliberately broke with the other African Americans by answering their contempt toward her with aloofness and exaggerated self-reliance.

Two symbolic events are of great importance here, since they could have brought about a reunification of the Suggs women and the black population: The one being when Sethe was taken to prison and the other being Baby Suggs' "contentious funeral" (*B* 209). Right after Sethe had killed her "crawling already? girl" (*B* 110), the runaway slave woman "climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cherry blue sky" (*B* 179) and was brought to prison. She did not show a sign of repentance; instead, Sethe walked with her head high and with a steadfast gaze right past the onlookers who had assembled outside of 124 Bluestone Road – apparently to show them her disdain for their meanness and envy. The community, however, had gathered "to hold and steady her on the way" to the cart with encouraging songs and a "cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her" (*ibid.*) – had it not been for Sethe's pride. It seems that the black people had realized their fault and were at least willing to support the child murderer and to let her know that she is not alone. Yet, Sethe's "profile [...] shocked them with its clarity" and they wondered: "Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight" (*ibid.*)? Sethe's disdain for them was answered by their withdrawal of communal support – the rift that was created by Baby Suggs' overdone help had widened into an unbridgeable gulf.

With the death of Baby Suggs – the last tie to the community, even though she had not preached in the Clearing after the infanticide and instead contemplated colors only –, Denver and Sethe were finally faced with social ostracism. In retrospect, Stamp Paid describes the whole funeral ceremony as a literal and completely absurd vanity fair since "Baby Suggs, holy, [who had] devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite" (*B* 202), where one insult was met with another – a reciprocal interaction with several negative outcomes: The community refused to enter 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe did not attend the funeral service and did not share in the hymns at the burial. This was reason enough for them to turn down Sethe's food, who, in turn, "did not touch theirs and forbade Denver to" (*ibid.*). From that moment on – at the latest –, "everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times [since her] outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it" and even the kindhearted Stamp Paid "wondered if some of the 'pride goeth before the fall' expectations of the townsfolk had rubbed off on him" (*ibid.*). Irreconcilable differences and pride on both sides led to Denver's and Sethe's social exclusion

and “124 and everybody in it [...] closed down, veiled over and shut away” (*B* 101/102) for years.

In the end, it is Denver, who – under the spiritual guidance of Baby Suggs – manages to leave the house at 124 Bluestone Road behind and reintegrate into the African American community of Cincinnati. When her grandmother had turned giving and helping into her private domain and her mother had deliberately cut the cords between the last Suggs women and the community by refusing their support, it is the third generation, who has to reestablish a connection to the other African Americans by *asking* for their help.

Having realized that Beloved – who in Kimberly Chabot Davis’ terms “represents the ‘return of the repressed’ past that demands to be worked through and not forgotten” (250) – and Sethe “had arrived at a doomsday truce designed by the devil” (*B* 294), Denver assumes responsibility for her life and for her mother’s. Encouraged by Baby Suggs’ commandment to “Know [the history], and go on out the yard. Go on” (*B* 288), she is able to overcome her fears and step into the outside world. Denver goes to Lady Jones, her childhood teacher, who presumably is a mulatto whose “light skin got her picked for a coleredgirls’ normal school [and who has paid] back by teaching the unpicked” (*B* 291) black children of Cincinnati in her house. The young, and up to this point rather immature, Denver asks for work and food and Lady Jones tells her that, even though “no one [of the black community] could pay anybody anything for work” (*B* 292), all Denver needs to do is ask for help and they are going to share their food with the Suggs women. The old teacher also mentions “her church’s committee [that was] invented so nobody had to go hungry” (*ibid.*). Apparently, then, philanthropy within the black community is based on Christian beliefs as well as what Hyde has called “increase-of-the-whole” (48) – the need to pass on a gift so that the community and not an individual is the beneficiary in the end.

Their intraracial help comes in the form of victuals rather than money. Consequently, “a sack of white beans” (*B* 292), “a plate of cold rabbit meat,” “a basket of eggs,” and “a blob of flour-water paste” (*B* 293) appear on the porch of 124 Bluestone Road. Highly remarkable about the community’s gifts is that “names appeared near or in [them] to let [Denver] know [...] who the donor was” (*ibid.*) – she is therefore able to return the dishes and baskets and also thank her sponsors for their help. The benefactors expect gratitude from the beneficiary – the simplest of return gifts, and also the symbol of reconciliation with the community, is Denver’s “soft ‘Thank you’” (*B* 294). As a result, the intraracial gift can be seen as the community’s peace overture to the Suggs women who finally have to accept their help, while

they are at last able to offer Sethe and Denver support. As might be reasonably expected, the motivations to help are manifold and cannot clearly be pinned down:

Maybe they were sorry for [Denver]. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up. In any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course. They whispered, naturally, wondered, shook their heads. Some even laughed at Denver's clothes of a hussy, but it didn't stop them caring whether she ate and it didn't stop the pleasure they took in her soft 'Thank you' (*B* 293/294).

Thus, the African Americans in *Beloved* are not portrayed as overly altruistic. Rather, they do talk behind other people's backs, they do take joy out of other people's failures, and they are described as slightly complacent – shortcomings which make them human, if nothing else. Nevertheless, they are concerned about the well-being of one of their peers and philanthropy becomes a crucial interpersonal relationship that shapes and constitutes their community. Stamp Paid therefore states that there “ain't a sweeter bunch of colored anywhere than what's right here. Pride, well, that bothers em a bit. They can get messy when they think somebody's too proud, but when it comes right down to it, they good people” (*B* 273). It is also striking that intraracial philanthropy does not lead to dependence on the part of the beneficiary (as is often the case in hierarchical interracial philanthropy); instead, Denver, for example, decides “to stop relying on kindness to leave something on the stump” (*B* 296), but rather accepts the job at the Bodwins'. The generosity of the other African Americans in a way “inaugurated her life in the world as a woman” (*B* 292). Her story, consequently, reads as a coming of age story, as she turns from an insecure and childish girl into a self-confident and independent adult – she becomes an integral part of the community through philanthropy, ultimately. Hence, Denver finds the right balance between accepting help and helping others and Linda Krumholz, for example, regards her as a future “teacher, [...] historian, and [...] author” (405) who will ultimately pass on knowledge about African American history to future generations.⁵⁷

Lastly, the house on Bluestone Road becomes the place of communal reconciliation, too. It is right in its yard – the physical connection of the house to the community and the embodiment of the transition from isolation to reunification – where Baby Suggs urges Denver to step outside, which triggers the mutual help in the first place; and it is right here where the women who gathered to exorcize “what could very well be the devil himself” (*B*

⁵⁷ I will further elaborate on this thought in chapter four.

302) by forming a “hill of black people” (B 309). This strong metaphor resounds in Hyde’s interpretation of the bonding effect of gift-giving that has literally the power to form “one body out of several” (73) and is the ultimate symbol of the reintegration of Sethe and Denver into the community. In Jesser’s words, 124 is both a ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ space: Allowing for permeability, it can facilitate a mutually supportive interaction between people and lead to a blurring of boundaries between them; screening them off from each other, however, it also functions as a closed container and confinement that effectively isolates people from the larger community (325/326). Morrison’s *Beloved* negotiates between the private and the public, arguing for an intermediate, reciprocal relationship between both: “Nevertheless, the ideal community for Morrison is one based on common understanding and *caritas*,” observes Charles Scruggs, “balanced between individual respect for communal ties and communal respect for individuality, and in her fiction this balance is played out between house and village” (97, his emphasis). In stark contrast to the effects that the Bodwins’ help has on the beneficiaries, intraracial philanthropy among the black community of *Beloved* appears to be characterized by flat, horizontal hierarchies; ultimately, the entire community and not a strong individual are of prime importance. Breaking certain racist and capitalist paradigms, Morrison’s novel reevaluates the American house and juxtaposes a white version with an alternative black one that approaches her notion of home.

Next to parallels between 124 Bluestone Road and its inhabitants as well as its symbolism for intraracial philanthropy, this house has a central importance in the Suggs women’s individuation and liberation from slavery: It does not only *reflect* their personality and character, it also *shapes* them to some extent. Commenting on the special role of 124 Bluestone Road, Morrison states in her foreword to *Beloved*:

It was important to name this house, but not the way ‘Sweet Home’ or other plantations were named. There would be no adjectives suggesting coziness or grandeur or the laying claim to an instant, aristocratic past. Only numbers here to identify the house while simultaneously separating it from a street or city – marking its difference from the houses of the other blacks in the neighborhood; allowing it a hint of the superiority, the pride former slaves would take in having an address of their own. (xii)

Different from its surroundings and from other significant places in this novel, the Suggs women’s home emphasizes the parallel between homeownership on the one hand and freedom and subjectivity on the other. Especially within an American context, property rights and identity formation have been intimately connected. Samira Kawash explains that “homeownership is held up as the supreme achievement of American adulthood” (2000: 185)

and that it “has become a potent sign and guarantee of the citizen-subject as possessive, and possessing, individual” (2001: 68). Americans’ desire to own property can be explained with its interplay with notions of Americanness and the process of Americanization. Historically deprived of these signs of participation in U.S. society, African Americans have consequently attached a high value to their belongings, particularly to houses, after the end of American slavery and their subsequent *de jure* right to actually hold property: Houses have functioned as perfect symbols for their own transition from object to subject, from formerly owned livestock or commodity to possessing humans. As signs of African Americans’ active construction of a free self and personhood as well as literal bulwarks against racist oppression, aggression, and violation, houses have also offered relatively safe harbors in which their physical and psychological wounds could heal and their personalities develop. They thus represent America’s black population’s hard struggle to achieve individual liberation and underline that “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (B 111/112).

The alterations to the house on Bluestone Road by Baby Suggs and Sethe’s almost desperate holding on to this place underline the significance of 124 for their individuation. Having been bought out of slavery by her son Halle, Baby Suggs is thrilled by the thought of owning a house. More than a mere extension of her personality and an analogy to her role within the African American community of Cincinnati, 124 Bluestone Road is a metaphor for her strong will to finally be regarded as a human being and to be treated with respect. Above all, however, the house also signifies and parallels Baby’s teachings in the Clearing: Here, she urged her followers to love and accept themselves (B 102-104). Just like Baby Suggs had to discover her heart in freedom and began to change the way she thought and perceived herself – or actually *began* to contemplate her self (B 166) –, she also assumed control of the house and altered her surroundings according to her needs and convictions: Most importantly, she turned the kitchen into the very heart of the house. Her moving this special room from the *outside* to the *inside*, from *periphery* to *center*, symbolizes her will to belong as well as her doctrine of self-love, which attempts to provide safety, self-awareness, and physical/psychological nurturing by centering on the self, the inside, the heart (B 244). Kawash thus holds that 124 is “the material sign of the freedom that transforms the one who is property to the one who may hold property” (2001: 73).

Sethe’s literal clinging to the house on Bluestone Road, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a frantic attempt to hold on to her free self, her strong self, and the self that

brought and kept her and her children out of slavery – her innocent self, in the sense of solely being the victim of an atrocity (slavery), and not also a perpetrator (infanticide). Intimately linked to the “twenty-eight days [...] of unslaved life” (*B* 111), 124 is also the physical reminder of Sethe’s successful flight from slavery and the pride she takes in her strength, determination, and perseverance. In a conversation with former Sweet Home slave Paul D, she reminisces:

‘I did it. I got us all out. [...] I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide.’ (*B* 190, her emphasis)

Even after the horrific infanticide, the following social ostracism of the Suggs women, and the disintegration of Sethe’s picture of a complete, perfect family, the house on Bluestone Road is still the last remnant of the person Sethe had hoped to become in freedom: a loving mother, cherished wife, and beloved daughter. It is hardly surprising, then, that she emphatically rejects Paul D’s suggestion that she leave the apparently haunted house behind stating that it is not just “a little thing [...] you could walk off from or give away any old time” (*B* 26/27). 124 Bluestone Road signifies Sethe’s spiritual wholeness (and her ‘hole-ness,’ that is, the hole left by slavery and her dead baby girl) and her (incomplete) process of individuation – significantly, she is greatly troubled and close to self-abandonment at the novel’s end, when the ghost of the past is finally exorcised but the haunted house itself *not* destroyed. Apparently, “the house as architectural enclosure,” explains Kawash, “secures as space of interiority as a space of property, echoing and reinforcing the image of the proper subject as bounded, interiorized, propertied” (2001: 76).⁵⁸

The contrastive depiction of 124 Bluestone Road further elaborates on Morrison’s notion of the ‘house/home antagonism’ and addresses the crucial issue of proprietorship as well as the intimate connection between owner and house, between character and construction. Through the inherent discrepancy between 124 as a ‘white’ and 124 as a ‘black house,’

⁵⁸ The outstanding importance of 124 Bluestone Road is further underlined by the personification of this house. Each of the three parts of *Beloved* begins with an opening sentence that characterizes this place in analogy to human beings: “124 was spiteful” (*B* 3) – presumably referring to the ghost that haunts the house; “124 was loud” (*B* 199) – alluding to the voices that Stamp hears around the house; and “124 was quiet” (*B* 281) – signaling the impasse between past and present close to the end of the novel. Moreover, Denver regards the house “as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits,” as “a nervous, idle relative” (*B* 35). Consequently, the developments and changes of 124 Bluestone Road can be read as a maturation of a character that eventually evolves into a vital and integral part of a mutually supportive, close-knit community.

respectively, questions such as who owns, who controls, and who wields power are raised, and their impact on the novel's population is shown. This house can therefore be seen as another Morrisonian Sweet Home, a place that "wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (*B* 16), but nevertheless functions as a constant frame of reference for her characters. It is thereby also a metaphoric reference to American philanthropy – a phenomenon that, in its traditional interracial version, perpetuates hierarchies, but can also be reevaluated by an intraracial counterpart. Hence, 124 is equally a dystopia, which only pretends to offer its black inhabitants a certain amount of belonging and participation but remains a place controlled by other forces, *as well as* a utopia, which, indeed, provides them with opportunities of a real home. *Beloved's* open end, however, leaves these tensions unresolved.

3.3.4 'Paradise Lost:' The Inversion of Symbolic Spaces in *A Mercy*

Literary critic Maxine Montgomery describes Toni Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy* as her "most ambitious novel to date" (628). Taking the reader back to late seventeenth-century America, the author explores the colonies before they became a nation. It is exactly in this unique setting in which Morrison can negotiate race relations and envision a different picture of the genesis of America. Through her "focus on the largely untold stories of a transnational assembly of outcasts," explains Montgomery, *A Mercy* "troubles the recognized historiography underlying the country's move toward nation building, Empire, and imperialist conquest" (ibid.). The novel engages in an important, if daring cultural work and partakes in a thought-experiment in American history: Reconceptualizing colonial America as a pre-race, pre-slavery, fluid, and liminal space, Morrison imagines a beginning different from traditional founding myths. Instead, throughout her novel she stresses that understandings of blackness and whiteness – and connotations that have ever since accompanied these terms (e.g., black subordination and white superiority) – were only beginning to develop around that time in pre-national America. She also argues that the firm division between the races had not yet taken secure grip of the colonies. Shaking the grounds of the American grand narrative, "*A Mercy* therefore sets the foundation for a fuller, more nuanced reading of America's national history and its diverse citizenry" (ibid. 635).

Jacob Vaark's plantation especially is a symbol for the architecture of America's racism in *A Mercy*, a metaphor for the processes that enshrined race as the defining factor in the very foundations of the U.S. nation and American identity: The three different construction phases – over the course of several years his homestead develops from a shaky log cabin to a modest and robust dwelling to an unfinished luxurious mansion – mirror and parallel the development

of the American colonies and their increasing prosperity. Significantly, both transitory movements are based on slavery to a great extent: While Vaark, initially a subsistence farmer, earns a fortune through brokerage and slave trade, the American colonies and the fledging republic also grew rich on forced labor of millions of deported Africans on sugar, tobacco, and cotton fields. Vaark's homestead and its peculiar development, which eventually results in the death of its owner and the complete desolation of the farm, can therefore be seen as an inverted symbolic space. Caroline Rosenthal, for instance, defines symbolic spaces as

spaces in which a nation sees its myths, narratives, and beliefs most accurately represented and re-produced; spaces which have held a specific importance for a nation's self-conceptualization; spaces which have functioned as spatial meta-narratives and which – just like historiography – inform a nation's image of itself. (5)

Read against the grain, then, an inverted symbolic space is a space that holds up a mirror to the nation; a space, ultimately, that may function as a corrective to traditional, conservative American history as well as to processes of nation building and identity formation. In the following discussion, I will trace the development of Vaark's upstate New York farm and analyze its impact on the heterogeneous group of its inhabitants; on Anglo-Saxon, African American, Native American, mixed raced, and homosexual people. Throughout, I argue that his farm is in many respects a missed opportunity – a literal 'paradise lost.' While it may have been an inherently philanthropic, utopian home for all of its diverse residents at one point, a place decidedly different from the spaces they have left behind (e.g., religious confines of Europe, sexual exploitation, and poverty), it nevertheless develops into an unhomely space, "a monument of death" (Connor 2013: 159), characterized by stagnation, incompleteness, and terminal disease.

In *A Mercy*, the reader accompanies Florens, a circa sixteen-year old female black slave who has been traded for one of Vaark's debtor's bad financial obligations, on her journey/errand to an otherwise unnamed free African blacksmith in 1690. Her first-person narration is continually interrupted by chapters presented by an omniscient narrator, which focus on the views of the other main characters: the late Dutch-English homesteader Jacob Vaark, his Native American help/slave Lina, his sick English wife Rebekka Vaark, mixed race Sorrow, as well as the homosexual white indentured servants Scully and Willard. Since all of the afore-mentioned main protagonists are uprooted and dislocated cultural orphans – an oeuvre-wide Morrisonian trademark –, Montgomery reads *A Mercy* as "the journey to a utopian home," as a tour to "a transcendent domestic place where the tension between self and other, male and female, Black and White ceases" (629/630). Parallel to the novel's

population, the participatory reader has to make sense of the disordered narrative. Because of Morrison's signature non-linear plot development, the audience has to piece the fragmented parts together in order to complete one coherent, chronological narrative. By doing so, the reader is eventually able to monitor the development of Vaark's farm from an inclusive to an exclusive, from an open to a closed space – a change that bears a striking resemblance to the overall history of colonial America. Closely related to other highly ambivalent houses and spaces in Morrison's oeuvre – above all *Beloved's* Sweet Home –, Vaark's farm walks the fine but solid line that the author's notion of the 'house/home antagonism' has drawn.

Jacob Vaark's late seventeenth-century homestead is a short-lived but true home for what Montgomery perceives as "an unlikely assembly of indentured servants, slaves, European immigrants, Native Americans, and Africans" (631). This 'unlikely assembly' functions as a mutually supportive surrogate family for the various cultural orphans that come together in this utopian space. I therefore read *A Mercy* as a different founding narrative that envisions the beginnings of the American colonies as deeply rooted in the true meaning of the word philanthropy. Having escaped from very different but equally harmful surroundings, the people at Vaark's farm seem to live harmoniously in this heterogeneous, almost egalitarian microcosm, which functions as a replacement for their missing 'first houses' and severed family ties. According to Valerie Babb, Morrison's *A Mercy* develops into "an American origins narrative that re-replaces the racial, gender, and class complexities lost in the creation of a canonical narrative that sought to privilege the few over the many" (147) through the construction of this pluralistic miniature society. By writing a revisionist account of the founding myths of the nation, "We can conceive of Morrison as a founding mother," claims Babb, "proffering the mercy of correcting a flawed historical record, engaging the past in order to go beyond it" (159). As an extension, correction, and addition to the traditional WASP narratives of the American genesis such as William Bradford's, John Winthrop's, or John Smith's, the author challenges stereotypical pictures of America and the nation's self-image.

The three different stages of construction of Vaark's farm, then, parallel the development of colonial America, but further enrich the uniform and whitewashed founding narrative significantly. While the non-Native American population of the British colonies in the New World was indeed composed to eighty percent of immigrants of English/Welsh decent around 1700, the populace became increasingly heterogeneous prior to the Revolutionary War and the ensuing independence from Great Britain: As a result, only fifty-one percent of America's

setters were of English/Welsh origin, twenty percent from Africa, and twenty-nine percent from other European countries in 1770. People of African descent, mostly slaves who were trafficked into bondage, have also made up a substantial proportion – at least one tenth in 1700 – of the colonies’ populace almost right from their beginnings (Heideking and Mauch 19). Thus, in their standard work of reference for the study of American history, Jürgen Heideking and Christof Mauch claim: “Nicht Einheitlichkeit und Homogenität, sondern mosaikartige Vielfalt war das hervorstechende Merkmal der englischen Festlandskolonien” (7).

As a Dutch-English landowner, Vaark’s family relations seem to reflect this diversity – his origins contradict the stereotypical picture of the English Puritan pilgrim. His humble beginnings in a simple log cabin nevertheless mirror the early settlers’ struggle to survive at the frontier. His second, sturdier house, then, parallels their apparent success and signifies the deeper roots that the European settlers were able to put down: Lina – who has lived longest on Vaark’s farm – describes the change between the first and second stage of Vaark’s homestead as a necessary and needed improvement from the rather temporary first dwelling: “The first house Sir built – dirt floor, green wood – was weaker than the bark-covered one she herself was born in. The second one was strong. He tore down the first to lay wooden floors in the second with four rooms, a decent fireplace and windows with good tight shutters” (*M* 41). Contrary to conservative historiography, however, it is exactly this place that houses the above-mentioned unlikely assembly of cultural orphans, a markedly heterogeneous group of white, black, and red; of free and indentured; of male and female. The composition of Vaark’s farm echoes recent statistics on the settlement of pre-national America. Before the Dutch-English landowner decided to build his third house, a luxurious mansion modeled after the plantation house of a Portuguese slave owner and one of Vaark’s debtors, his farm can be interpreted as “liminal home existing outside fixed cultural bounds” (Montgomery 627) that offers its inhabitants a place of communion, mutuality, and reciprocity. The second building phase of Vaark’s homestead, then, is an almost utopian chance, a moment in time at which American history may have taken a different course.

On his farm, an unlikely assembly of different people lives in close contact with each other. Florens, the central figure and part-time narrator of *A Mercy*, can be seen as a paradigmatic character through her exposed position: Undoubtedly, she embodies best the diaspora experiences that all of the inhabitants of Vaark’s farm share to some extent and in her first-person account the reader gets an immediate, personal picture of the psychological trauma

that the severing of family ties as well as cultural bonds entails. When Jacob Vaark visited the slave master D'Ortega on his Maryland plantation in 1682, he accepted the seven- or eight-year-old Florens as a compensation for the Portuguese's bad debt. This 'transaction' is presented through three different pairs of eyes throughout the novel that offer two strikingly divergent accounts of Vaark and D'Ortega's deal: Firstly, Florens thinks that, initially, mother and daughter were not to be separated and that her mother chose her infant son over her older daughter: "Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due" (*M* 5).⁵⁹ Secondly, from Vaark's and the mother's viewpoint, respectively, the reader gets a different impression. At first, Vaark refused to accept one of D'Ortega's slaves as partial repayment for his debt, but finally agreed to the deal in order to shorten this revolting experience and leave the plantation as soon as possible. He claimed Florens' mother *only*, which D'Ortega rejected immediately. After the mother's successful pleading with Vaark to take her daughter instead, he finally accepted Florens (*M* 20-25). Knowing the dangers of D'Ortega's slave plantation, especially the sexual exploitation that women are susceptible to (*M* 161), and sensing goodness in Vaark, Florens' mother did not choose her son over her daughter; instead, she thought she would protect her from the lecherous Portuguese and from slavery in general: "I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human" (*M* 164/165).

Unable to comprehend her mother's motivation, however, Florens is plagued by recurring dreams of her 'minha mãe' trying to tell her something important (*M* 1, 6, 99, and 135/136), and is severely traumatized by what she experienced as an "expel" (*M* 134 and 135), a neglect or abandonment of her mother that she has to continuously relive at night: "I see it forever and ever" (*M* 5). Deeply hurt and emotionally fractured, Florens' personality is described by Willard – one of the two white male indentured servants who labor occasionally on Vaark's farm – with the following words: "It was easy to spot that combination of defenselessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others" (*M* 150). Throughout *A Mercy*, this insecurity and desperate need to belong to someone and somewhere is best embodied in Florens' near obsession with other people's shoes: Literally walking in someone else's shoes – Senhora D'Ortega's high heels as a child (*M* 24) and most

⁵⁹ Throughout the novel, Florens' first-person narration is in the present tense, which simultaneously refers to her status as a Pidgin English speaker and also highlights the ever-present trauma of her motherlessness.

prominently late Jacob Vaark's boots on her journey to the blacksmith –, Florens does not harden herself against the dangerous, sometimes violent, and harsh surroundings.

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My mother, a *minha mãe*, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top. As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. (*M 2*)

'Too tender for life,' her soles – in its singular a striking homonym of 'soul' – cannot offer Florens any protection against the outside; consequently, she is left – bodily as well as spiritually – vulnerable, weak, and fragile.

However, upon her arrival at Vaark's farm, surprisingly, Florens found some sort of replacement for her mother: Apparently, Rebekka Vaark and Lina are the persons to whom the child Florens related most closely. As role models and, in the case of Lina, surrogate mother, both are very important for her development; it can even be claimed that they continue her mother's unfinished education: Her mother's instructions about Florens' bad habit of wearing shoes were seconded by both Lina and Rebekka (*M 2*). After the separation from her mother and the subsequent loss of her mother('s) tongue Portuguese, Florens learned English from these two mother figures. Florens thus states: "At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a *minha mãe* and me. Lina's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress's. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone" (*M 4*). The Native American Lina, finally, comes closest to the role of psychological parent and emotional caregiver for the child: While Florens addresses the Vaarks continuously and uniformly as 'Sir' and 'Mistress' respectively, which seems to indicate a certain hierarchy between master and servant, white and black, it is Lina who "smiles when she looks at [her] and wraps [her] for warmth" (*M 6*) upon Florens' arrival at Vaark's place. Protecting her like her own child, tending to her needs, and teaching her crucial knowledge, Lina clearly embodies an ersatz mother. As a result, Florens regards Jacob's farm and its inhabitants as her family, as "the only home, the only people" (*M 3*) she knows.

Parallel to Florens, Vaark's farm functions as a temporary home to a variety of orphaned, uprooted, and/or 'othered' characters. Interrupting Florens' first-person account, an omniscient narrator informs about their views, experiences, and lives and each character is

given an entire chapter of *A Mercy* to delineate her point of view. For Jacob Vaark, the Dutch-English landowner who inherited this place from an unknown uncle, his farm – or America in general – presents the ideal opportunity to move up on the social ladder: Describing himself as a “ratty orphan” (*M* 10) and having lived in an English poorhouse in his youth, Jacob has never experienced the warmth and comfort of a family: “His mother, he was told, was a girl of no consequences who died in childbirth. His father, who hailed from Amsterdam, left him with a name easily punned and a cause of deep suspicion” (*M* 30/31). An outcast pushed to the margins of society, he took the first chance that offered a way out of his plight and signed a contract with “the Company” (*M* 31) as a trader in the American colonies. Leading a solitary, adventurous life on the frontier, Jacob, quite by chance, “found himself an heir of sorts [and] relished the thought of becoming a landowning, independent farmer” (*M* 31/32). Apparently, the Dutch-English settler lives an early version of the American Dream narrative as he develops from a “misborn and disowned” (*M* 31) orphan to a modest homesteader to a wealthy broker. He even starts a family with his ‘mail order bride’ Rebekka: Despite the fact that none of their four children reaches the age of six, they still appear to have a fulfilled marriage in which both support and complement each other. Jacob, for example, states that his wife “seemed ever more valuable to him” and that “from the moment he saw his bride-to-be [...], he knew his good fortune” (*M* 18). Moreover, he reinterprets the purchase of Florens and thereby avoids thinking of himself as a slaver. Just like Lina and Sorrow are not slaves to him but “helpers” (*M* 19), the young African girl becomes some sort of suitable replacement for his late daughter Patrician: Before finally agreeing to the deal with D’Ortega, Jacob reasoned, “perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one here [...] appeared to be the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so” (*M* 24). His condescending remark that if occasioned, the death of Florens would not affect him or his wife as much as the death of their daughter, his very matter-of-fact tone, however, reveals his beginning moral downfall and foreshadows the destruction of the home he and the other inhabitants of his farm have built.⁶⁰

Next to Vaark himself, the Native American Lina has lived longest on his homestead. One of only three survivors of a smallpox epidemic that killed her entire village (*M* 44/45), she was taken to a Presbyterian community as a child. Even though these Christians pretend to be benevolent to Lina, their charity turns out to be rather misdirected: For one thing, “They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope” (*M* 45). Their choosing of her namesake – Empress Valeria Messalina, notorious for promiscuity as

⁶⁰ I will return to Jacob Vaark later on in this chapter when the ruin of his farm comes into focus.

well as nymphomania and, according to Montgomery, believed to be “a scheming woman” (631) – symbolizes their latently racist convictions about indigenous people. In accordance with traditional Western thinking, then, her name alone signifies the alleged shadiness and potential danger of Native Americans. It also demonstrates the arbitrary power of white people to name and define others. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Presbyterians’ Christian charity reads as indoctrination. While they ‘convert’ her from heathen to Christian, they still do not fully integrate, let alone accept her in their chosen community (*M* 44/45). Furthermore, Lina has certainly been mistreated by them and presumably even been raped at the hands of a priest: When Jacob Vaark bought her at the age of fourteen, she had a “swollen eye” and “lash cuts on her face” (*M* 50) and Florens, later on, recalls Lina’s account of her continual rape, sexual harassment, and beatings by an otherwise unspecified man of “learning and position in the town” (*M* 102).

So, Vaark’s farm is a considerable improvement for her: Here, she develops a friendship to Rebekka and is able to establish almost a mother-daughter relationship with Florens. Being in similar positions, Vaark’s wife and Lina have to put up with certain obstacles: With Jacob being away on business trips, the two women are left to manage the farm on their own. They both tend to the Vaark’s children and Lina even delivers Rebekka’s babies as her midwife; both become intimately connected to each other and overcome their initial resentments: “They became friends. [...] Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. Together, by trial and error they learned” (*M* 51). Even more important than the relationship to Rebekka is Lina’s (motherly) love for Florens: While Vaark’s wife refuses to regard the little African girl as an ersatz daughter, the Native American “had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow” (*M* 58). Florens rekindles the feelings that Lina had felt when she was still in the bosom of her village, protected by her family, and cared for by her mother. As a result, she wants “to protect her” (*ibid.*), regards her as “a quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement,” and thinks of her as *her* child: “this one [...] could be, would be, her own” (*M* 59). Their intimate connection, Lina understands, is established by their mutual diaspora experiences: Dislocated and uprooted, both have lost their cultural bonds; both have had to suffer from the separation from their mothers. Consequently, both feel “Mother hunger – to be one or have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone” (*M* 61); and both readily accept the role of surrogate mother and ersatz daughter respectively. Pleased with her role and the overall social setting of Vaark’s farm, “Lina had relished her place in this small, tight family” (*M* 56).

Rebekka Vaark's migratory experiences also read as a story of success: Having been raised by a pious but harsh and unloving English family, her memories of her childhood and adolescence are mostly unpleasant and frequently involve public displays of violence and religious hatred such as hangings (*M* 73). Literally 'sold' by her parents, she left her hostile homeland behind aboard the tellingly named ship "*Angelus*" (*M* 79, her emphasis): In stark contrast to the extreme psychological as well as physical hardships of the Middle Passage – graphically described in *Beloved* and in the account of Florens' mother (*M* 161-163) – Rebekka's memories of her trans-Atlantic passage are more pleasant. The name of the ship, for instance, underlines this: Saved and protected by a guardian angel, the English woman is transferred from a crowded, polluted, and violent London to the welcoming, open, and pure New World. Aboard the *Angelus*, Rebekka met a group of wayward female outsiders: prostitutes, thieves, and 'disgraceful' women (*M* 80). Deep in the belly of the ship, in this decidedly feminine space analogous to the female womb, they developed a close-knit community or sorority based on their mutual experiences. Parallel to this "kind of family [that a] sea journey creates" (*M* 79), Rebekka formed a female alliance with Lina, "the single friend she had" (*M* 71), when she arrived at Vaark's farm. A deep level of reciprocity marks their intimate relationship: They toil next to each other on the farm, they raise the Vaarks' children together, and they share their knowledge. Like sisters, "they sputtered with laughter, like little girls hiding behind the stable loving the danger of their talk" (*M* 78/79). As a result, Sorrow describes this female duet as a single entity: "Mistress' skin was like the white of eggs, Lina's like the brown of their shells" (*M* 119).⁶¹ Apparently, then, Rebekka has found a supporting and strengthening family on Vaark's farm: a loving husband, the chance to start a family, and a close female companion – intimate and warm relationships that she had missed in England.

Sorrow, who arrived at Vaark's farm approximately ten years before Florens, but later than both Lina and Rebekka, is the only character who does not establish healthy relationships with the other inhabitants; nevertheless, she also undergoes a considerable change. Shipwrecked as a young girl, she was found on the shore of a river by a sawyer's two boys and claims to have never lived on land. Her only memories revolve around the ship, "the only home she knew" (*M* 115), and its captain who may have been her father. Her origin is just as unclear as her race and her name: While the sawyer nonchalantly defined her as "a bit mongrelized" (*M* 118), the other characters paint a picture of an almost overdetermined

⁶¹ This metaphor brings to mind Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic concept of semiotics in which he differentiated between 'signifier' and 'signified.' The intimate, mutual relation between the sign and its meaning have been graphically depicted by linguists as the famous 'Saussurean Egg.'

character: Jacob described her as “curly-headed” (*M* 31) and Lina perceived her “red hair, black teeth” (*M* 51) and “silver-gray eyes” (*M* 52). Presumably of mixed race, then, Sorrow embodies the heterogeneity of the early American colonies, a society that, as I have shown by employing statistics above, was anything but racially uniform, purely white, or even consistently Anglo-Saxon. The sawyer’s family gave Sorrow her name for the deplorable condition they found her in and also because she refused to tell them her real name. Only “Twin” (*M* 114), a mysterious ghostly presence who symbolizes her fractured personality, addresses her with her unmentioned real name in their frequent conversations, which are perceived by others as Sorrow’s monologues as yet another testimony to the fact that she is insane.⁶² Even though the sawyer’s family seems to comfort her and treat her well – they offered her food and clothes, asked questions, and showed compassion –, there is still a change to be noticed. Having a servant ultimately alters their behavior: “But the pleasure of upbraiding an incompetent servant outweighed any satisfaction of a chore well done and the housewife raged happily at every unswept corner, poorly made fire, imperfectly scrubbed pot, carelessly weeded garden row and badly plucked bird” (*M* 117). Moreover, at the age of eleven she was pregnant from the sawyer’s boys and therefore sent away as if it were her fault. The change in the sawyer’s family and their increasingly racist and condescending attitude toward Sorrow foreshadow later developments at Vaark’s farm.

Here, she is renowned to be an insecure and sexually loose woman who engages in random and seemingly trivial sexual relationships with various men resulting in several pregnancies and stillborn babies. When Florens, for instance, is sent on her journey to summon the blacksmith, who is believed to be able to cure Rebekka from smallpox, Sorrow is pregnant again.⁶³ The apparent decay of Vaark’s farm, however, is contradicted by the birth of Sorrow’s daughter and the change in her personality: With Jacob Vaark dead, his ill wife tied to the bed, Florens away, and Lina lost in thoughts, “Everything was in disarray” (*M* 129) and Vaark’s formerly philanthropic home is falling into a “heap” (*M* 130). With the help of Willard and Scully, Sorrow gives birth to a healthy child and maternity changes her dramatically: “Sorrow’s wandering stopped. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs” (*M* 132). More significantly, however, is the fact that she even renames herself “Complete” and that “Twin was gone, traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her” (*ibid.*). Her positive development is signified by the different names she bears: While she was at first unwilling – or even unable – to recall her real name

⁶² Together with her muteness, this links her to other traumatized female characters in Morrison’s oeuvre like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* or Pallas in *Paradise*.

⁶³ While nothing definitive is known about the father of Sorrow’s child, Lina thinks it is Vaark’s (*M* 6).

and was consequently rechristened by the sawyer's family, she finally names herself – 'Complete,' therefore, symbolizes the cure of her "psychotic dissociation" (Michlin 111) and the coping with her psychological suffering.

The last two characters who form the 'unlikely assembly' on Vaark's farm are Willard and Scully, the homosexual white indentured servants whose terms are freely and repeatedly extended for various reasons, so that neither of them knows exactly when (or if at all) they will eventually receive their freedom fees (*M* 146/147). Despite the fact that only Lina openly admits to knowing of their sexual preferences – she knows that Scully does "not object to lying with Willard when sleep was not the point" (*M* 56) –, the other characters could hardly have failed to notice their homosexuality. Apparently, then, they seem to be rather indifferent to Willard and Scully being gay. This is exemplified by the marked difference between Vaark on the one hand and their owner on the other: Even though the former traded their labor force for his land, "unlike their more-or-less absent owner, [he] never cursed or threatened them. He even gave them gifts of rum during Christmastide and once he and Willard shared a tippie straight from the bottle" (*M* 142). At Vaark's farm, therefore, Willard and Scully are treated with a certain amount of respect and this place is a definite improvement compared to their former experiences of physical hardships and cruelty (*M* 146/147 for Willard's memories and 151/152 for Scully's). Consequently, they regard Vaark's farm as a home and its people as their family: "For years the neighboring farm population made up the closest either man would know of family. A good-hearted couple (parents), and three female servants (sisters, say) and them helpful sons. Each member dependent on them, none cruel, all kind" (*M* 141/142). Apparently, they have found a role within the farm's population, with which they are satisfied, and a benevolent place, where they can be the persons they are, regardless of their sexual preferences and social status.

While Vaark's farm indeed functions as a philanthropic home and the cluster of inhabitants is seen as some kind of ersatz family by the characters themselves, it is only a temporary home to them and eventually develops into an exclusivist, exceptional, and racist place. Parallel to *Beloved's* Sweet Home, described by Paul D as a "cradle already split" (*B* 258), then, this seemingly utopian place and its heterogeneous family fall apart. The break-up of its 'unlikely assembly' takes place exactly when Vaark decided to build his third house as "a profane monument to himself" (*M* 42). Paid largely with money earned through the slave trade, Jacob can no longer conceal his deep entanglement in the peculiar institution and his ensuing moral degradation. Slavery – with its promise of enormous financial gains – and the

institutionalization of racism alter the American colonies fundamentally and transform them from a paradise to a 'paradise lost.' From this point in time, American society has been characterized by a clear division along the color line, by a firm distinction between the classes, and by a careful differentiation between men and women. Willard and Scully's disillusioned realization turns out to be a prediction or forecasting for the future of the colonies and the American republic: "They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess" (*M* 154). Largely responsible for the fall of this paradisiac utopia is its owner Jacob Vaark, the very personification of the prototypical American Adam.⁶⁴

Vaark's progression from an orphan living in an English poorhouse, to a landowning farmer to a financially successful broker, is mirrored by the three building phases of his homestead, which is transformed from a simple, weak log cabin to a decent, strong four-room house to a "double-storied, fenced and gated" (*M* 41) mansion. Apparently, then, Vaark seems to embody the American Dream, the national ethos composed of the opportunities for prosperity and upward social mobility. In *A Mercy*, however, Morrison addresses the crucial questions of the downsides of this alleged success story, and asks: What is the cost of Vaark's 'progress'? Who can participate in the American Dream narrative? And who cannot and why? Reinterpreting the Dream as a Nightmare – in fact, Florens has a recurring bad dream of her mother –, Morrison imagines a narrative different from the master discourse. Since she provides answers to the above-mentioned questions – or at least provokes the reader to engage with and address these problems –, I read her novel as a sort of allegory that represents certain developments of the United States' history, which have their roots in colonial America: In this light, Vaark is the prototypical American settler who lives an early version of the rags-to-riches story and his homestead becomes a metaphor for colonial America. Even though *A Mercy* runs the risk of being devalued as didactic and Morrison might be accused of wagging her finger, it makes perfect sense for me to actually employ an allegory: As one of the most widespread modes of Renaissance and Puritan literature, the literature that was produced and consumed at the exact time of this novel's temporal setting, the allegory enables Morrison to engage intertextually with some of the key texts of this era. Especially Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" and John Milton's famous epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) loom

⁶⁴ This, however, does not mean that Morrison divides her white and black characters along the lines of good and bad, guilty and innocent. Instead, moral and ethical questions are highly complex in her fiction.

large in the background and are at least implicitly hinted at in her novel: Jacob Vaark's mansion *on a rise* is the very emblem of the belief in American exceptionalism and the deadly smallpox disease is a symbol for the fall of the American society through its deep involvement in slavery, its original sin.

Concerning Winthrop's famous sermon, Holland states that it can be interpreted as "exhibit A of American exceptionalism" (73). By evoking powerful body imagery closely analogous to the concept of the church as one body in Christ, the Puritan leader put emphasis on philanthropy as one core characteristic of the future settlement. In addition, he compared the settlers of the American colonies with the Israelites, God's chosen people. The Puritan leader instilled in his followers a sense of chosenness and gave their colonial/business enterprise an exclusive air. Consequently, this almost elitist idea is enshrined in his trope of the exposed position of America as a 'City upon a Hill,' a bright beacon to the world and New Jerusalem. Winthrop's address, however, carries a dual message: While he preached philanthropy and communalism on the one hand, he also based his colonial enterprise on exclusion and a strong belief in exceptionalism. In any case, "A Model" clearly highlights the interconnectedness of the New World, later understandings of Americanness, and philanthropy.⁶⁵

In *A Mercy*, then, Morrison 'uses and abuses' Winthrop's allegories – to borrow from Linda Hutcheon's definition of the poetics of postmodernism (1992: 33) – and rewrites them. For one thing, Vaark's "third and presumably final house" (*M* 41) is a symbol for America: Towering on "that rise in back, with a better prospect of the hills and the valley between them" and "rising on a hill above the fog" (*M* 25 and 33), this dream image of his grand mansion clearly recalls Winthrop's famous dictum of the elevated position of America. Almost shaped verbatim after the Puritan leader's trope, then, Vaark imagines his future house as "fair," "pure," and "noble" (*M* 25). The mansion's characteristics underline Vaark's understandings of beauty, highlight his claims to virtuousness, and illustrate his aspirations to climb the social ladder. Read against the grain, however, they also expose Vaark as a tempted sinner: Blinded by the façade, the mere looks, and neat ornaments, he is envious of D'Ortega's luxurious and splendid house on his tellingly named plantation Jublio. Impressed and spurred by the Catholic gentry's standards of aesthetics and lifestyle, the things Vaark ostensibly claims to abhor during his stay at the slaver's tobacco plantation, he finally accepts one of D'Ortega's slaves (Florens) as partial repayment of the Portuguese's debt and decides to invest in rum – a euphemistic description for his investment in slavery in the West Indies.

⁶⁵ For a more nuanced discussion of Winthrop's "A Model" see chapter 2.1.2.

Read in this light, Jacob's dream mansion's alleged purity and its location 'above the fog' gain a double meaning: Supposedly, the adjective 'pure' refers to his personal goodness that is to be reflected in his mansion. Thus, it would show "None of the pagan excess" that Vaark saw at D'Ortega's plantation and "would not be compromised as Jublio was" (ibid.). On a deeper level, however, 'pure' may also refer to Jacob's Puritan beliefs. Even though he appears not to be the most religious person throughout his life, remains religiously unaffiliated in the colonies, and is satisfied that his wife Rebekka stops going to church, too (*M* 85), he has been instilled with hatred against Catholics and can still vividly recall the vitriolic primers of his youth (*M* 12). According to Roynon, these have very many things in common with actual pedagogical publications of the late seventeenth century, which were "Ostensibly designed to advance children's literacy," but indeed consisted of "dogmatic Puritan morality and religious instruction" (2011: 596). The attribute 'pure' can also be related to racial purity, a purity reached through a remote labor force of African slaves in the West Indies. The very geographical distance between Vaark and his farm on the one hand and the source of his wealth in unfree labor on the other – a fact that makes for a "profound difference" (*M* 33) between him and D'Ortega by Jacob's reasoning – is mirrored by the location of his dream mansion 'above the fog.' Dense and indistinguishable, however, fog is usually impenetrable to the eye and therefore symbolizes unseen dangers. Even though he may not have to see his slaves and simultaneously cannot be seen by them, and despite the fact that he can uphold "his good opinion of himself" (*M* 25) for some years, Vaark's deep entanglement in slavery eventually corrupts his soul, his farm deteriorates into a smallpox-ridden graveyard, Vaark dies, and the mansion – a symbol for America – remains unfinished. As allegory, then, the character of Jacob Vaark underlines the contradictions of Enlightenment, Christianity, and European/Western civilization and their complicity in American slavery. Monica Michlin therefore states, "he is the invisible enabler of the slave trade, as stockholder and lender (heralding similar contradictions within Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, a century later)" (108). Further, Valerie Smith explains, "His greed symbolizes the corruption at the heart of the American national mythology and is at least partly (sic!) responsible for his death" (123).

The Winthropian body imagery, then, is replicated in the closely knit, tight family of Vaark's farm. While this heterogeneous band of people does indeed form a supportive family-like union, it nevertheless remains an *unlikely* assembly. After Jacob's sole decision to build his mansion, the Vaark family body is literally dismembered and the former 'family members' are bitterly disillusioned: Lina can no longer "veil the truth: that they were not a

family – not even a like-minded group” (*M* 57); Sorrow states, “they were falling away from one another” (*M* 132); and Willard and Scully comment on their separate/separated futures (*M* 154).⁶⁶ Furthermore, the destruction of this utopian, heterogeneous community functions as an ironic inversion of the U.S. nation’s motto *e pluribus unum* (‘out of many, one’), that Winthrop’s body imagery apparently invokes. Instead of the innocent, if naïve, belief in America as a ‘melting pot’ or ‘salad bowl’ of different cultures, the disintegration of the Vaark family seems to foreshadow the direct line toward white supremacy. Finally, Morrison inverts Winthrop’s cherished sense of chosenness and his firm belief in America as a New Jerusalem – she uses American exceptionalism, ultimately, to turn it not only on its head, but against itself: While the Puritan’s followers had entered into ‘Covenant’ with God and were told to be His chosen people, Jacob Vaark’s already isolated and secluded farm develops into an exclusivist place and his wife into an overly zealous, stern believer.⁶⁷

‘Fenced and gated,’ Vaark’s mansion, with its impressive iron gate made by a free African blacksmith, almost instantly brings to mind images of present-day gated communities as enclaves of mostly rich, white Americans. Even though they are ostensibly designed to protect their inhabitants from the allegedly soaring crime rates of metropolitan areas in the United States, recent statistics show that gated communities are not necessarily safer than other neighborhoods (Low 110-130). Instead, people move to these communities for various other reasons, among them social prestige and the fear of the ‘Other.’ Jacob Vaark’s motivation to build this enormous mansion, erect a fence around it, and have it guarded by a massive gate, explains his fear: Imagining “an avalanche” and an unheard “roar” (*M* 20), Vaark has sensed the potential danger of treating human beings as mere commodities while touring D’Ortega’s farm and examining his slaves. Afraid and probably even guilt-ridden, Vaark attempts to fortify himself against the outside – in vain, as the ‘intrusion’ of the deadly smallpox disease finally illustrates. Just like Jacob tries to immure himself, his wife Rebekka erects a wall of piety around her and thereby secludes herself from the other inhabitants of their farm. The smallpox – an allegory for the destructive influence of slavery on white America – changes her dramatically: Even though she survives with the help of Lina’s medicine and the blacksmith’s instructions, Michlin contends, “Rebekka turns into a

⁶⁶ In this respect, the disintegration of Vaark’s family and farm mirrors the downfall of Sutpen’s Hundred in William Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936): Both estates and families disintegrate because of their respective heads’ – Jacob Vaark’s and Thomas Sutpen’s – hubris. Yet, there are also several differences between both novels: While *Absalom, Absalom!* is Sutpen’s story, *A Mercy* is the story of several persons; while the former is primarily narrated by a character, Quentin Compson, quite far removed from the events, Florens as co-narrator is directly affected by them.

⁶⁷ Tally (2014) conducts a more detailed reading of Winthrop’s sermon and its influence on Morrison’s trilogy.

nightmarish embodiment of the white mistress” (109). Despite her negative experiences and childhood memories of religion (*M* 72), she ironically turns to a pious life of a stern believer and thereby ‘converts’ to white supremacy: Consequently, Scully has to eye-witness how the erstwhile kind-hearted Rebekka “beat Sorrow, had Lina’s hammock taken down, advertised for the sale of Florens” (*M* 153). Therefore, she breaks the last ties of the family-like communion at Vaark’s farm and turns a formerly heterogeneous Edenic utopia into an exclusivist dystopia.

Especially the Vaarks’ stories can thus be read as a variation on the biblical narrative of the fall of humankind and the battle of the forces of good versus the forces of evil – Lina even directly refers to them as “Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations” (*M* 56/57). An oeuvre-wide Morrisonian topic,⁶⁸ the negotiation of good and evil in this novel provides for an insightful, but hitherto largely undiscovered, intertextual reading of *A Mercy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: Parallel to the Renaissance allegorist’s poem about the Fall and subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden, I interpret Morrison’s Vaarks as variations on the Adam-and-Eve pattern: Tempted by slavery as their original sin, Jacob Vaark’s utopian paradise disintegrates, he dies a bitter and lonely man; Rebekka undergoes a decisive personality change; and their mansion remains unfinished and deserted. However, this stands in stark contrast to Milton’s unifying, Manichaeic, Puritan worldview that tried to contain evil in the character of Satan, or as Roynon explains, “In its own marriage of heaven and hell, its disruption of binaries, its breaking down of the division between good and evil, *A Mercy* is antithetical to the ostensibly sharply defined morality of *Paradise Lost*” (2011: 604). I therefore read Jacob Vaark as an ambivalent (American) Adam and his unfinished mansion as a literal ‘paradise lost.’⁶⁹

On his way to D’Ortega’s plantation in 1682, Jacob Vaark travels from his native upstate New York farm southbound to the border region between Virginia and Maryland – probably

⁶⁸ Morrison’s second novel *Sula*, for example, can be read as a narrative about the disruption of and ensuing critical discourse on the differentiation between concepts of good and evil: While its eponymous character Sula Peace is turned into the communities scapegoat and pariah, she paradoxically does good; while her counterpart Nel Wright resembles the ‘muted standard’ and believes to be (W)right all her life, she ironically fails and is responsible for death (e.g., the death of Chicken Little, the ‘death’ of her marriage and of her friendship with Sula). Eva Peace’s insight thus strongly questions the binary opposition of good and evil and calls for a non-binary reading and understanding of these forces: “You [Nel]. Sula. What’s the difference” (*S* 168).

⁶⁹ It has to be duly noted, however, that most characters in *A Mercy* undergo dramatic changes throughout this novel and that their stories share certain characteristics with the biblical fall narrative. Likewise, the ambiguity of good and evil is not only exemplified in Vaark and his farm; moreover, the character of the blacksmith bares a striking resemblance to other ‘dangerously free’ black men in Morrison’s oeuvre (e.g., Cholly Breedlove and the Vulcan-like character in *The Bluest Eye*), African American literature (e.g., Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* or Jim Trueblood in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*), and black folklore in general (e.g., the folk hero and legend Stackolee).

even disembarking somewhere near the swamp-area where the United States' present-day capitol, Washington, D.C., is situated (*M* 11). Awed and overwhelmed by the unknown terrain, he seems to embody the prototypical early settlers and their relationship with the untamed, enormous wilderness they found in the colonies. Yet, his impressions of the surrounding nature are replete with references to prosperity and financial success and Vaark's narrative represents an early version of the American Dream and of the stereotypical Horatio Alger rags-to-riches-story. Moreover, there are numerous sexual connotations throughout this passage: Picturing himself as a "ratty orphan [...] making a place out of no place" (*M* 10), Vaark describes the thick fog in Chesapeake Bay as follows: "Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way north where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream" (*M* 7). He acquires the standpoint of a colonizer entering or conquering a virgin land waiting for European settlement and civilization. As a result, "the world was soundless" (*M* 8) and he notices "forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking" (*M* 10). Apparently alone in a welcoming New World, unimpeded by other humans and restrictions whatsoever, Vaark's confidence grows with every step his horse takes in this Edenic land.

The noticeable change that takes place within Jacob upon this mythical reenactment of Columbus' 'conquest of paradise' symbolizes an axiomatic change in early settlers'/colonizers' mindsets: Even though some, if not most, fled from oppression, political tension, religious intolerance, and deplorable living conditions of the Old World and were eager to start anew in the New World, they seem to have quickly forgotten from what they have escaped and freely replicated some of the things they had thought to have left behind. Contrary to the myth of an egalitarian genesis, the colonies, and later on the young American Republic, developed into a strictly hierarchical society based on race, class, and gender differences. Additionally, Vaark's contract with 'the Company' shows that the earliest settlements in America were indeed primarily driven by economic interests: founded in 1607, the Jamestown colony, for example, was in fact established by the enterprising and profit-seeking Virginia Company of London. And even the later settlers of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, though purporting to start a New World on religious grounds, were financed and spearheaded by shrewd businessmen.

The contradictions between Vaark's opinion of Bacon's Rebellion (1676) and his later position as a slave owner can thus be seen as an indicator for his change of mind: Even

though he seems to sympathize with “that ‘people’s war’” (M 8) and dismisses the laws that were issued after the suppression of the revolt as “lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue” (M 8/9), he still embodies the inherent discrepancies of the political rhetoric of the day and the Enlightenment – inconsistencies that have surreptitiously found their way well into the Constitution. Analyzing the laws that were passed in the revolt’s aftermath as one of the first steps to the solidification of racism within the very foundations of America and commenting on the massacres of Native Americans during that rebellion, Vaark does not follow the long-lasting, but somewhat flawed, historiographical analysis of Bacon’s Rebellion as a needed precursor to the American Revolutionary War one hundred years later. Closer to more nuanced and scientific discussions of early colonial America, such as Edmund S. Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), Jacob does not participate in the mythmaking that stylized Bacon as patriot – as a ‘torchbearer of the revolution’ as Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker once dubbed him. Yet, while this account of the historical events seems to be in line with Morrison’s writing of a revisionist history of early America, Jacob can hardly be seen as a philanthropic harbinger of civilization. He rather embodies the dichotomy of early America: While proclaiming to build a New World on egalitarian principles, the colonies were founded on exploitation of natural resources and of human beings from their very beginnings.

Instead of being a culture-bringer, Vaark slowly but surely adopts a rather condescending outlook on his surroundings. Tempted by the Portuguese slave owner D’Ortega, he finally commits the original sin: He becomes involved in American slavery. Throughout his stay at the tobacco farmer’s plantation and his magnificent house, Vaark repeatedly pronounces the differences between him and his noble debtor – in the end, however, his positive self-image is undermined by his progressing corruption and the very fact that his future mansion is constructed after the model of D’Ortega’s, both architecturally as well as financially. Vaark’s stressing of the alleged dissimilarities between him and the nobleman borders on schizophrenia: In order to play down, neglect, and avoid recognizing their similarities, he is continuously caught between suspicion and attraction, disdain and awe, rejection and enthusiasm – the epic battle between good and evil over his soul is thus set in motion.

Concerning the slaver’s mansion Jublio, for example, Vaark states: “The wealthiest men he knew built in wood, not brick, riven clapboards with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament. Grandiose, he thought, but easy, easy to build in that climate. [...] easy work, easy living, but, Lord, the heat” (M 13). Furthermore, Jacob’s derogatory comments on

the Portuguese's Catholic faith, his clothes, his family, and his profession, are Vaark's (unsuccessful) way to fight temptation at D'Ortega's plantation. In this respect, the Catholic planter be equated with Milton's Satan and Jacob can be seen as a variation of the allegorist's Adam: Despite the great, hell-like heat in Jublio, a fact that Jacob mentions several times, he is astonished that "D'Ortega's skin was as dry as parchment" (*M* 14) and Roynon reads the Portuguese's mansion "as a witty translation of Milton's hellish edifice" (2011: 600). The Dutch-English farmer senses a certain danger in his noble debtor and thinks that he effectively hides his true self from him; Jacob says: "There was something beyond Catholic in him, something sordid and overripe" (*M* 21). Just like Milton's Satan, then, the looks and conduct of D'Ortega are described as fanciful and ornate. It is therefore hardly surprising, that the slave owner's "sly" and "indirect" (*ibid.*) voice is his most dangerous weapon: Whereas Milton's Satan disguises himself as a serpent, enters Paradise, and successfully tempts Eve to partake of the apple from the Tree of knowledge, Morrison's Jacob Vaark enters the hell-like Jublio and is enticed by D'Ortega's promises of wealth. These slight differences between the biblical story of the fall of humankind and Morrison's rewriting of it do not only point into the direction of an exegesis, which is less biased toward women, but also critically question Jacob's role in his own downfall and his innocence specifically.

Despite his claim that "Flesh was not his commodity" (*M* 20) and his determination "to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin" (*M* 26), Vaark seems to neglect that he is already deeply entangled with the institution of slavery. He thinks strictly in economic terms: Slaves are a mere "currency" (*M* 12) to him and as such have only monetary value. When D'Ortega tells him about his 'losses' and the cause of his default in a shockingly perverse, matter-of-fact way, Vaark draws on his debtor's terminology and describes the slaves on the Portuguese's ship (who died by the hundreds because of the slave trader's greed) as "cargo" (*M* 15). Despite all his alleged principles, Jacob *is* familiar with the slave trade and *does not* seem to generally object to it: Instead, he lists his losses without any word of repulsion, and refers to the death of many slaves and their horrible bondage on the slave ships only in passing. Vaark's conscience and his alleged principles therefore have to be strongly questioned: Regardless of all the differences concerning their origin, religion, conduct, et cetera, D'Ortega and Jacob meet on equal footing when it comes to business – they both are, and remain, capitalists after all. Their relationship is not defined by the underlying hierarchy of nobleman and commoner, but is rather an equal one that symbolizes the fact that the early American society was indeed in flux and offered opportunities of upward social mobility, if only for the

prototypical WASP, representative men: Newcomers and shrewd businessmen like Vaark are on the rise, whereas the establishment can no longer solely rely on its status; old money has to enter contest with new money, and the core of Vaark's American Dream is delineated: "Where else but in this disorganized world would such an encounter be possible? Where else could rank tremble before courage?" (*M* 23).

His story/colonial history, however, cannot be read as a narrative of success, but rather presents the American Dream as a Nightmare, an inherently flawed story of dubious morality: Deliberately entering hell and a conversation with Satan/D'Ortega (which makes him probably an even worse sinner than Eve), Vaark is tempted by the grandeur and majesty of Jublio, neglects his fears and distrust, and finally enters the slave trade quite naïvely: Euphemistically calling slaves "a remote labor force" and his financing of their trafficking an investment in rum, he concludes, "the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based" (*M* 33). Vaark absolutely disregards his long-time indirect involvement in slavery via his money lending business – thus, the corruption of his soul actually started well before he even met the devilish D'Ortega. This is metaphorically depicted in the trope of the raccoon: On his way to D'Ortega, Vaark "dismounted twice, the second time to free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break. [...] Once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws" (*M* 9). While this incident can be interpreted as a foreshadowing of Florens' mother's decision to give her daughter away to Jacob in order to rescue her from the lecherous Portuguese slave owner, it can also be seen as a comment on the precarious role of black people in the colonies and afterwards, on a larger scale, in all of the United States. Literally and figuratively, Vaark realizes that he has got his hands dirty when trying to free the raccoon and notices "a trace of raccoon blood on his hands" (*M* 15). As he thinks about whether or not he should indeed invest in a sugar cane plantation in the Caribbean after his visit to D'Ortega, he finally reasons that his investment would be far different from the tobacco planter's and neglects his principles of freedom and his disgust of slavery. Following the example of D'Ortega, he literally washes his hands clean and claims innocence even while he becomes ever more deeply entangled with the inhumane business of slavery. Strikingly, he does that in the water of Chesapeake Bay, a bay feeding into the Atlantic Ocean, the very water route on which the African slaves were shipped to the Americas: "By and by the detritus of the day washed off, including the faint trace of coon's blood" (*M* 33). The shortened form 'coon,' moreover, which may have derived from 'raccoon' or 'barracoon,' is a derogatory and offensive racial slur for black slaves, which further underlines Vaark's beginning racist attitudes and highlights his double standards and

hypocrisy. Race and racism have entered and permeated not only Vaark's mind and language, but also his soul, and he becomes the embodiment of a corrupted (American) Adam.

His personality, then, is mirrored in the foundation and construction of Vaark's grand house, especially in its gate. Shaped after D'Ortega's Jublio – “bigger, double-storied, fenced and gated like the one he saw on his travels” (*M* 41) –, a whole entourage of paid skilled workers is needed for the building of Vaark's mansion, and only the finest and most expensive materials are employed (*M* 35 and 87). Its luxury and extravagance, however, cannot veil this mansion's corrupted nature, the very fact that it was built by money made in the slave trade, and that it resembles a significant disruption of the paradise-hell opposition: Whereas the biblical paragons Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise after being tempted to partake of the Apple, Morrison's Jacob Vaark ‘imports’ hell into his utopian paradise. Unlike the Dutch-English homebuilder, who has been tricked by Jublio's beautiful façade and overlooked its hell-like downside, the other inhabitants of Vaark's farm are not as easily enticed or fooled by his new edifice – consequently, their perceptions of the deserted, unfinished mansion clearly emphasize this place's inherent contradictions. Lina, who is plainest in her criticism, calls it “Sir's foolish house” (*M* 43). While his second house was indeed a clearly needed improvement to his first one, his third and last dwelling is not only a useless, but also an unnatural place, a place that is surrounded by death, sickness, and stagnation: The Native American bemoans “the death of fifty trees” that once stood in the place of the house and the fact that it “distorted sunlight” (*M* 41). Since Vaark died there, she also believes that the restless ghost of its owner will forever haunt the mansion. Parallel to Lina, his wife Rebekka comments on the futility, the worthlessness, of Jacob's wealth, with which he can only buy “gifts that were becoming less practical, even whimsical” (*M* 86). The fortune he earned in the slave trade appears to breed greediness and an insatiable hunger for more in Vaark – finally, it culminated in his obsessive desire to build a mansion like Jublio, in Rebekka's view “Something befitting not a farmer, not even a trader, but a squire” (*ibid.*) and an estate absolutely oversized for their needs.

While Lina and Rebekka highlight the ostentatious display of wealth and draw an analogy between Jacob Vaark's vanity and the splendor of his mansion – the very things he ostensibly detests in D'Ortega –, Florens, Willard, and Scully are still impressed by the sheer magnificence of the house. The adolescent black slave, for one thing, admires the mansion, mainly because her love-interest has had a significant part in its construction and the place therefore functions as a visible reminder of her beloved blacksmith. Nevertheless, she notices

the distinctly negative impact of this mansion on Vaark: Instead of satisfying his narcissism – after all, Vaark himself holds, “What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (*M* 87) in a dispute with his wife over his building plans –, Florens observes that “He cannot help envying our health and feeling the cheat of his new house” (*M* 34). The ‘cheat’ therefore symbolizes betrayal: Since the edifice itself is not a monument to Vaark but rather a monument to death, Jacob has abandoned his virtues, egalitarian beliefs, and philanthropic mindset. The white indentured servants Willard and Scully admire the building in whose construction they helped. Willard, for instance, says, “Not only was the house grand and its enclosure impressive, its gate was spectacular” (*M* 147). Yet, they are nevertheless horrified of this place: Mistaking Florens’ writing of her story on the walls and floors of the mansion as the ghost of the risen Vaark, they avoid the house and never not dare to approach it (*M* 141). In stark contrast to Jacob Vaark’s dream mansion, then, his house has become a useless display of wealth, a deceitful place, and a haunted mansion for the former family members.

Finally, the complete ambivalence of Vaark’s mansion is best encapsulated in its ‘spectacular’ gate. Designed by an equally ambivalent blacksmith, it is not only a symbol of the exclusivity of the manor, its exceptionalism and elitism, but it also stands for the fall of humankind replicated in the downfall of Jacob Vaark. The gate of the manor near the tellingly named town of Milton (*M* 110) is equally the entrance to both heaven and hell. Thus, it is the last link in a long chain that connects Morrison’s *A Mercy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, so that Roynon boldly states, “it would be an act of willful scholarly oversight to ignore this intertextual relationship any longer” (2011: 593).

Separating Vaark’s mansion from its surroundings and unsuccessfully protecting it from the outside world, this impressive entrance to the Anglo-Dutch broker’s enclosure is completed by two snakes on each side of the wrought iron gate. Since most of the main protagonists comment on these figurines, referring to them as “glittering cobras [that] still kiss at the gate’s crown” (Florens, *M* 34), “copper snakes” (Lina, *M* 49), and “serpents” (Willard, *M* 148), these ornamentations by the blacksmith are of special importance. From ancient Egyptian mythology onwards, snakes have been depicted as guardians of the underworld. More significantly, however, is the juxtaposition of devil and the serpent: Disguised as a snake, Satan enters Paradise and tempts Eve. In Morrison’s variation of the story of humankind’s fall, then, Vaark himself introduces hell into his utopian paradise and is responsible for his own downfall. The inconsistencies and contradictions of Vaark are therefore replicated in the gate to his mansion: While it appears “sinister” to Lina and she

feels like “entering the world of the damned” (*M* 49) when walking through it, Rebekka perceives it as “gate to heaven” (*M* 87) and Willard’s recollections of it, finally, comprises both of these opposing images:

Neatly these iron bars led to the gate each side of which was crowned by a flourish of thick vines. Or so he thought. Looking more closely he saw the gilded vines were actually serpents, scales and all, but ending not in fangs but flowers. When the gate was opened, each one separated its petals from the other. When closed, the blossoms merged. (*M* 148)

Oscillating between a floral Eden and dangerous hell, Vaark’s mansion and its gate function as a powerful allegory for early America in particular and American history in general: Perceived as a paradisiac utopia by immigrants from its very genesis, this country could not keep what it so solemnly promises in the Declaration, namely ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ With *A Mercy*, Morrison stresses the paradox of the unfree in the alleged land of the free: Paid for by money earned in the slave trade, this rich and luxurious mansion must forever be unfinished and incomplete.

While America is depicted as inchoate and imperfect, the people who have built it are badly infested with the ‘disease’ of slavery. As a result of his tainted money and his prosperity based on slave labor, all characters notice an obvious and dramatic change in Vaark’s conduct and attitude, which finally culminate in his terminal “sickness” (*M* 34). Once again, then, the intimate connection between owner and house is underlined: Vaark’s mansion remains unfinished and deserted, and its owner dies a lonely death in this/his tomb. Florens, for example, states that Jacob has become “different, slow and hard to please. He is short with Mistress” (*ibid.*). His engagement in slavery marks therefore not only the beginning of his psychological and physical downfall, but also the start of the deterioration of his relationships – even of his marriage. The African American girl claims, the “sickness alters his mind as well as his face” (*M* 35). Lina and Rebekka, on the other hand, have been well aware of the progressing change in Vaark’s personality for some years. While he spent an increasing amount of time away from the farm on his business travels, his wife notices,

His returns, however, were joyful times, full of news and amazing sights [...]. It was some time before she noticed how the tales were fewer and the gifts increasing, gifts that were becoming less practical, even whimsical. [...] When finally she did ask him where this money was coming from, he said, “New arrangements,” and handed her a mirror framed in silver. (*M* 85/86)

Their love for each other and their intimate relationship has faded, Vaark guards his secret of the real origin of his wealth, and physically as well as mentally distances himself from his

wife. When he dies, then, Lina eyewitnesses that Vaark “went quickly. Screaming at Mistress” (M 48).

The smallpox disease can be interpreted as punishment and ultimate sign of his downfall, a continuous, long-lasting process that finally led to Vaark’s spiritual ruin as well as, eventually, his death: “he was deadweight before he was dead” (M 87). Jacob’s death of smallpox can not only be read as an allegory for the ‘pollution’ of America by slavery or, as Michlin contends, “as a curse upon America” (108), but also as an ironic reversal of the historical facts: A disease introduced in the Americas by Europeans, smallpox killed millions of Native Americans and was therefore one key factor for the ‘successful’ white settlement of these vast areas.⁷⁰ While the horrible death of Lina’s tribe narrates exactly this part of the story (M 44/45), Jacob’s moral downfall and the parallel course of his terminal disease run counter to it, presenting the European settlers, paradoxically, as the very cause of their own destruction.

Hence, *A Mercy* contradicts Morrison’s motivation to imagine ‘home’ as “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter” (“Home” 3, her emphasis), without disrupting her ‘house/home antagonism’ altogether. Discussing colonial America as a missed opportunity and a paradise lost, Vaark’s farm is not a utopia but a dystopia. Consequently, Lina senses the danger she, Sorrow, and Florens are in: Without protection by a real family and deprived of any rights, these slave-outlaws are “wild game for anyone,” “interlopers [...] subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (M 56). Vaark’s story reads like an allegory for the development of the United States. From its genesis, America has been seen as a ‘City upon a Hill’ and ‘New Jerusalem;’ Morrison, however, revises these notions: Just as she uses and abuses Winthrop’s sermon “A Model” to undermine the belief in American exceptionalism, she also engages critically and creatively with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to disrupt the binary opposition of good and evil and provoke her readers into doing likewise. Vaark’s farm becomes an inverted symbolic space. Literally, it is turned into ‘the house that race built’ – to employ the title of Wahneema Lubiano’s collection of essays in which Morrison’s “Home” was published. Paid by money made in the slave trade, it represents the indissoluble ‘wedlock’ of skin color and slavery; of blackness and negative moral judgments; of racism and white supremacy. It is not only a monument to Vaark but also a monument to death, “a mausoleum” (166), as Jaffe Schreiber put it, symbolizes the corruption of Vaark’s soul – or the soul of white America,

⁷⁰ In fact, some historians have even argued that during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) pox-infected blankets were distributed among hostile Native tribes and the disease used as means of biological warfare (Fenn 1553-1558). This, however, is a controversially debated topic among scholars (e.g., Lewy).

when read as allegory – and the deaths of millions of African slaves and other unfree laborers. Thus, *A Mercy* seems to suggest that America could have been a true, philanthropic home for various kinds of people, but that its history has taken a different course.

3.3.5 Frank and Ycidra Money as Present-Day Hansel and Gretel in *Home*

The use of mythology and tradition has been one of the most intensely studied fields in Morrisonian studies and is certainly a fiercely debated topic within Morrison scholarship. While older criticism has largely focused on the parallels of her works to classical Western narratives,⁷¹ more recent studies have seen a literal reclamation of the supposedly true, authentic sources for Morrison's literary imagination. In her book *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, La Vinia Jennings, for instance, argues, "Rich, guiding African traditional cosmologies are at the core of Morrison's fiction" (4).⁷² Even Morrison herself seems to further fuel this current trend: In a 1995 interview with novelist Cecil Brown, she states, "I try to stay out of Western mythology. [...]. I tend to use everything from African or Afro-American sources" ("Interview with Toni Morrison" 113). When she does, however, employ Western narratives in her works, it is "in order to signal something being askew" (ibid.). Then, her characters are usually caught in a dead-end situation in which they will not find support or guidance from these ancient Western traditions: "outside of their history, so to speak," Morrison says, her characters "are pulling from another place that's not going to feed them" (ibid.). Hence, her characters have to reestablish a connection to their 'own' roots and traditions, their spiritual and historical homes that are most often closely associated with ancestor figures, the nuclear black family, and with the larger African American community around them.

Despite Morrison's complicated and at times even ambivalent stance toward Western mythology and fairy tales in particular – she boldly claims that she is, in fact, "not interested" ("Interview" 116) in fairy tales at all –, I interpret her second to last piece of fiction, *Home*, as a *roman à clef*, with the key to this novel being the Grimms' well-known tale "Hansel and Gretel." Both narratives revolve around an intimate sibling relationship, show striking

⁷¹ Here, one could mention the Icarus-myth in *Song of Solomon*, Medea as an intertext for *Beloved*, and the uncountable references to the Bible throughout her entire oeuvre.

⁷² In this respect, Roynon decries the futile attempt to claim the 'true' Morrison or excavate her 'true' sources and to locate Morrison as either deeply rooted in Western/white or African/black traditions: "For too long, a falsifying and unnecessary critical polarization has made Morrison a pawn in a struggle rooted in the 'culture wars' of the 1980s. The attempt to claim her 'most significant' as somehow and nonsensically *either* 'African' *or* 'European', and an oversimplifying conflation of these descriptors with 'black' and 'white', reinscribes a notion of intellectual purity that ultimately serves the dominant culture and that her novels themselves strongly contest" (*Classical Tradition* 169; see also Fraile-Marcos).

parallels in their plots, and discuss fundamental problems of humankind such as poverty and child abuse.⁷³

Like their fairy-tale forerunners, Frank and Ycidra ‘Cee’ Money, as present-day, alternative versions of Hansel and Gretel, have to suffer from childhood trauma of abandonment – a pathological finding Ulrich Knoepfelmacher has termed ‘Hansel and Gretel Syndrome.’ Following a childhood characterized by the “*indifference of parents and the hatefulness of grandparents*” (H 83, her emphasis), Frank and Cee leave their *unheimlich* family home in Lotus, Georgia, behind only to encounter the very antitheses to home in the wide/white world. Eventually, both return to Lotus and find a place of mental and spiritual rest there, only when they come to terms with their traumas and finally shoulder responsibility for their own lives. Parallel to the Grimms’ folktale, Morrison’s contemporary novel can be read as rite of passage or initiation story: In this respect, Jack Zipes remarks that “Hansel and Gretel” has often been interpreted as “socialization fairy tale” (197) that discusses the ambivalence of home, family, and identity. However critical of this approach himself, Zipes states:

Hansel and Gretel leave their home to undergo a psychological socialization in which they must realize that their mother and home are ambivalent, loving, and cruel, and they must learn to come to terms with this ambivalence and their own sexuality and aggression in order to survive. (197)

This interpretation focuses on the process of humanization of the fairy tale’s main protagonists, who have to face and eventually overcome enormous obstacles. The physical barriers that they need to cross, the deep forest and the big water, as well as the witch, whom they have to overpower with wit, function as potent symbols for their maturation – a change most drastically signaled in the development of Gretel who grows from a passive, plaintive girl into an active planer and caretaker who finally saves both herself and her older brother from the cannibalistic witch. Their initiation is eventually completed when they return to their repentant father with riches found at the witch’s house: Not only is the nuclear family restored – in later versions of the tale, it is even purged of the intrusion of the evil stepmother –, but they can now also ‘live happily ever after’.

In the following chapter I will discuss the ambivalent concept of home in Morrison’s eponymous novel. Taking the Grimms’ fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” as an intertext for her novel, I argue that Morrison gains a different understanding of home. Frank Money’s journey

⁷³ Besides, at one point in the novel, the narrator explicitly equates *Home*’s protagonists Frank and Ycidra Money with their fairy-tale forerunners Hansel and Gretel (H 53).

across the United States thereby resembles the author's oeuvre-wide quest from house to home and I therefore read her penultimate novel as a conclusion to her house/home antagonism: Just like Morrison arrives at a singular notion of tradition (one that is not rigid and fixed but rather open to adaptation and integration) by drawing productively from her African/African American as well as Western sources, she conceptualizes home as a mental/psychological rather than spatial/geographic idea by using and abusing the classical Western fairy tale. In this respect, home is not a utopian counterforce to a potentially dystopian house: Instead, Morrison conceives of this concept as an ideal toward which one can and, indeed, should strive – an ideal that can probably never be reached in its entirety, but also an ideal that has the power to considerably change the American house. Hence, *Lotus* may not be perfect but it nevertheless is a true home to Frank and Ycidra – a place that is indeed characterized by philanthropic relationships between its inhabitants.

Morrison's tenth novel *Home* is preceded by an unattributed epigraph taken from her own song cycle *Honey and Rue* (1992) that presents an unnamed first person narrator's contradictory feelings about an unspecified, potentially generic house:

Whose house is this? / Whose night keeps out the light / In here? / Say, who owns this house? / It's not mine. / I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter / With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats; / Of fields wide as arms open for me. / This house is strange. / Its shadows lie. / Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key? (n. pag.)

As a particular kind of paratext, the epigraph is a liminal zone: Not part of the narrative proper, it is nevertheless an integral part of the book located somewhere between outside and inside, text and context, reader and work/author. According to Gérard Genette, paratexts are 'thresholds of interpretation:' they guide the audience's analysis, sharpen their senses to the main issue of the text, and make the work accessible prior to the actual reading. Genette claims that their most crucial function is "to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world" (1, his emphasis). In short, paratexts make the text. Genette then describes the four main roles of epigraphs: They can be used, firstly, as "justificatory appendage to the title" (157); secondly, as a commentary on the text, which is the most widely used function of epigraphs; thirdly, as an *authorizing* instrument that evokes a particular authority (e.g., Shakespeare, Homer, etc.); and lastly, as a clear indicator and marker of certain literary traditions. "The epigraph in itself is a signal (intended as a *sign*) of culture, a password of intellectuality," Genette explains, "With it, [the author] chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon" (160, his emphasis). I now continue to apply these functional levels to *Home's* epigraph.

Even though it discusses an enigmatic house, the paratext of *Home* clearly justifies and explains the novel's title. Traditionally, the notions of 'house' and 'home' are intimately connected to each other and most often used interchangeably. With the epigraph, however, Morrison complicates this view: Prior to *Home*, she has already dwelled on the 'house/home antagonism' in most of her novels. This time, though, she clearly spells out the differences between the two ideas and pits the titular home against the epigraphic house. Even before the reader accompanies Frank Money on his epic quest to find a home for his sister Cee and himself, Morrison raises certain fundamental problems attached to one of the most powerful symbols of home – the house. This epigraph places *Home* squarely among her earlier works and it can even be argued that her oeuvre has thereby come full circle: Both her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* and her second to last novel *Home* are preceded by epigraphic paratexts that explicitly deal with symbolic houses.

Opening with an unanswered/unanswerable question ("Whose house is this?" n. pag.) and ending with an equally enigmatic one ("Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?" n. pag.), the epigraph also clearly foreshadows the central topic of the novel: the ambivalence of houses and homes. Offering no ready solution to the inquirer's predicament, this central problem is further underlined in the rest of said epigraph: In fact, four out of eight sentences of this paratext are questions, while the other four certainly do not represent answers, either. The facts that the epigraph is *unattributed*, the speaker *unnamed*, and the house *unspecified* all point toward a state of confusion, indeterminacy, and negation. Contrary to the traditional positive or at least familiar understanding of houses, the one in the epigraph is, consequently, "strange" (n. pag.) – it is dark, not owned by the narrator, characterized by unfulfilled promises and high expectations. The epigraph, and by extrapolation the novel *in toto*, can therefore be read as an allegorical reference to the black experience within the United States – the alleged *home* of democracy as well as egalitarianism, the land that has *housed* African Americans for at least the past three hundred years, despite the fact that their experiences have often been characterized by a pronounced feeling of *homelessness*.

Read in this light, the unnamed narrator's predicament parallels that of Frank Money and that of African Americans per se, and the 'strange' house becomes a powerful symbol for America: When the speaker, for example, asks, "Whose house is this? [...] Say, who owns this house?" (n. pag.), only to state shortly thereafter, "It's not mine," (n. pag.), she addresses a historically developed structural weakness within U.S. society – the uneven distribution of proprietorship. According to the United States Census Bureau, homeownership rates differ

greatly by race and ethnicity of the householder: In 2014, for instance, over seventy-two percent of white Americans owned the houses they lived in, while only forty-three percent of African Americans owned theirs (*Quarterly Homeownership Rates by Race and Ethnicity of Householder: 1994 to Present* n. pag.). Next to the real-life social implications of owning a home, such as access to better education, gateway to middle class, civic participation, et cetera, homeownership also works on a metaphoric level: It symbolizes belonging and constitutes a crucial part of American identity. Put differently, then, people who do not own their homes are more likely to be socially excluded and regarded as un-American.

Furthermore, the narrator's idyllic picture of the American house remains a dream image: Instead of a wide-armed, open, and welcoming house waiting for her, she discovers a strange, dark, and exclusivist place, a place that distorts the typical (self-) image of the United States and contradicts its founding principles. The pun in the last line of the epigraph, finally, reverses not only the idiomatic expression it is based on, but also questions the firm belief in America as the Promised Land. Usually, one would say that a key fits a lock, since keys are obviously made for locks and not the other way around. Morrison, however, has the speaker inquire, "Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?" (n. pag.). I interpret this sentence as a metaphor for the ambivalent role of the American house in the black imagination – where the U.S. is and is not regarded as home, where it is a contradictory place that the novelist has arrestingly described by means of the Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*. The pun, then, addresses the inherent discrepancies of the United States and asks: Are only certain people made for the land? Are some not made for it? Or is the land, indeed, made for the people? In short: Who is really accepted into the American house? Thus, Yvette Christiansë claims that the use of epigraphs in Morrison oeuvre – and especially the one in *Home* – "is as much a political act as a literary one" (240).

If, lastly, the epigraph of Morrison novel is read against the historical backdrop of 1950s America, *Home's* temporal setting, then the political/didactic dimension of both novel and epigraph can hardly be denied. The fifties are nowadays largely perceived as a decade of relative prosperity and of pleasant tranquility; it is the time of the baby boomer generation, of beginning consumerism, and of the rise of suburban bliss. Morrison's novel, however, discusses the not so idyllic sides of this decade: the Korean War, the prevalence of strict racial segregation, and of poverty. Her novel calls for a reevaluation of the one period in time, which comes closest to the ideal (or idealized) picture of America and the American home. "*Home* invites readers to think not so much about the significance of literal houses, but rather, about

the broader meaning of home,” claims Valerie Smith and further explains: “More specifically, it asks us to think about the meaning of home during the 1950s, a decade for which many late twentieth- and twenty-first century Americans have become nostalgic” (132). The epigraph of *Home* can therefore be interpreted as the novel’s motto – in fact, Genette regards the motto as the epigraph’s ancient precursor (144) – which is equally a guide to deeper understanding of the work and a pointer to Morrison’s oeuvre-wide concern with the ambivalence of houses. In accordance with her other novels, *Home*’s paratext calls for a co-creative, participatory reading of the work that transfers a substantial amount of responsibility onto her audience: “the use of an epigraph,” explains Genette, “is always a mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader” (156). Hence, the text itself does only become meaningful if the (implied) reader is willing to enter into a fruitful collaboration with the author/narrator, only if she is willing to thoroughly *work* text and context.

Analogous to their fairy-tale progenitors, Frank and Ycidra Money have been brought up in an ambivalent home that is simultaneously the place of their deepest psychological (and physical) traumas as well as *the* one symbolic space in the world that may bring about the cure for their wounds. The name of the town of Lotus itself testifies to that: While it clearly refers to the lotus plant – “the symbol of birth and creation” (Ward 146) in ancient Egypt as well as Buddhist and Hindu cultures –, it may also allude to the land of the lotus-eaters in Homer’s *Odyssey*. For the ancient Egyptians, on the one hand, the lotus plant – or in fact the water lily, which is not a lotus proper – was closely associated with Horus, the sun god, and Osiris, god of the underworld and resurrection. Opening its flowers to the sun and closing them at night, the lotus flower was seen as holy sign for re-birth, fertility, and the circle of life. In Hindu philosophy, the lotus plant or ‘padma’ is a symbol for purity: Growing out of the mud, its flowers are still immaculately white. For Buddhists, Buddha and lotus are intimately related with each other (Ward 135-145). The lotus is thus a powerful ancient symbol that stands for creation as well as purity and is closely related to some of the most influential deities in Eastern culture. On the other hand, the name ‘Lotus’ may also refer to the land of the Lotophagi, literally the land of the lotus-eaters, of Greek mythology. In Book IX of Homer’s *Odyssey*, for instance, Odysseus and his crew reach this remote land to replenish their water and food supplies and to continue their journey to Ithaca. Scouting their surroundings, however, some of his men eat from the lotus plant and forget about their plans to return home. It is only due to Odysseus’ strength and thanks to his self-control that the crewmen are finally able to return to their ship and put their vessel back to sea (*Odyssey* 9.84-

102). The Homeric epic, then, presents a different picture of the lotus plant and connects it with oblivion, stagnation, and lethargy.

The name of this Georgian small-town town alone signifies the antinomies of Frank and Cee's childhood home. For one thing, Lotus is the place of communal reciprocity, of pride in homeownership as well as economic progress, and of protection. As a four-year old boy, Frank had to witness his family's forced removal from their Texas home at the hands of a racist mob, directed and incited by members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the 1930s. Confronted with the alternative of death, the Moneys – Frank's mother being heavily pregnant with Cee – and their black neighbors were given twenty-four hours to pack their belongings and leave the county. Even their house, supposedly a shelter from outside forces and a refuge for the family, did not offer any protection: "You could be inside, living in your own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move" (*H* 9). This feeling of utmost vulnerability is deeply imprinted in Frank's psyche, just as deeply as the memories of great hunger (*H* 40) and the extreme heat (*H* 41) during their exodus. By these standards, Lotus is indeed a marked improvement offering safety and rest, even though the family's living conditions can be described as cramped at best: With Frank's family and his uncle, five people moved into the tiny house of his grandfather Salem and his step grandmother Lenore. After three years of working poorly paid jobs, his parents Luther and Ida had eventually saved enough money to rent a house. Their new status led to a considerable change in the Moneys themselves and in their place within the Lotus community: "Cee remembered the relief and the pride they all took in having their own garden and their own laying hens. They Moneys had enough of it to feel at home in this place where neighbors could finally offer friendship instead of pity" (*H* 46). Apparently, then, Frank and his family have found a true home – a place among family and friends who offer them protection and comfort, who share joy and sorrow with them and a place in which they can cultivate self-confidence in themselves as well as trust in other people.

Yet, Lotus remains an ambivalent place for Frank and Ycidra. Firstly, Lenore's house is literally *unheimlich* – as a replica of the evil stepmother in the Grimms' fairy tale, she is described as "mean" and anything but a "forgiving and generous" (*H* 43) grandmother: Instead of caring for the young children left in her hands while their parents were at work, Lenore kept most of the food for herself and even beat Frank and Ycidra (*H* 44). She was especially hard on Cee, though, whom she named "gutter child" (*H* 45), because she was

born on the road from Texas to Georgia. Discontented with her living conditions, she treated the siblings as scapegoats for her situation: “The cloud of her displeasure at being so put-upon found a place to float: around the heads of the boy and the girl. It was they who paid, although Lenore believed she was merely a strict step-grandmother, not a cruel one” (H 88). Just like her fairy-tale prototype, then, Lenore resembles the stingy, greedy, and hostile misanthrope who is only interested in her own well-being and in material wealth:

She was a profoundly unhappy woman. And, although she had married to avoid being by herself, disdain of others kept her solitary if not completely alone. What soothed her was a fairly fat savings account, owning property, and having one, actually two, of the few automobiles in the neighborhood. (H 90/91)

Secondly, despite the fact that Lenore’s apparent avarice stands in stark contrast to the Lotus community’s generosity – “Everybody in the neighborhood, except Lenore, was stern but quickly open-handed” (H 46) –, even these people are seen as an oppressive force by Cee. As a young girl, she had to experience the bossiness and vigilance of the adults in her community: “Watched, watched, watched by every grown-up from sunrise to sunset and ordered about not only by Lenore but every adult in town” (H 47). This conduct borders on an overbearing surveillance to which, paradoxically, even her brother’s protectiveness has contributed substantially. As a result, Ycidra’s development has been blocked and she remains insecure, immature, and dependent on others.

Thirdly, the nuclear family of Frank and his sister can be interpreted as a broken home. Due to their extreme poverty, their late parents – both died when Frank was deployed in Korea – were forced to work long hours in order to make ends meet; consequently, they were too exhausted when they came home and have never established an intimate relationship to either of their children. Cee, for instance, states, “any affection they showed was like a razor – sharp, short, and thin” (H 53) and bemoans the lack of caresses and family compassion (H 129).

Deprived of the warm and comforting love of their parents, left at the hands of a mean step grandmother, and subjected to an oppressive, suffocating small-town atmosphere, the adolescent Frank and Ycidra experienced Lotus not as their home, a place characterized by rejuvenation and positive progress, but rather as a dead end, a prison-like place of stagnation and suffocation. While Cee “swore never to go back there” (H 50), her older brother sums up his disillusionment and complete disgust of Lotus in the following words:

Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. [...] there was no future, just long stretches of killing time. There was no goal other than

breathing [...]. Nothing to do but mindless work in the fields you didn't own, couldn't own, and wouldn't own if you had any other choice. (H 83/84, her emphasis)

Their decidedly negative memories and experiences of childhood and adolescence finally become manifest in a traumatic event that they had to witness on a farm near Lotus while they were still very young: Sneaking away from home to secretly watch a herd of horses outside the town's limits, Frank and Cee accidentally observe a burial of a black man who was, as it turns out much later in the novel, apparently killed in a forced duel between himself and his son. On the one hand, this scene can be analyzed as a foreshadowing of the terrible experiences that both siblings will have to make in the world outside of Lotus. Almost instantly, revolting pictures of lynchings and equally appalling fictional descriptions of forced violence against and amongst African American men come to mind: for instance, the controversial battle royal scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as well as the 'Mandingo fight' in Quentin Tarantino's 2013 Western movie *Django Unchained*.⁷⁴

On the other hand, however, the burial can also be interpreted as the ultimate symbol for their vulnerability and solitude. In this respect, the whole scene signifies not only Frank and Cee's deepest fears of abandonment, but also explains their tight-knit brother-sister relationship. In a field miles away from Lotus, completely on their own with virtually no one else to turn to for support and protection, Frank and Cee have to rely on each other. Just as Hansel and Gretel are banished into the woods and left to their own devices, so are they forced to witness the black man's burial – metaphorically, the result of white society's cannibalism. Seeing the foot of the dead man being pushed into the grave by white men, his younger sister panicked and fell into a state of deep emotional shock. Before she was able to scream or give away their presence to the gravediggers, Frank "*hugged her shoulders tight and tried to pull her trembling into [his] own bones because, as a brother four years older, [he] thought [he] could handle it*" (H 4, her emphasis). Just like he defended Cee against Lenore and against anything harmful in Lotus throughout their childhood and adolescence, so he also tried to comfort her and act the strong male protector when, in fact, he too was severely traumatized and deeply hurt by this event. It is only years later that Frank admits to repressing his memories of this revolting experience: "*I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal*" (H 5, her emphasis). In stark contrast to the beauty, grace, sheer might, and dignity of the studs, which "*rose up*" (H 3, her emphasis) and "*stood like men*" (H 3/5, her emphasis) in their fight for mares, the lifeless body of the black man is pulled in a wheelbarrow, pushed into the grave, and buried by his

⁷⁴ I will discuss Frank and Cee's negative experiences in the wide/white world below in more depth.

white tormentors. Frank's vivid recollection of the horses can thus be seen as screen memory, a Freudian term "for a childhood memory whose apparently indifferent content screens from consciousness some (usually previous) significant emotional event" (*OED* s.v. "Screen Memory"). However, Frank's and Ycidra's not coming to terms with their childhood traumas – as is clearly evidenced in the burial scene – will not solve the problem. The ghosts of their pasts are going to haunt the siblings in their future and both will have to face them in order to overcome their traumas. For the time being, however, Frank and Cee eventually escaped Lotus' narrow confines and sought an exit: While Frank joined the United States Army and was deployed in Korea, Cee 'married' a man and followed him to Atlanta, Georgia.

Analogous to the Grimms' fairy-tale protagonists, the Money siblings encounter difficulties outside their parental home. Hansel and Gretel, for instance, have to face almost insurmountable obstacles in a hostile outer world such as a deep forest and a cannibalistic witch. Helpless and lost, the unknowing children turn to a familiar construction for nourishment and protection – an apparently welcoming house made of gingerbread right in the middle of the woods. The witch's place, however, functions as a clear antithesis to traditional understandings of houses as shelters as well as family places and thereby contributes to the overall ambivalence of the house that the Grimms' main characters have to experience: Instead of offering safety, rest, and food, both are held prisoners by the evil witch, Hansel is fattened by her, and Gretel has to do slave work for her. It is the children's cunning and solidarity that eventually frees them from the witch's clutches and enables them to return home. Parallel to their fairy-tale paragons, then, the displaced Frank and Ycidra Money turn to various well-known 'houses' in the United States – either literal or metaphorical ones. Both build up fragile and ill-fated intraracial love relationships, and both try to get along in the wide/white world: Frank as a soldier in the U.S. Army and Cee as a housemaid for Dr. Scott. Hence, as Valerie Smith states, "Frank and Cee move from one house to another, encountering the codes and exclusions of the landscape of 1950s America in the search for a home" (135).

While Hansel finds himself incarcerated by the witch in a cage, Frank is held as an inmate in an army hospital or mental asylum at the beginning of *Home*. Tied to his bed and under the influence of strong medication, he does not even remember why and how he was hospitalized in the first place. The only thing on his mind is a letter which reads, "Come fast. She be dead if you tarry" (*H* 8) – urging him to go on a rescue mission to save his sister Cee. Just like his fairy-tale counterpart tricks the witch into releasing him by poking out a bone instead of his

finger, Frank has to play a trick on the guards/nurses: In order to escape from this “nuthouse” (*H* 11), he fakes “a deep rhythmic snore” (*H* 7) to avoid further medical treatment. Succeeding in his scheme, he makes a bolt for the unlocked fire exit and flees to the nearby church with the suggestive name “AME Zion” (*H* 9) – the manifestation of the biblical Promised Land. There, Reverend John Locke and his wife Jean welcome him with open arms and ask him about the reason for his time in the hospital. Especially the tellingly named pastor functions as a typical fairy-tale guide or mentor who, in a laconic way, offers Frank valuable, if disillusioning, knowledge about white doctors (*H* 12), the U.S. Army (*H* 18), and the United States (*H* 19). As his seventeenth-century namesake’s philosophy is reflected in the founding documents of America, so the cleric’s insightful comments are surely to leave a deep impression on Frank’s view of the world. Upon the Lockes’ inquiry, it becomes clear that he has suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) ever since his return from Korea over a year ago and after his discharge from the armed forces. Contrary to his experiences on the frontlines, and next to the sheer thrill at earning money, the army held a different attraction for Frank: The war had offered him and his Lotus-friends Mike and Stuff the opportunity to escape their suffocating southern small town; it had promised them adventure, the comfort of fraternity of an ersatz family, and full entrance into adulthood. In short, it appeared to be “the only solution” (*H* 35).

Despite being racially segregated until after World War II, U.S. armed forces have always attracted large numbers of African Americans. As a result, all-black units have fought in every major conflict with American participation ever since the Civil War. Next to the promise of a steady income, an appeal that should by no means be underestimated when taking into account the historically rather precarious economical situation of considerable proportions of the U.S.’s black population, African American recruits were especially susceptible to war propaganda and deeply attracted by the commonly held belief in advancement opportunities within the armed forces. Spurred by official governmental rhetoric – from President Woodrow Wilson’s famous line justifying U.S. engagement in World War I in order ‘to make the world safe for democracy’ to his predecessor Harry Truman’s explanation of the Korean War that ‘Korea is the frontline between freedom and tyranny’ –, then, black men were motivated to fight their way into American society and prove their ‘worth’ to the American public (and their masculinity to themselves) through their service. This was especially true for African Americans enlisting for military service in Korea, the first war that would be fought with an integrated army after Truman had issued Executive Order 9981 in 1948, which officially abolished racial discrimination. The black soldiers’

experience of the war front as well as the home front, however, most often contradicted their hopes and aspirations and ridiculed America's self-image as the land of the free.

In their autobiographies, the highly decorated Korean War veterans Curtis Morrow and Evelyn Decker described their disappointment and frustration experienced within the armed forces and at home. While Morrow stated, "black soldiers soon realized the bitter irony of our situation – supposedly fighting to protect the freedom of American society, even as that freedom was denied us in our own country" (1), Decker described the dire effects of a *de facto* still segregated army (26/27) and her appalling experiences after being discharged:

When I got out of the army, there were still some places where I would not be served a glass of water even though during my thirteen years of service to my country I received the Army Campaign Medal; the World War II Victory Medal; Army Occupations Medal, both from Japan and Germany; the United Nations Service Medal; the National Defense Service Medal, and the Korean Service Medal with two Bronze Stars. (55)

Morrow's and Decker's personal experiences are further substantiated by an official investigation of several court-martial decisions against black GIs conducted by lawyer Thurgood Marshall. Reviewing several cases in which African Americans had received severe sentences, Marshall's report revealed racist attitudes and practices within the supposedly desegregated armed forces: Not only did white soldiers receive milder punishment for similar offenses, but the blacks accused were also not granted due process of law: No impartial hearings were held and some were not even allowed to give their testimony. Marshall sarcastically concluded, "even in Mississippi a Negro will get a trial longer than forty-two minutes, if he is fortunate enough to be brought to trial" (11).

These non-fictional accounts largely agree with Morrison's portrait of her Korean veteran Frank Money and his experiences as a soldier and repatriate. Throughout the novel, then, Frank's traumatic memories of the combat zone gradually unfold: the senseless killing at the frontlines, the anarchy on the battlefield, the loss of his two best friends, and – most dramatically – the loss of his innocence. Musing about his internment in the asylum, for instance, Frank wonders:

Other than that B-29 roar, exactly what he was doing to attract police attention was long gone. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone to a gentle couple offering help. If he wasn't in a fight was he peeing on the sidewalk? Hollering curses at some passerby, some schoolchildren? Was he banging his head on a wall or hiding behind bushes on somebody's backyard? [...] Had he thrown himself on the ground at the sudden sound of backfire? Perhaps he started a fight with a stranger or started weeping before trees – apologizing to them for acts he had never committed. (H 14/15)

Having received no psychological treatment from the discharge doctors (*H* 18), Frank is plagued by recurring and uncontrollable flashbacks which express themselves to his surroundings as inexplicable, outrageous behavior, aggressiveness, and/or prolonged periods of grieving. Repeatedly, he has to relive scenes from the war: “he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in [...]; or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama” (*H* 20). Further, Frank is wracked with survivor guilt. While his childhood friends Mike and Stuff lost their lives overseas, he believes that “His easy breath and unscathed self would be an insult to” (*H* 15) their families back in Lotus.

His deepest psychological wounds, however, are neither caused by combat nor by the deaths of his childhood “buddies” (*H* 16). The most severe effect of the Korean War on Frank is that it ultimately “changed him” (*H* 98). Where he was once Cee’s caring protector, good friend to his buddies, and a young and nervous soldier, on the battlefield, however, he “was reckless, lunatic, firing, dodging the scattered parts of men” (*ibid.*). In that war Frank lost his innocence and was turned into both a victim and a perpetrator: In hints and allusion throughout the novel, the reader slowly unearths his deeply buried memories of war crimes, guilt, and personal shame. Seeking revenge for his buddies, Frank shot unarmed civilians like “that one-legged man on a crutch hobbling at the edge of the road” (*H* 21). Moreover, he developed a blind hatred for Koreans in general as the following racial slurs indicate: “There were not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him” (*H* 98).

Most important, however, are his memories of a little Korean girl who strongly reminded him of Cee: While the Asian girl had two missing teeth (*H* 95), Frank kept two of Cee’s milk teeth as keepsakes in a matchbox (*H* 35/120). Time and again, the novel refers to her. Apparently, the Korean girl lived in a nearby village and scavenged for food among the army’s garbage when one of the soldiers killed her after she had offered to perform (or performed) fellatio on him (*H* 22, 76/77, 94-96). It is only late in the novel that Frank finally confesses that he was the murderer of the Korean girl, that she approached him sexually, and that – because he felt tempted – he was disgusted with himself (*H* 133/134). Just like the memory of the horses has screened the memory of the indecent burial of the dead black man, his grief for his dead friends has supplanted his recollections of the massacres and killings in which he participated. His experiences in the war leave him severely traumatized.⁷⁵ Not only

⁷⁵ From this point of view, the peculiar (non-) place of the Korean War in the U.S. psyche is striking: Sandwiched between the heroic efforts of World Wars I and II on the one hand and the traumatic shock of the Vietnam campaign on the other, this conflict is dubbed ‘the Forgotten War’ in American historiography – it is effectively screened from national consciousness.

do his memories of the combat zone resurface repeatedly – “They never went away, these pictures” (H 98) –, he is also haunted by the ghost of the dead Korean girl: When, at a church picnic, “a little girl with slanty eyes reached up over the opposite edge of the table to grab a cupcake” and gave Frank “a broad smile of thanks, he dropped his food and ran through the crowd” (H 76/77).

The U.S. Army could not meet his many hopes and high expectations. For one thing, he and his Lotus-friends did not find a home there and the much-cited ‘band of brothers’ dissolved in the mayhem and anarchy of the frontlines. His return to the United States, for another thing, has to be seen as representative for that of many African Americans discharged from military service – black soldiers who have perceived wars as guideways to full participation within the American nation and therefore fought in every conflict from the Revolutionary War onwards. Having fought for his country in an integrated army, side by side with white and black soldiers, Frank – or, by extension, the Black Veteran *per se* – returned to a still strictly segregated United States. Valerie Smith, therefore, sums up Frank’s predicament:

Afraid of being arrested for vagrancy if he is found standing or walking outside with no apparent purpose, forbidden entry to public restrooms, waiting rooms, and hotels, he is unwelcome in the country he risked his life to defend. The country to which he returned is not his home. (133)

Left to his own devices, Frank’s revolting experiences in the Korean War cannot be integrated into a coherent life narrative; consequently, his very identity is fractured and he is a broken man.⁷⁶ Plagued by survivor guilt and ashamed of himself, he is caught in a state of suspense – safely returned home to the United States, yet unable to return home to Lotus – and seeks temporary distractions from his traumas by turning to and finding relief in alcohol, gambling, and simply killing time (H 15/68). A less self-destructive way of coping seemed to be his ill-faded relationship to Lillian Florence Jones, in whose company he “*felt like [he]’d come home*” (68, her emphasis).

Parallel to Frank’s Georgia hometown, his girlfriend’s name evokes a strong flower imagery: While her second name is derived from the Latin verb *floreo*, which means ‘to

⁷⁶ The recurring motif of the zoot-suiter supports this interpretation. Throughout the novel, this image appears at crucial moments when Frank questions his understanding of masculinity. For instance on the train to Chicago, when an insulted black man is believed to beat up his wife, who had witnessed his humiliation and tried to save him (H 24-27); during the night after his conversation with the adolescent Thomas Watson, when Frank realizes that the next generation of black males may become educated and self-confident professionals whose manhood is not built on mere physical prowess (H 31-34); and finally at the proper burial of the dead black man in the end of the novel, when he has laid to rest the ghost of his past (H 144).

blossom' (*Stowasser* s.v. "Floreo"), her first name Lillian even directly refers to Lotus. In Catholic tradition, the lily is a symbol for Virgin Mary signifying purity and creation. The lily can thus be interpreted as a literal replacement of the more ancient flower symbol of the lotus, since both have comparable symbolic meanings and are closely associated with divinity. Lily Jones – quite tellingly, Frank only addresses her by her nickname – has certain healing qualities and for quite some time exerted a positive influence on Frank; consequently, he willingly moved into her house and entered the metaphoric home of relationship. Firstly, with Lily he felt needed and could resort to his well-established behavior of the protector. In her presence, he felt strong and loved her vulnerability – "*the small breakable things inside [her]*" (*H* 67, her emphasis). In this respect, Lily may not only be interpreted as a proxy for Lotus, but also for Ycidra. Secondly, her love partly relieved Frank from his PTSD-related traumas (*H* 20) and she did have a decidedly positive influence on him as Frank admits: "*Something about her floored me, made me want to be good enough for her*" (*H* 69, her emphasis).

This effect, however, is only short-lived and Lily ultimately failed to cure Frank from his wounds. Since "Lily had never asked about the war and he had never brought it up" (*H* 77), many things remained unspoken between them and her influence on Frank has to be read *cum grano salis*. Even though Frank's behavior improved in her presence and he even softened (*H* 68), her love, as it transpires, provides only a distraction: "Only with Lily did these pictures fade, moved behind a screen in his brain, pale but waiting, waiting and accusing" (*H* 21). Instead of coming to terms with his traumas under the guidance and support of his love interest, they both evade the topic. Comparable to the drugs in the asylum, which do not tackle the root problems but merely suppress them by curing the symptoms of Frank's psychological stress, then, he describes their relationship in the following terms: "He was now convinced his attachment to her was medicinal, like swallowing aspirin" (*H* 107). Thus, a certain emotional distance characterizes their relationship: While Frank was simply unable to completely open up in front of Lily, she was likewise not able to muster enough understanding for his situation: Eventually, she began "to feel annoyance" (*H* 75) and "resentment" (*H* 79), and both were quite relieved after their separation. Hence, Lily has an ambivalent impact on Frank and it appears that she offers him what only the real lotus/Lotus can accomplish: psychological wholeness and healing.

Without protection and assurance from her older brother, Cee, in turn, became lonely and isolated in Lotus: "Feeling adrift in the space where her brother had been, she had no defense" (*H* 48). Therefore, she fell in love with a young man named Principal, who spent some time at

his aunt's place in her rural hometown for unspecified reasons, and called himself Prince. At the age of fourteen, she rushed into marriage with him. Just as Lily Jones can be regarded as her replacement, so do I interpret Prince as a substitute for Frank. Unlike her protective and caring brother, however, Prince is a self-centered person who "loved himself so deeply, so completely" (ibid.) and married Cee "for an automobile" (H 49). It is only a few weeks into their marriage that she was left behind by him – his departure turning the 'house' of their marriage into a prison or hermitage: "She was all alone now [...] while Prince was cruising around with his thin-soled shoes pressing the gas pedal in California or New York, for all she knew" (H 50). Her upstairs neighbor Thelma, who, comparable to John Locke, functions as a spiritual guide to the forsaken young woman, is the only person who is able to penetrate Cee's solitude and isolation. It is she who helped Cee to find a job, who offered her friendship and, more importantly, companionship, and whose harsh love challenged the younger female into accepting responsibility for her own life. Lastly, Thelma also made Cee finally *see*. Punning on the well-known fairy tale "The Frog Prince," the older woman opened Ycidra's eyes to reality: "'Prince.' Thelma snorted. 'You mean Frog. I've seen no-counts by the truckload. Never saw anybody more useless than him. Do you even know where he is?'" (H 56).

Having had her wake-up call, Cee takes charge of her life and begins to plan for a better future. From Thelma, she learns about a white couple in Buckhead, a suburb of Atlanta, who "want a maid-type person to help the husband" (H 57) and Cee regards this as an ideal opportunity to improve her poor economical condition. This, however, resembles a move from present danger to even worse peril: The white suburban bliss of the Scotts' neighborhood turns out to be a black hell and the neat façade of the family crumbles and reveals a horrible interior.

Residential areas around the cities' peripheries mushroomed into existence all over the United States during the 1950s. Perceived as enclaves and paradises of the white middle class, they also became markers of social exclusion, where black people were only allowed to perform menial work.⁷⁷ Frank, on his way to rescue Cee, takes a bus to Buckhead and is struck by his fellow passengers and witnesses the following:

It was 7:30 a.m. when he boarded a bus filled with silent dayworkers, housekeepers, maids, and grown lawn boys. Once beyond the business part of the city, they dropped of the bus one by one like reluctant divers inviting blue water high above the pollution

⁷⁷ When Lily Jones, for instance, had saved enough money to finally afford her own house in a respected part of town, the real estate agent has to inform her about the house owner's racist policy: "No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or Asiatic race excepting only employees in domestic service" (73, underlined in original).

below. Down there they would search out the debris, the waste, resupply the reefs, and duck the predators swimming through lacy fronds. They would, clean, cook, serve, mind, launder, weed, and mow. (*H* 109)

Apparently located above the smog of the downtown districts, this supposedly idyllic section of Atlanta becomes an ironically ‘inviting blue water’ full of ‘debris,’ ‘waste,’ and ‘predators’ for the African American workers. Especially the oxymoronic expression ‘grown lawn boys’ further highlights their place of servitude and subordination: Once their day’s work is done and they have completed all the tasks that the white inhabitants of this section of the town do not want to do themselves, they have to leave or drown – or become prey.

The discrepancy between Buckhead’s outward beauty and its inherent threats is underlined by the fact that the second KKK’s headquarters were located in this uptown area of Atlanta in the 1920s and 30s. Housing a terror organization that was heir to a movement responsible for thousands of lynchings, which openly and aggressively intimidated African Americans (e.g., with burning crosses), and which employed a rhetoric firmly rooted in (pseudo-) scientific racism, this residential area becomes the very heart of darkness for African Americans. Moreover, the Scotts’ “large two-story house rising above a church-neat lawn” (*H* 58) bears a striking resemblance to an antebellum-style home that served as the Klan’s ‘Imperial Palace’ (Kessler Barnard 61/62).

Cee’s living conditions, then, further expose the downsides of the Scotts’ mansion’s grandeur. Impressed and thus blinded by the building and its inhabitants, she does not recognize the danger she is in and believes that theirs is “a good, safe place” (*H* 65). However, her first entering into this house as well as her room should undoubtedly sound the reader’s alarm. She has to enter the Scotts’ place through the backdoor, historically the door that house slaves had to use (*H* 58), and her private chamber resembles a prison cell: “Down a hall not far from the doctor’s office was Cee’s room, spotless, narrow, and without windows” (*H* 62). The Scott’s aristocratic mansion is thus turned into a fairy-tale like witch’s house – a house that lures Cee in with its sheer beauty and luxury, but also a place that will strip her of her humanity.⁷⁸

The owners of this dubious place appear to be the very emblems of upper-class philanthropy at first sight: While Mrs. Scott, who “has all the money” (*H* 61), is the rich sponsor of the supposedly humanitarian efforts of her husband, Dr. Beauregard Scott’s

⁷⁸ Viewed in this light, there is yet another striking resemblance between Morrison’s *Home* and the Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel.” The hunger that drew the siblings to the witch’s gingerbread house is paralleled by Cee’s voracious appetite upon entering the Scott’s house (*H* 61).

professions – he is “a scientist as well as a doctor” (ibid.) – seemingly commit him to knowledge and healing. Both purport to be engaged in the uplift and progress of humankind, define themselves in terms of their philanthropic fervor, and thereby secure their social rank among the town’s leading white families. Dr. and Mrs. Scott also exert a decisive influence on their surroundings: Cee, for instance, compares the wife to a “queen” (*H* 60) and admires the husband’s kindness, intelligence, and generosity (*H* 64/65). Just like their house’s neat façade needs to be penetrated in order to uncover its dark secrets, however, the Scotts aristocratic and philanthropic auras have to be closely scrutinized.

Cee’s first meeting with Mrs. Scott resembles an audience that a commoner would have had with a noblewoman: Being received in an expensive living room, Cee is interviewed by Mrs. Scott who, throughout that scene, adopts a pose of utmost dignity and noblesse: “Mrs. Scott, her hands resting on a tiny pillow, her ankles crossed, nodded and, with a forefinger, invited Cee to sit” (*H* 59). The luxurious room and her posture function as power symbols that clearly assign certain roles to the people present. While Mrs. Scott underlines her social rank and takes control of the situation – after all, she is the one who is going to decide Cee’s fate –, her young African American counterpart has to play a subordinate, passive role: Cee has to answer her questions and she receives Mrs. Scott’s orders (*H* 59/60). Hence, they assume the roles of mistress and servant, respectively.

Yet, an analogy between the room and Mrs. Scott on the one hand and movie theaters and movies in general on the other cast a different light on the entire scene: Cee remarks that the “living room [...] seemed to her more beautiful than a movie theatre” (*H* 59) and that Mrs. Scott “looked every bit the queen of something who belonged in the movies” (*H* 60). Apparently, then, neither the house nor its owner are real, both seem to act a part, both cannot be taken at face value. In this respect, Mrs. Scott’s gestures reach a completely different level of meaning. Beckoning with one’s index finger, for example, usually translates to a request to come close or an invitation. In this particular interview scene, however, said hand sign conveys condescension as well as luring and enticement: It is a gesture that is most often associated with witches, demons, and devilish characters in fairy tales. Her aristocratic air and dignity are thus revealed to be mere snobbish cloaks for her racist and ignorant, her true personality. Concealed under her noble aloofness, she harbors discriminatory feelings toward African Americans (*H* 59), does not know anything about her husband’s experiments (*H* 60), and is said to be addicted to drugs (*H* 65).

Lastly, her pretentious behavior throughout this entire scene is exposed by television shows that she watches regularly. Spending most of her time watching the epitomes of TV's golden age – the *Milton Berle Show*, as well as the sitcoms *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy* –, Mrs. Scott is portrayed as a quite average white American, as anything but the queen-like character that she aspires to, a person who merely revels in the pulp-fictional productions of the fifties. According to Ronald Berman, then, sitcoms function as mirror images of American society:

The sitcom [...] is supposed to “relate” to its audience. It does so in a number of ways, first by creating characters who are supposed to resemble and to represent the audience. Second, it dramatizes events or conditions (for example the conflict of female liberation with male chauvinism) which provide motivation for a plot. Third, the sitcom suggests an attitude towards things and toward ourselves.” (6)

At first, it seems strange that Mrs. Scott enjoys *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy*, shows that can be analyzed as the representations of the working class put onto the stage. While these sitcoms do not appear to reflect her own living conditions, the plot of both sitcoms, however, informs the reader about her view on the relationship to her husband: On the one hand, *The Honeymooners* features an incompetent man, Ralph, who unsuccessfully attempts to get rich; *I Love Lucy*, on the other hand, centers on Lucy, a would-be show star. It is hardly surprising, then, that Mrs. Scott chooses the first over the second since she cannot accept to identify herself with the inapt wife. Her TV habits uncover her secrets: She lives in a fabricated world, a bubble screened off from reality, and invents her own persona. Since Mrs. Scott is merely acting a part, has no occupation, and wastes her time, she remains an empty, hollow character. Throughout the novel, consequently, the reader does not get to know her first name and she is reduced to a mere shadow in the dubious antebellum mansion. Her character also exposes the hypocrisy and shallowness of old money in the American South, an elite who grew rich on cash crops based on slave labor, and failed to live up to their lofty, chivalric rhetoric. The parallels between her house and her very personality lend support to that interpretation: Just as the neat façade of the grand mansion conceals its darker history, so Mrs. Scott attempts to cloak her ignorance and racist beliefs under a bourgeois, benign disguise. She is thus characterized by contradictions and inconsistencies. Remaining a highly ambivalent person, her supposedly philanthropic enthusiasm and humanitarian commitment are called into question.

Parallel to his wife, Dr. Beauregard Scott, presumably a gynecologist, turns out to be a dubious character as well. On the one hand, Cee is fond of her new employer and Sarah

Williams, the Scotts' long-time black maid, states, "Dr. Beau – that's what everybody calls him – is very gentlemanly" (*H* 61). He seems to be not only a kind but also an affable person – the very fact that he accepts being addressed a nickname and the meaning of the name itself seem to suggest a certain friendliness after all. A closer look at his first name, on the other hand, leads to a reevaluation of this scientist-doctor. Derived from French, *Beauregard* roughly translated to 'beautiful outlook.' For one thing, this can be taken as a reference to his splendid house, his position as a respected physician, and his place of high regard within the white community of Atlanta. For another thing, however, his first name might also constitute a possible reference to P. G. T. *Beauregard*, a General of the Confederate States Army and hero of Fort Sumter as well as the First Battle of Bull Run. Viewed in this light, then, Dr. Scott is described as a right-wing conservative who does not only embrace the Confederacy and the Southern society based on slavery it defended, but also strongly opposes politically other-minded people.⁷⁹ Since he is a "heavyweight Confederate" (*H* 62), a man who lives in a place strikingly similar to the former KKK-headquarters, and husband of a woman who belongs to the old money elite of the South, the above-mentioned positive picture of him needs to be strongly questioned and subsequently reevaluated.

While Cee believes in his altruistic motivations and his affirmation of the Hippocratic oath by boldly stating, "I guess that's why he invents things – he wants to help other folks" (*H* 63), Mrs. Scott's and Sarah's observations trouble the sugarcoated picture of a humanitarian scientist-doctor. When Mrs. Scott interviews Cee, for instance, she comments on the importance and significance of her husband's experiments – ironically, without knowing anything about them specifically – and states, "His inventions help people" (*H* 60). The very next sentence, however, turns this assertion upside down. Referring to Mary Shelley's eccentric scientist who conducts rather unorthodox experiments and most famously creates a monster out of the body parts of diseased people, she claims: "He's no Dr. Frankenstein" (*ibid.*). Equating her husband with a self-proclaimed scientist, she risks reducing his work to absurdity. Her statement ties in with Reverend John Locke's laconic remarks about the morally questionable conduct of doctors in the U.S. Talking to Frank about his time in the asylum/hospital, he states, "Well, you know, doctors need to work on the dead poor so they can help the live rich" (*H* 12). Mrs. Scott's comment can thus be interpreted as an answer to certain rumors that have spread about her husband's experiments – rumors that discredit his

⁷⁹ His rejection of a former employee as a "fellow traveler" (*H* 62), that is, a sympathizer of the Communist Party of the United States, for instance, can be read in the socio-historic context of the Red Scare and McCarthyism of the 1950s – an extremely conservative and reactionary period at the beginning of the Cold War, when political dissent was all too often wrongly and hastily equated with communist infiltration.

scientific reputation and that arouse suspicions about his work. Apparently, then, she is trying to uphold the neat façade of the Scott family when interviewing a potential new employee with Cee.⁸⁰

The Scotts' long-time maid Sarah Williams also casts a dubious light on them. Having worked for the white couple for the larger part of her life (*H* 61/62), her realization that Dr. Beau's treatment of Cee might be wrong surfaces only slowly – and causes her great pain. Throughout her life with the Scotts, she has been fond of her work and has never questioned her employers. When she has to notice Cee's dramatic decline in health, however, she begins to grow suspicious: Worried about Dr. Scott's strange experiments on Cee, Sarah, for instance, wonders, “when he got so interested in wombs in general, constructing instruments to see farther and farther into them” (*H* 113). Finally recognizing her erstwhile complicity – her docility and conformity, after all, made Dr. Scott's inhumane treatment of Cee possible, at least partly –, she “blamed herself almost as much as she blamed Dr. Beau” (*H* 112).⁸¹ By sending a letter to Frank and also by playing a vital part in the rescue scene (*H* 111), she eventually (re-) assumes the role of the fairy-tale mentor and guide – parallel to John Locke and Thelma –, after having fathomed the doctor's real intentions and his decidedly negative influence on Cee's health. Ycidra therefore rightfully believes that she has “become her family, her friend, and her confidante” (*H* 65). Hence, Mrs. Scott's and especially Sara Williams' comments contradict the Scotts' whitewashed self-image and further ridicule Dr. Beau's scientific integrity – instead of the benevolent healer, this gynecologist turns out to be a misanthropic ‘evil witch doctor.’

While most of the characters in *Home* reach this conclusion, only Cee is unable to *see* through him and her impaired vision stylizes her boss as a philanthropist: Frank, for instance, calls Dr. Scott an “evil doctor” (*H* 120/122) twice and the female community of Lotus categorically refers to him as “devil” and “bandit doctor” (*H* 126/128), both without ever really getting to know him. Just as Cee was wrong about the Scotts' mansion, however, she stands in awe at his alleged altruistic motivation to help other people, and especially women, and remains blind to the truth. This is best exemplified by her admiration of Dr. Scott's

⁸⁰ According to Praver, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be interpreted “as a symptom of the ‘cultural neuroses’ of the nineteenth century, the fear of science, fear of the control of natural forces, without adequate corresponding control of the soul and psyche” (19). As such, Dr. Scott and his apparently pseudo-scientific racism can be seen as contemporary adaptations of an immoral scientist.

⁸¹ There is a strong metaphor for Sarah's unknowing complicity in Cee's predicament. During the latter's first week at the Scotts', Sarah cuts a ‘female’ melon foreshadowing Dr. Scott's inhuman experiments on Cee: “Sarah slid a long, sharp knife from a drawer and, with intense anticipation of the pleasure to come, cut the girl in two” (*H* 66).

bookshelves: Thumbing through the titles in his office, she stumbles upon three books dealing with eugenics, racial hygiene, and scientific racism – Hermann Joseph Muller’s *Out of the Night* (1935), in which the author promoted his idea of ‘positive eugenics,’ that is, reproduction of (supposedly) genetically higher advanced, of course white, people; Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), a book that forwarded the pseudo-scientific theory of so-called ‘Nordic superiority;’ and Theodosius Dobzhansky’s *Heredity, Race, and Society* (1946), a signer of the UNESCO’s *The Race Question*, who argues against eugenics in his work (H 65). From this collection it can be inferred that Dr. Scott is greatly interested in eugenics and that the supposedly benevolent scientist and doctor apparently believes in some form of human engineering – either through genetic improvement of the human gene pool or through (forced) abortions.⁸² Despite the fact that she does not know the meaning of the word ‘eugenics,’ Cee is impressed by Dr. Scott’s seemingly immense knowledge, symbolized by his well-stocked library, and pities her own poor education, when what she actually needs is insights into human nature rather than formal schooling.

Her dependence on other people, her ignorance, and her passivity are equally results of Lotus’ role as an ambivalent home and Frank’s misunderstood brotherly love. While, through the lack of a supportive family, Cee was unable to decode the former’s instructions into helpful guidelines for a better life and experienced the (female) community’s advices as bossiness, her brother’s over-protectiveness leaves her practically defenseless throughout her life. She states: “That’s the other side, she thought, of having a smart, tough brother close at hand to take care of and protect you – you are slow to develop your own brain muscle” (H 48). Thus, Cee has to painfully realize that Frank’s “devotion shielded her, [but] did not strengthen her” (H 129).⁸³ Paradoxically, then, Frank’s protective instincts leave her especially vulnerable to men: First, she fell for a ‘Frog Prince’ and then she was tricked by an evil witch doctor into his house, when she should have been highly suspicious of both of them from the very beginning. The first question that Dr. Scott, for instance, asked her was,

⁸² This is especially striking since the Scotts’ two daughters are said to suffer from “Cephalitis” (H 63), presumably referring to the disease hydrocephaly, which can cause severe damage to the brain, and thus have to live in an asylum away from their parents. In any case, premature death or acute diseases of their offspring and infertility of the parents seems to be a common ‘punishment’ for self-proclaimed philanthropists in African American fiction: Mr. Norton’s late daughter in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Mrs. Thrush’s barrenness in Wideman’s *The Cattle Killing*, the childless bachelor and spinster Bodwin in Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Jacob and Rebekka Vaark in *A Mercy*, who had to lay to rest all of their children – all of these examples may come to mind in this respect.

⁸³ Concerning this, Frank’s assuming the role of Cee’s guardian can be interpreted as a selfish act: Through her, he was able to develop a positive self-image and to restore a coherent identity based on a childish sense of heroism, bravery, and innocence despite all the things he has done ever since. All the while, however, he has treated his sister as “his pet kitten” (H 88) and she has been “a shadow for most of [his] life, a presence marking its own absence” (H 103, her emphasis).

“whether she had children or had been with a man” (*H* 64), foreshadowing his obscene and cruel experiments.

Dr. Beauregard Scott – literally the man with a hunch for the beautiful – is exposed as a racist charlatan who is more than willing to sacrifice Cee’s life for his shady purposes. When, finally, he can no longer hide his true self while facing Frank during the rescue scene, the neat façade of the respectable, upright scientist-doctor crumbles: “The doctor raised the gun and pointed it at what in his fear ought to have been flaring nostrils, foaming lips, and red-rimmed eyes of a savage. Instead he saw the quiet, even serene, face of a man not to be fooled with” (*H* 111). Unable to disguise his racist stereotypes, he expects Frank to unleash his brutish fury. The latter, however, does not revert to violence in order to save his sister and simply carries her out of the witch doctor’s basement.

The markedly non-violent rescue gives Frank a feeling of “deep satisfaction” (*H* 114) and (moral) superiority: His almost mythic appearance – “Exactly the way the old folks said: not when you call Him; not when you want Him; only when you need Him and right on time” (*H* 113) – portrays him in the style of a comic book superhero and for the first time he has really earned his nickname ‘Smart.’ Yet, Frank and Ycidra have still a home to find. Because both have not had the benefit of experiencing the comforting warmth of what Bachelard has termed the first house during their childhood, they have been on the lookout for such a place for all of their lives. Throughout Morrison’s *Home*, both have tried out different actual or metaphoric homes: While Frank enlisted in the fraternal home of the U.S. Army and entered the house of Lily, Cee rushed into marriage and worked in a suburban home-turned-hell. Both their (intra-racial) relationships and the wide/white world – signified by the army and the Scotts’ grand mansion –, however, prove to be futile attempts to find a supportive home. In their despair, the siblings return to Lotus, the only place left for a severely traumatized war veteran and a physically wounded ex-maid to turn to for healing and help. Their return home, however, is not the triumphant return of Hansel and Gretel, who enter the repentant father’s house, purged of the presence of the evil stepmother, with innumerable riches and thereby restore the nuclear family: The Money siblings are beaten and battered by the wide/white world, their parents are long dead, they are practically penniless, and Lenore, their evil step-grandmother, is still alive. Therefore, their home is not a fairy-tale-like given, not a place one can take for granted. It is not as much a geographical place as a mental state, a place of psychological healing and wholeness that the mature Frank and Ycidra can only reach in collaboration with the African American community of Lotus.

Home's most striking deviation from the Grimms' fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" is that the evil step grandmother does not have to die in order to turn the formerly unhomey house into a supportive, stable home. Instead, Lenore Money, the miserly 'wicked witch,' is 'punished' in a different way: Without a family and even without the company of her second husband Salem – Frank and Cee's biological grandfather –, she spends most of her days just by herself. Throughout her life in Lotus, she has maintained a certain distance to the female community and thought herself better than them, because she is propertied and indeed moneyed, so that the community also fail to be appropriate company for her: "It was too late to curry friendship with neighboring women, who she had made sure knew their levels and hers. [...] Now she had to be content with the company of the person that she prized most of all – herself" (*H* 92). Finally, when even her home help Jackie deserts her after Lenore mistreated her dog, she finds herself eventually home alone – a dangerous state of existence, as she has to learn the hard way: With no one to look after her, with no one to share her company, with no one, ultimately, who loves her besides herself, she suffers from a "minor stroke", that nevertheless causes her severe physical damage, since she received medical treatment only "after a long, perilous wait" (*ibid.*). Unable to talk, walk, and even wash herself, Lenore's misanthropy has confined her to her bed; ironically enough, she now has to rely on the philanthropy of the Lotus women whom she has despised all her life. Despite the open hostility that she has shown them, the female black community still takes care of her, provides food, cleans her house, does her laundry, and keeps her alive (*ibid.*).

While the root of all evil in the Grimms' fairy tale is identified as the stepmother – some critics even claim that she and the evil witch are, in fact, closely related or even identical in most published versions of this tale (Zipes 210-212) –, things are of course more complex in Morrison's novel. It can be argued that the very source of Frank's and Cee's hapless journey through America is not Lenore and it becomes clear that *Home* defies a Manichaean worldview that turns good and evil into binary, mutually exclusive entities: Instead, Lotus is strong enough to shelter Lenore; knowing the latter's faults and also knowing about the divine punishment for 'the pride which goeth before the fall' (*H* 92), the female circle around the leading figure Ethel Fordham stretches out their hands to a member gone astray – just like the Bottom community shuns but does not expel Sula in Morrison's eponymous novel. In any case, the (female) community's caring for Lenore can be interpreted as paradigmatic for Frank and Cee's homecoming: Despite the fact that both have rejected the community as youngsters, they are now welcomed by it with open arms, are given its immediate attention, are offered valuable advice, and are finally reintegrated into said Lotus-community.

Parallel to the Grimms' fairy-tale protagonists, Frank and Cee return as changed persons to Lotus: Not only have they lost their childish innocence and looked into the abysses of white America, but they also return with the benefit of having made their own experiences outside their rural hometown. And just as the saying goes, it is only the view of one's home from a distance that eventually leads to a fuller appreciation of it. As a result, there is a considerable turn in Frank's and Cee's perception of this Georgian small-town from a decidedly negative to an ever more positive image.

To the young Frank and Cee, Lotus is a stagnant, stifling, and confining place; a town that is, in a manner of speaking, only the place that grants them asylum and will forever be connected to memories of their forced removal from Texas; a place that is characterized by a marked absence of their parents and of family love – in short, a place that will never be their true home (*H* 15/16, 50, and 83/84). Both leave Lotus behind on a quest to find a place that may serve as their home – only to be rejected, humiliated, and changed along this way. Consequently, Frank and Cee, caught in a harmful limbo, are virtually homeless throughout most parts of Morrison's novel: A feeling of restlessness and dislocatedness, for example, plagues Frank and prevents him from establishing healthy and intimate relationships with other people. Severely traumatized by his war experiences, he is utterly unable to open up to Lily (*H* 75-79), isolates himself, and becomes addicted to alcohol.

While traveling across the United States on his way to the South, however, Frank feels increasingly at ease with other people and his surroundings; hence, his meetings and conversations with African Americans as well as the impressions of the land around him, which he practically absorbs, usher in a slow process of change that eventually culminates in his deep and heartfelt appraisal of Lotus. The first people in a long list of black helpers are Reverend John Locke and his wife Jean, who actually set Frank's sojourn in motion: They feed him, warm him up, provide him with clothes, money, and advice, and give him directions for the first stage in his journey to Georgia (*H* 11-19). Next, Frank meets Taylor, a friendly conductor on the train to Chicago, Illinois, who gives him valuable information about the metropolis he is about to enter as well as some liquor to comfort him (*H* 25-27). Lastly, there is Billy Watson whom Frank meets in Chicago: Even though both are perfect strangers, Billy insists on hosting him, introduces Frank to his family, and helps him find his way through the 'Windy City' (*H* 29-37).

Just like Frank appears to change toward being more ready to engage with other people as he gets closer to Chicago, so does the landscape around him appear to change, too. Before, he

recalls a moment shortly after his return from Korea when the land was suddenly and unexpectedly drained of all color (*H* 23/24) and even on the Greyhound bus from Seattle, Washington, to Portland, Oregon, the landscape reminds him of his war-related traumas (*H* 20). Chicago, afterwards then, appears to mark a turnaround in Frank's perception of his physical surroundings. Historically, the Windy City has attracted millions of African Americans from the South and has thus been one of the centers of black life and culture in the American North ever since the days of the Great Migration. It is hardly surprising, then, that Frank describes Booker's diner, a restaurant that was recommended to him by Taylor, as a place where African Americans could eat and talk "with the ease of family in their own kitchen" (*H* 27). Booker's caters to the needs of their customers in more than one way: Besides offering the welcoming familiarity of soul food, that is, food which is traditionally served in the South, it provides a space for comfortable "down-home friendliness" (*H* 28). While Frank perceived Seattle as a cold, lonely, and potentially threatening place, Chicago is characterized by a familiarity and intimacy that reminds him strongly of the black, southern way of life.⁸⁴ This trend is further pronounced the farther south Frank travels. Disembarking the train in Atlanta, for example, he admires the relaxed rhythm of this city, whose pace seems to match Frank's:

Apparently there was time in this city. Time to roll a cigarette just so, time to examine vegetables with the eye of a diamond cutter. And time for old men to gather outside a storefront and do nothing but watch their dreams go by: the gorgeous cars of criminals and the hip-sway of women. Time, too, to instruct one another, pray for one another, and chastise children in the pews of a hundred churches. It was that amused affection that led him drop his guard. (*H* 106)

As a youngster, Frank used to be annoyed and disgusted by what he perceived as Lotus' inertia and lethargy (*H* 83/84); now, however, the tranquility of this southern city strongly appeals to him and he 'drops his guard.' While being caught off-guard entails some dangers, this phrase could also be interpreted as an internal change: Casting off his soldier's uniform, Frank is now able to leave his extremely violent past – and identity – of a warrior behind, to reintegrate into a community, and to finally restore his original, inherently gentle identity. Nevertheless, African Americans in *Home* are not unanimously mentors and guides and even the South is by no means a utopian paradise: Despite the friendliness, hospitality, and comfort Frank experiences on his way to the South, he also meets Reverend Jessie Maynard in

⁸⁴ Even white police forces treat African Americans with more respect here: In Seattle, Frank had been arrested, put into an asylum, and even stripped of his money, but in Chicago they leave him alone after discovering his service medal (*H* 36/37). This, however, is by no means intended to justify the police's brutality and arbitrariness – after all, Billy's son Thomas was shot by a white officer and is left with a dead arm in consequence of this (*H* 31).

Portland, who is strongly suspicious of this ragged visitor and from whom he receives “no love” (*H* 22). His growing ease and relief are disrupted twice: First, he gets into a fight with a pimp near Chattanooga, Tennessee (*H* 101/102), and then some hoodlums assault him in Atlanta (*H* 106/107). This seems to suggest that danger and evil linger not only in the wide/white world, but also among black people ‘down home’ in the South.⁸⁵

These negative experiences notwithstanding, Frank, without consciously realizing it, starts to look on the southern way of life with evermore appreciative eyes. Upon his return to Lotus, he is startled by the sheer beauty, gaiety, and liveliness of the place he once so deeply despised:

It was so bright, brighter than he remembered. [...] children still laughed, ran, shouted their games; women sang in their backyards while pinning wet sheets on clotheslines; occasionally a soprano was joined by a neighboring alto or a tenor just passing by. [...] every front yard and backyard sported flowers protecting vegetables from disease and predators. (*H* 117)

Under the influence of the joyful, protective, and benevolent atmosphere of his hometown, and comforted by certain powerful images that are used to characterize this place – plays, music, food, and a vivid flora –, Frank is amazed at the buzzing life of Lotus, the place that had been a dead end in his imagination: “Color, silence, and music enveloped him” (*H* 118). Again, he comments on the slower pace, which is for him no longer an appalling but now an appealing characteristic of Lotus, and even looks more favorably on field work and cotton picking, the main occupations in this rural town which he once abhorred (*H* 120). Before his wide eyes, then, Lotus transforms from a life-threatening and suffocating place into an inherently philanthropic one – the place of oblivion in Western tradition, Homer’s land of the Lotophagi, is turned into the very essence of the symbolic plant of Eastern religious cosmology.

Lotus’ “safety and goodwill” (*H* 118) as well as its enduring strength – characteristics that clearly distinguish it from Frank’s former impression of some Georgian small-town-town as well as from the malevolent (white) world – are most vividly expressed in a metaphor’s about the sun, which is “menacing Lotus [and] torturing its landscape” (*H* 117): “the malevolent

⁸⁵ After Frank has been mugged in Atlanta, he receives help from a racially unspecified man whom he calls “Samaritan” (*H* 107). Since the biblical parable centers on altruistic help from an unexpected other – in Jesus’ story a Samaritan helps a robbed Jew, an ethnic group strongly despised by Jews (Lk. 10:29-37) – the mysterious man in Morrison’s *Home* may be white. One could argue that this, then, is meant to tentatively promote a deeper understanding and a mutual feeling of compassion among the races in U.S. society. One could even go so far as to speculate whether the Samaritan’s “long ponytail” (*H* 107) is to be taken as a foreshadowing of a more liberal minded white society in the 1960s.

sun,” tellingly located in a *white* heaven, tries to burn out the “blessed peace” and “pleasure” Frank experiences all around him, but ultimately fails (*H* 118). Protected by almost elemental forces, Lotus may not be a town of easy living, it may not offer much comfort to its inhabitants, and it may not even be the prettiest place on earth to the eyes of an outsider, *but* it is the one place where Frank and Cee actually can prosper, heal and endure – thus, it becomes their *home*. Frank therefore concludes: “he could not believe how much he had once hated this place. Now it seemed to him both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding” (*H* 132).

Frank and Ycidra come to accept that their home is not a fixed spot on the map, but a psychological state of mind that only the knowledgeable and experienced can reach. Moreover, their home is nothing that they should take for granted; instead, the siblings will have to work hard to establish and maintain it – which implies that they will have to come to terms with their pasts, since Lotus’ strength and future rely on an intimate knowledge of history. Even though this trend is true for both, there is still one profound difference in their impressions on Lotus: While Frank’s outlook seems to be rather global or impersonal – his change is largely centered on a reevaluation of his perception’s of the surroundings –, Cee’s is clearly attached to the people inhabiting Lotus. She negatively remembers her step grandmother and becomes positively connected to the female community. While he feels the place, she feels the people; consequently, he toils the land, while she knits a quilt.

Even though Frank and Cee’s returning to Lotus in Morrison’s *Home* clearly deviates from the Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel” in more than one instance (e.g., survival of step grandmother vs. death of stepmother; return of battered and beaten protagonists vs. triumphant return of main characters; the home as an ideal which one has to strive for vs. the home as something natural and given), the novel nevertheless retains one central aspect of its fairy-tale intertext: In the end, both narratives question their siblings’ relationships. While Gretel took the lead at the witch’s place, tricked her, rescued her brother, and even knew how to navigate across the wide water, Cee seems to be the one who is saved by her older brother, the person who has always protected her and cared for her. The last five chapters of *Home*, however, contradict this view: Chapter thirteen, which reads almost like a duet between Frank and his sister, triggers the former’s confession that he, in fact, killed the little Korean girl (chapter fourteen). Having thus assumed responsibility for his crime, Frank is now, in chapter fifteen, able to come to terms with the root causes of his and Cee’s traumas as well as with the very source of his insecurities about his manhood. This, then, leads to a symbolic scene in which the Money siblings give the dead black man of the opening chapter a proper burial

(chapter sixteen), before, in the ultimate chapter, Cee urges Frank: “*Come on, brother. Let’s go home*” (*H* 147, her emphasis). It is therefore up to discussion who saved whom. For one thing, Frank played only a comparatively minor role in Cee’s healing: Both quantitatively – merely four pages are devoted to the rescue scene (*H* 110-113) as compared to almost a whole chapter in which the female community’s cure is described (*H* chapter thirteen) – as well as qualitatively – Frank ‘merely’ physically frees Cee from Dr. Scott’s clutches, while Miss Ethel Fordham and other women of the town tend to the spiritual healing proper. More important, however, is that Cee can be read as a role model for Frank, as it is the physically cured and mentally matured younger sister who eventually prompts her older brother’s beginning process of true healing.

Undergoing the treatment of Lotus’ knowing women, certain spiritual processes accompany Cee’s bodily healing: Not only do they see to the wounds inflicted on her body at the hands of the evil witch doctor, but they also pass on their unofficial knowledge, deep insights, and worldviews. Their cure is a harsh teaching on reality, too, which functions as an unsentimental eye-opener to Cee, the person who, figuratively speaking, has an impaired vision (*H* 122). Once the young woman has learned her lesson, her female guides set their hands to the task of community building – they sit together and quilt:

they used Ethel Fordham’s house as their quilting center. Ignoring those who preferred new, soft blankets, they practiced what they had been taught by their mothers during the period that rich people called the Depression and they called life. Surrounded by their comings and goings, listening to their talk, their songs, following their instructions, Cee had nothing to do but pay them the attention she had never given them before. (ibid.)

According to Floris Barnett Cash, quilting has performed the function of establishing community cohesion, cultural identity, and close kinship ties. Ethel Fordham’s ‘quilting center’ therefore becomes something of Lotus’ unofficial town hall, where the community’s history and knowledge are transmitted to the next generation. Furthermore, Barnett Cash claims that this cultural practice has also been interpreted as a means of economical progress for African American women, who were able to sell their quilts and thereby contribute substantially to the family income (30-38). It can thus be seen as a significant step in the emancipation of female African Americans in the United States. Lastly, the knowing women of Lotus teach Cee the underlying, ancient principles of each and every stable community – reciprocity and mutuality: “There was no excess in their gardens because they shared everything [...] They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them” (*H* 123).

Leading throughout the healing process is Miss Ethel Fordham, probably the most important fairy-tale like mentor and ancestor figure in Morrison's *Home*. Not only does her house function as community center, but she also gives Cee the most important pieces of advice, teaches her to assume responsibility for her life, and urges her to develop greater self-awareness:

Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (*H* 126).

Strongly reminiscent of Baby Suggs' advice for her granddaughter and Denver Suggs' inauguration into womanhood with the help of the female community in *Beloved*, Lotus' female community, spearheaded by Miss Ethel Fordham, triggers a process of maturation in Cee that finally turns her into an integral part among their midst and make her independent of other people – even of her brother. By extrapolation, then, Cee's healing also symbolizes her reintegration into the (female) community of Lotus and stands for a metaphorical reconciliation of older and younger generations. This also underlines the central importance of the ancestor figure in African American fiction, the “advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor” (39) that Morrison describes in her essay “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction.” In any case, parallel to her fairy-tale paragon, Cee has undergone a dramatic change throughout the novel and the narrator remarks, “Cee was different. Two months surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her” (*H* 121). Determined “to be the person who would never again need rescue [...], she wanted to be the one who rescued her own self” (*H* 129) and arrives at a new, more positive understanding of her relationship to Frank: “Meantime her brother was there with her, which was very comforting, but she didn't need him as she had before” (*H* 131). Eventually, Cee is able to express a sense of belonging – she finally *sees* and accepts Lotus as her home: “I ain't going nowhere, Miss Ethel. This is where I belong” (*H* 126).

His sister's change does, naturally, not go unnoticed by Frank who has yet to learn to tolerate her brave, knowing, and robust individuality: “They delivered unto him a Cee who would never again need his hand over hers or his arms to stop her murmuring bones” (*H* 128). Perceiving his little sister as a re- or new-born, stronger person, then, she continues to become his role model. With deep respect, Frank describes his admiration for and even jealousy of his little sister's strength to come to terms with her trauma: “She could know the truth, accept it,

and keep on quilting. Frank tried to sort out what else was troubling him and what to do about it” (H 132). The Korean War veteran now begins to reevaluate his self-image and admits, “his vision was occasionally deceitful” (ibid.). Having already had to revise his picture of Lotus, he now has to acknowledge to himself that he has used the grief, anger, and sorrow that he felt for his dead ‘buddies’ as screen memories for a deeper, more horrific, and traumatizing event that occurred during his time on the frontlines – a memory that he has tried to suppress ever since his return from Korea and feelings attached to it that he would have loved to externalize. In the light of Cee’s newly won self-assurance, however, he is no longer able to inhibit his feelings of guilt and shame, to uphold the mask behind which he has hidden himself so far, and to deny his weakness. What follows, consequently, is his confession:

I have to tell you the whole truth: I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me. I felt so proud grieving over my dead friends. How I loved them. How much I cared about them, missed them. My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame. (H 133, her emphasis)

Feeling the comforting atmosphere of Lotus and being under the supporting guidance of Cee, Frank is finally able to assume responsibility for his crimes – he no longer denies that he, in fact, killed the Korean girl, who reminded him of his sister, because he had been tempted by her or had even engaged in oral sex with her (H 133/134).

Moreover, the Money siblings perform a therapeutic ritual in which they symbolically bury the old, fractured Frank and resurrect a new, healed one. Investigating the story behind the black man who was killed and buried near the stud farm, Frank discovers the horrible truth about this stranger’s fate and convinces Cee to follow him to the place of their traumatic childhood memories. Having disinterred the corpse of the man, Frank places him in Cee’s first quilt and both give him a proper and decent burial together with a commemorative tombstone that declares: “Here Stands A Man” (H 145). Wrapped in Cee’s quilt, the murdered African American is symbolically reintroduced to the community and the bold inscription forever honors his life. The fact that Frank and Cee give him a perpendicular burial (meaning they bury him upstanding or in an upright position) under a bay tree, or laurel – which is tellingly “*Hurt right down the middle / But alive and well*” (H 147, her emphasis) –, may be interpreted as Frank’s figurative rebirth and defining step on his process of psychological healing: In ancient Greece and Rome the laurel symbolized victory and especially honor, and in the Bible, the bay tree is depicted as a metaphorical reference to the resurrected Jesus Christ (Ps. 37:35). Be that as it may, I conclude that Frank needs Lotus just as much as he needs his little sister – it is Cee, after all, who is his savior. This is further underlined by a

parallel tree symbolism: Frank is equated with the bay tree and Cee is likened to dogwood tree: Cee's rescue is framed by a recurring image of this latter tree, which stands in full bloom in the beginning, but loses its blossoms in the end (*H* 110, 112, and 113). While both trees reference Jesus Christ, the laurel signifies the bright beginning of something new and the dogwood is usually seen as a symbol for His crucifixion. It may then be argued that Cee's barrenness – her infertility expressed in the metaphor of the fading and falling blossoms – can be interpreted as a sacrifice for Frank's murder of the Korean girl, his original sin – hence, the dogwood reference. In this case, she would be directly compared to the only Son of God, symbol for His ultimate sacrifice as well as His enduring love for and belief in all humankind. Moreover, without Jesus' death, humankind would not have been blessed with salvation and would thus be unable to enter Heaven: In analogy, then, without his younger sister's sacrifice, Frank would probably never be able to arrive at home.

In the end, however, Cee's encouraging final words – “*Let's go home*” (*H* 147, her emphasis) – provide enough room for a brighter future of the Money siblings and may also signify that they have actually reached their home. Valerie Smith thus concludes, “By reclaiming their personal secrets, they are able to reclaim Lotus as their literal, physical home. Through their willingness to confront their past, they find their true home within them in the memories they share” (135). Additionally, I would claim that Morrison's novel – and, indeed, by extension even her entire oeuvre – has come full circle and resolved her ‘house/home antagonism:’ *Home* begins with an epigraph describing a strange house and ends with an invitation to go ‘home,’ evoking the term the author uses to describe a ‘new space’ in clear opposition to the racist ‘house.’ Significantly, then, the Money siblings' quest does not end in a symbolic house, but rather in their hometown. The novel's ending, moreover, also makes clear that Morrison's concept of home has to remain an ideal: While Lotus comes indeed closest to it, it is anything but perfect. By extrapolation, then, *Home* also indicates that American philanthropy – epitomized in the Scotts' and their mansion – needs to be revised: Lotus and especially its female community can then be interpreted as counterparts, places and people that are characterized and motivated by a true love for humankind.

3.3.6 Chapter Summary

The analysis of the motif of the house in Morrison's fiction has emphasized the intimate, though at times intricate, relationship of American philanthropy to the American house. On the one hand, traditional renditions of America have found one of their most vivid expressions in the metaphor of the nation as a house: In this respect, I have claimed that the philanthropist

becomes the strong, protective father figure and head of the household, while the recipients of his generosity are his dependents. American philanthropy organizes the American house – and by extrapolation U.S. society – in a strictly hierarchical manner, from roof to basement, from top to bottom. On the other hand, philanthropy has also frequently been employed as cement to hold together the parts of the American house that are constantly drifting apart and to conceal the differences between high and low, white and black, male and female, et cetera. Most often, however, the constructional defects at the very foundations of this house have not been corrected; instead, certain systemic imbalances remained largely intact and racist as well as capitalist paradigms are, ironically, solidified instead of rectified by American philanthropy.

Morrison's journey from house to home represents a revaluation of the American house and of American philanthropy: Her different understandings of home and philanthropy attempt to effect renovation and change. Consequently, in her fiction, she moves from exclusive, narrow definitions of both phenomena to more inclusive, broader ones. Distancing herself from white norms and the supremacy of WASP men, she breaks with certain governing principles of the United States and changes emphasis from the individual to the community, from monetary to more intimate forms of help, from vertical to flat hierarchies. Her concepts of home – forwarded in her eponymous essay – and of philanthropy, however, have to be perceived as ideals. Hence, both cannot be interpreted as perfect alternatives to the American house and American philanthropy. Rather, they resemble endpoints of a potentially infinite journey, a continuous process that, from my point of view, indeed has the power to change the very nature of America.

In her oeuvre, then, Morrison dwells on the 'house/home antagonism,' a notion she has set forth in her essay "Home." Her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* diagnoses the root problems of the American house and characterizes it as an exclusivist place based on strictly white principles, racism, and discrimination. While these cultural imperialist tendencies are all encapsulated in the domineering primer, Morrison also introduces her first literary realization of home: The MacTeers' house and family, therefore, allow for truly philanthropic interactions and disrupt the primer's hegemony over the black community of Lorain. I have further interpreted *Tar Baby* as a development of the ideas generated in Morrison's first novel. Adopting a twofold approach, this work closely scrutinizes the American house as well as American philanthropy and probes the nature of home for African Americans. The island setting, firstly, allows for a deconstruction of L'Arbe de la Croix and its owner Valerian Street – significantly stylized as

biblical inn and innkeeper from the Nativity. Secondly, in attempting to define home for Jadine and Son, *Tar Baby* also negotiates between the seemingly irreconcilable antinomies of past/future, male/female, and assimilation/rejection. Her novel, however, leaves these tensions unresolved. Furthermore, through the juxtaposition of 124 Bluestone Road as white and black house, respectively, Morrison conducts a reevaluation of the American house and American philanthropy in *Beloved*: Whereas 124 as a white house is rather unhomey, it becomes a crucial means of and indicator for individual liberation of its African American inhabitants as a black house. Moreover, by shifting emphasis from Edward Bodwin to the Suggs women and the larger black community of Cincinnati, she places an intraracial form of philanthropy right next to the more traditional, interracial variant. Carrying out a thought-experiment in American history, *A Mercy*, moreover, narrates a different story about the genesis of America: While the colonies may have had the potential to become truly philanthropic homes for their heterogeneous band of settlers, early America developed into a literal paradise lost driven by economic interests rather than ethico-moral beliefs. Hence, this novel makes it undoubtedly clear that the defects at the foundation of the American house and at the core of American philanthropy have been present from their very beginning – and strictly speaking even before then. I have read *Home*, finally, as a conclusion to Morrison's oeuvre-wide concern with the house/home antagonism: Mirrored in Frank Money's quest across the United States, she has come full circle and thus completes her journey from house to home. Furthermore, Frank and Cee's arrival at home underlines the fact that this concept is indeed thought of as an ideal by Morrison, since Lotus is anything but perfect, and *yet* it is the only place which Frank and Ycidra can truly consider their home.

Further elaborating on these thoughts in the next chapter, I will concentrate on certain characters and/or narrators in Morrison's oeuvre whose development throughout the novels parallels the reader's acquisition of knowledge. In order to achieve this, I will approach her works with a clear focus on narratology as well as on reader-response theory and I will discuss her novels as philanthropic gifts, ultimately.

4. ‘It Was/This Is Not a Story to Pass On’ – Readerly Figures in Toni Morrison’s Oeuvre

The title of this chapter consciously references the narrator’s enigmatic credo in the epilogue of Morrison’s *Beloved*, words that have been commented on extensively by literary critics (e.g., Sundeep Bisla, Karla Holloway, Joanna Wolfe, and James Phelan [1993]). The meaning(s) of this sentence, its three repetitions in quick succession, and its slight, but significant, variations – from past to present tense, from the more neutral “It” (*B* 323 and 324) to the more emphatic “This” (*B* 324) – have been intensively studied. Addressed to the audience of Morrison’s novel, ‘It was/This is not a story to pass on’ reads like a piece of advice or word of warning. On the one hand, it can be argued to express that readers must not neglect *Beloved*, or that, by extrapolation, America should always remember the story of slavery. On the other hand, the narrator appears to caution the audience: *Beloved* should not be handed down to future generations since the traumas inflicted by the slave system may exert a destructive influence on them. The ambivalent semantic dimension of the phrasal verb ‘pass on’ raises questions about *Beloved*, storytelling, and story-based trauma therapy. More importantly, however, the narrator’s words clearly call for the reader’s attention and draw the audience into the narrative. Synthesizing the opposing meanings of the phrasal verb, ‘It was/This is not a story to pass on’ is a call for an emancipation from traumatic stories – meaning that writer/teller and reader/listener have to create environments in which these stories are no longer harmful. Hence, in *Beloved* as well as in Morrison’s other novels, meaning-making is a collaborative process that heavily relies on a participatory reader who shares direct responsibilities with the author of the texts.⁸⁶

In the following chapter, I therefore conduct a reader-response reading of selected works by Morrison, which is intended to analyze the communicative situation between her text and her audience, between author and reader, by extension. Assuming that her novels have a strong impulse of teaching, I will consider certain didactic tools, too. As mediators between the parties involved, I argue that readerly figures qualify as such didactic tools, which eventually secure the transmission of knowledge from author and text to the receiver: Guiding Morrison’s audience through her narratives, they act as role models for the reader; going through developmental processes similar to the audience’s, they present the reader with her

⁸⁶ I will address the rather slippery terrain of terminology in reader-response criticism in the following theoretical chapter (chapter 4.1). Hopefully, this will clear up possible confusions and provide a thorough framework for the discussion of Morrison’s novels.

novel's gift of knowledge. Finally, I will discuss Morrison's oeuvre as an ultimately philanthropic act.

To begin the analysis of Morrison's communicative engagement with her audience, there is a remarkable difference between the initial reception (and also sales figures) of her first two novels compared to all her later works: While nowadays her entire oeuvre is taught in American-Studies departments across the world and has been translated into countless languages, it was not until her third novel that Morrison won a wider readership and earned some critical acclaim. Published in 1977, *Song of Solomon* is markedly different from her two previous novels in its adherence to certain typical (Western and/or American) narrative conventions, some of which are quite alien to Morrison's other novels: its focus on a male protagonist (Milkman); its linear plot development; and its style following the paragon of the *Bildungsroman* or story of initiation. Whereas her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* and its follow-up *Sula* focused on female African American protagonists – together with issues of beauty and competing understandings of black women's roles, to name just a few –, *Song of Solomon* made it easier for a predominantly white, male readership (and academia) in the U.S. to relate to her novel thematically as well as formally: It showed fewer blanks, to employ Wolfgang Iser's terminology, and reduced the distance between text and audience (Dittmar 145). My point, however, is not to claim that Morrison wrote a WASP narrative with *Song of Solomon* – maybe even only to attract a wider (whiter) readership. Quite to the contrary, this novel is replete with African (American) topics, characters, and motifs – most importantly, of course, the recurring motif of flight. Rather, my point is that Morrison had to invent subtle narrative ways and means to engage in a stable communication with her audience via her text. And for *Song of Solomon* this seemed to have meant adopting certain literary conventions that mark this novel as clearly outstanding within her oeuvre.

In her formally (e.g., *Beloved* and *Jazz*) and thematically (e.g., *Beloved*, again, and *Paradise*) most challenging and ambitious novels, then, Morrison pursues a different course in trying to reduce the distance between herself and her readership by creating readerly figures. I do not employ the term 'readerly' in the sense of Roland Barthes' notion of readerly texts with fixed and stable meanings, as opposed to writerly texts (*S/Z* 3-6; *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* s.v. "Readerly Text, Writerly Text (Barthes)"). Rather, following James Phelan's understanding (2007: 3), I employ the term 'readerly' simply as an adjective meant to denote the reader's activity. Hence, this notion stresses the procedural

character of the communicative system between sender, text, and receiver, in which the latter assumes a central role.

Even though Barthes' understanding is reversed, I still employ the adjective to highlight the production of meaning – a participatory, inclusive, and creative process that occurs while reading literature.⁸⁷ Readerly figures in Morrison's novels, then, approximate the reader in many respects and an analysis of them directs emphasis into the direction of the receiving end. As a modifier, 'readerly' also describes and qualifies the noun 'figure' and avoids the totality of the compound 'reader-figure.' The readerly figures that I will analyze cannot only be compared to the reader, but also to the writer, as they share characteristics with both the sender and recipient. The modified noun phrase is thus more open and flexible than the compound and leaves enough room for various other interpretations. Especially in German narratological discourse, moreover, 'Leserfigur' roughly corresponds with the concepts of narratee and implied reader. My notion of readerly figure, however, differs from that narrow definition insofar as I mainly concern myself with the impact on the receiving end of the literary communication by means of a catalyst situated at the level of story and/or discourse. The scope of the term 'readerly figure' is therefore not concerned with any of the text's projections of the reader, be that the narratee or implied reader. Instead, I claim that readerly figures can have an influence on the reader-figure and the reading as such. Because not all of the figures that I am about to discuss are located at the level of story, lastly, I shall avoid the term 'character.'

Appearing on different levels of diegesis in Morrison's novels, readerly figures often surfaces as characters (Denver in *Beloved*); at other times, they are the narrators (*Jazz*); sometimes, however, they even be both (Claudia MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*). As actual characters, they can be central to the story or only peripheral: Whereas Denver and Claudia clearly belong to the main protagonists of their novels' universe, Patricia Best in *Paradise* is a mere chronicler and, for that matter, observer of the events that unfold in Ruby. What all of the afore-mentioned readerly figures have in common, however, is their impact on Morrison's audience: Functioning as role models for her readers, they have to create meaning out of a chaotic environment, they undergo a decisive change during the course of novels, and they gain a deeper (and, at times, unsettling) understanding of the world. Accompanying the

⁸⁷ Foregrounding the dichotomy of literary production and literary products, Barthes differentiates between an active, creative (writerly) and a passive, merely receptive reading (readerly): "The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure. But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions), they make up the enormous mass of our literature" (5).

audience on its winding way through Morrison's novels, they facilitate a more immediate reading experience and thereby ensure that Morrison's stories will indeed not be passed on – that her audience, in other words, will not miss the underlying agenda of her works. Moreover, it is striking that several critics have emphasized the parallels between the above-mentioned characters and Morrison herself, often turning them into figurative embodiments of the author. Krumholz (1992: 405) as well as Duvall (151), for instance, have stressed the resemblance of Morrison to Denver and Patricia Best, respectively: As lay historians and (future) teachers, both assume a role that has also been associated with the novelist.⁸⁸ Hence, these characters become points of intersection between author and reader. Their relationship, in turn, is not characterized by a mere give and take, but by a more subtle, multi-layered exchange: Both engage in an intense intercourse through storytelling, a co-creative, collaborative, and participatory process of meaning-making, that can be regarded as the most fundamental purpose of Morrison's works.

In giving a brief overview of the field of reader-response criticism, I will now provide a framework for the ensuing interpretation of Morrison's novels and highlight this approach's importance for my subsequent reading of her works: By shifting literary studies' emphasis from the text to the reader, the reciprocal interplay between text and audience, author and reader comes into focus. Thus, I perceive literature as a communicative system in which sender and receiver engage in a mutual exchange from which both parties can eventually benefit – a process that underlines the philanthropic dimension of fiction.

4.1 Reader-Response Criticism

When literary scholars across the globe, but especially in the United States and Germany, began to develop a theoretical interest in the reader, they were met with open rejection by the academic establishment. The bone of contention was the argument over the old primacy of the text as opposed to the new interest in the reader: Is meaning to be found only on the page? Is there meaning only through reading? What is the 'true' subject matter of literary studies, the text or the reader? In stark contrast to formalism, and diametrically opposed to its American offshoot New Criticism, reader-response theories hold that literature derives meaning from its effects on its audience (Tompkins ix). Instead of separating text and influence on the reader, instead of attempting to find meaning merely and exclusively among the words on the page,

⁸⁸ Even though Krumholz notices Denver's ambivalent place between reader and writer in Morrison's novel (1992: 405), she nevertheless does not elaborate on that thought.

reader-response criticism has consequently led to the ‘destruction’ of formalism’s belief in the objectivity of the text and has brought the reader into the central focus of literary studies.⁸⁹

It has therefore been claimed that literary theory has opened and expanded its horizon in the past few decades: Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg argue that a gradual movement in narrative theory from largely text-centered approaches (e.g., New Criticism, structuralism) to a greater interest in ideological/political underpinnings of literary works (e.g., postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist readings) to a focus on the role of the reader (e.g., cognitive narratology, reader-response criticism) has to be duly noted (290-292). Likewise, reader-response criticism has gained momentum and won wider acceptance inside academia since its infancy in 1970s’ United States and Germany. Today’s state of the art can best be exemplified in the theory of Phelan, who bases his approach to literature on the works of Stanley Fish, Hans Robert Jauß, Wolfgang Iser and Wayne Booth, among others. Forwarding his idea of ‘rhetorical reading,’ Phelan focuses on the “rhetorical triangle – author, text, and reader” (Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 296).

Thinking narrative as rhetoric – that is, the “art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others” (*OED* s.v. “Rhetoric”) –, Phelan puts his emphasis on the interactive relationship between transmitter and receiver of a given message as well as on that message’s impact on the receiving end of this process. Accordingly, he understands narratives as “communicative acts” (2013: 24), consisting of a sender (narrator/[implied] author), a medium (e.g., novel), and a recipient (narratee/[implied] reader). On the most fundamental level, then, narrative as rhetoric implies a targeted action to him, namely, “*the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose*” (1996: 8, his emphasis). Phelan’s rhetorical reading treats literature as an event that intends to engage the reader and eventually cause “particular thematic, affective, and ethical effects on the audience” (2013: 24). Instead of a rigid one-way street with the author domineering over the reader, however, he perceives rhetorical reading as an inherently flexible and open process that uncovers the interrelatedness between authorial agency, textual phenomenon, and reader response. In this manner, initial reactions to texts may change and may thus contribute to a reevaluation of intended effects and the workings of the text as such (2013: 26/27). Unlike Fish’s and Jauß’

⁸⁹ Attempting to base their research on ‘objective’ theories, formalist critics brought the inherent features of texts (e.g., grammar, syntax, and literary devices) into focus and disregarded the historical, biographical, and cultural contexts of texts. By 1949, then, two of its leading theoreticians, William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, had virtually ruled out any ‘subjective’ influence on the understanding of literature: Denying both the author’s intention (“Intentional Fallacy”) and the reader’s response (“Affective Fallacy”) any impact on the work whatsoever, Wimsatt and Beardsley strongly advocated the primacy of the text and claimed that meaning is to be found *exclusively* on the page.

concepts, then, Phelan's theory does not come to an abrupt halt at the consideration of attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge, which a reader brings to the symbiotic reading-writing-process, but rather looks at how these might change during the course of reading, at how literature influences its audience.

Following Iser's blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality (Iser 53), Phelan detects a "default ethical relation [...] in narrative" (2007: 53), which links author and audience in a reciprocal relationship:

Each party both gives and receives. Authors give, among other things, guidance to their particular value systems and to the ethical judgments that follow from those systems; they expect to receive in return their audiences' interest and attention. Audiences give that interest and attention and expect to receive in return, among other things, reinforcements, challenges to, or disagreements with their own value systems. (2007: 53/54)

The extreme poles of this relation are didacticism on the one hand (e.g., too rigid, explicit value systems) and alienation of the reader on the other (e.g., no guidance whatsoever): While narratives with no clear signs of guidance may affect an end of the communication between author and reader, Phelan claims that they can also "provide [their audiences] with extremely rich reading experiences" (2007: 54), since greater ethical responsibility is transferred to readers. Moreover, Phelan also believes in a certain ethico-moral reach of novels and attests fiction a palpable impact on 'real' life: "[I]n some cases," states he, "a novelist's execution of his or her particular project can influence the shape of extra-literary history" (2013: 6).⁹⁰

In theorizing the communicative act of literature, Phelan differentiates between two levels of narration: first, a direct or textual layer and second, an indirect one that points toward the direction of an extra-textual reach of narratives. "[T]he standard rhetorical approach," he maintains, "is to assume that the narrator directly addresses a narratee and, through that direct address, the implied author indirectly addresses the authorial audience" (2005: 12).⁹¹ Having established these layers, Phelan explains that rhetorical reading identifies four possible audiences of narratives, although he claims, "it is just as accurate to say that it focuses on a subset of the actual audience [...] and one intratextual audience" (2013: 28). Firstly, there is the actual "flesh-and-blood rhetorical reader" (ibid.). This real reader, as Phelan explains,

⁹⁰ Interestingly enough, Phelan explicitly attributes this quality to novels by African American literati such as Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and, most importantly, Morrison's *Beloved* (2013: 7).

⁹¹ This is a slightly revised version of an earlier statement by Phelan: "[T]here is the narrator's telling the story to his or her audience and then the author's telling of the narrator's telling to the author's audience. [...] what is a matter of the telling at one level becomes a matter of the told at the next" (1996: 8).

takes up two positions: On the one hand, she attempts to join “the authorial audience” (ibid.). Placed at the fuzzy boundaries between the direct, textual and the indirect, potentially extra-textual, this term corresponds roughly to Booth’s implied reader (1983: 137/38). On the other hand, Phelan’s “rhetorical readers *pretend* to join the narrative audience” (2013: 28, his emphasis). This third audience accepts the storyworld as real and exists on the level of diegesis only. As the only purely intratextual audience Phelan perceives the narratee – a fictional character whom the story is narrated to by the equally fictional narrator (ibid.). Except for the addition of the narrative audience, his concept is practically equivalent to the right-hand side of the well-established narrative communication diagram: real author – [implied author – narrator – narratee – implied reader] – real reader.⁹² Phelan’s more detailed approach, however, puts more emphasis on the receiving end of the literary communication, for the ultimate goal of his rhetorical reading is “to illuminate the potential for productive, multi-layered communicative exchanges between implied authors and actual audiences” (2013: 36) – in other words, to eventually unearth fiction’s influence on its real-life readers.⁹³

Despite the thorough theoretical headway made by Fish, Jauß, Iser, Phelan, and many more, there are still certain resentments against reader-response criticism. The most direct attacks can be traced back to William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “Affective Fallacy” and their wholesale rejection of, to paraphrase their words, impressionist and relativist readings of literature that tend to disregard the literary text proper. Scholars with an interest in the reader are thus regarded as people fouling their own nests: “The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*),” wrote Wimsatt and Beardsley,

a special case of epistemological skepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the overall forms of skepticism. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome [...] is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear. (1949: 31, their emphasis)

At bottom line, their critique is directed at the supposedly unscientific subjectivism inherent in any kind of literary criticism that does not follow the ‘art for art’s sake’ dictum.⁹⁴

⁹² I intend the square brackets to indicate the separation of non-fiction and fiction.

⁹³ Despite the greater theoretical interest in the receiving end, Phelan’s approach cannot fully evade a problem of the communicative diagram identified by Harry Shaw: “[T]he terms the diagram seeks to describe necessarily become hazier as we move from left to right” (299). In his readings, then, Phelan would frequently use the neutral terms *audience* and *reader* without further specifying them.

⁹⁴ Booth showed that the formalist aesthetics-only approach came under attack by feminists, black critics, Marxists, by race, class, and gender studies in the aftermath of what is today known as the ethical turn in the 1980s. These critics revealed the underlying ethical schemes of supposedly unethical formalists and unearthed a

In order to address these allegations, there has developed a sub-branch of reader-response criticism that conducts empirical research and attempts to base its theory on ‘objective’ data. In the United States, Richard Gerrig, for instance, has carried out statistical surveys, which suggest that readers are, firstly, ‘transported’ by literary texts (both fiction and non-fiction alike), and, secondly, that they take an active role in the creation of meaning. Gerrig’s experiments show that readers tend to get lost in literature – that “a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now” (3). Encapsulating the experience of narrative worlds in the metaphor of transportation and voyage, he claims that “*The traveler returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey*” (16, his emphasis). This is to say that narratives can have a profound impact on their readers’ real lives – Gerrig’s stock example for this being the movie *Jaws* which led to people’s anxieties about swimming: Even given evidence to the contrary (e.g., statistics indicating that shark attacks are extremely rare), vacationers and lifeguards found it equally hard to approach the sea after watching this movie and had to literally force themselves to go into the ocean (16/17). Gerrig’s research also experimentally supports the theoretical work done by Fish, Jauß, Iser, and Phelan: While the latter (theoretically) assume an active, participatory reader, the former’s statistics prove that reading has a performative dimension to it. By this, Gerrig is able to replace Coleridge’s old dictum of the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ with his own “willing *construction* of disbelief” (230, emphasis added). Accordingly, readers actively engage in the construction of narrative worlds and accept even obviously fictitious things, at least temporarily. Hence, Gerrig concludes, “Through both active participation and passive acquiescence, our lives are enhanced by richly diverse experiences of narratives” (241).

My subsequent reading, however, will not rely on ‘hard-boiled’ empirical data in order to interpret readerly figures in Morrison’s works and to analyze the triangular relationship between author, text, and audience. Instead, following the ideas of Fish, Jauß, Iser, and especially Phelan, I focus on the reader’s experiences in reading Morrison’s oeuvre, on the subtle interplay of intimacy and distance between text/author and audience/reader, and on the ethico-moral reach of Morrison’s novels into ‘real’ life. My reader-response reading thus attempts to discuss Morrison’s oeuvre as philanthropy: The most fundamental assumption, then, being that her works have the potential to make an impact on their audience and that her novels may indeed be regarded as gifts for her readers. Yet, instead of excavating the ‘real’ authorial intent and embarking on a tour to unearth Morrison’s ‘true’ motivation for writing

male-dominated, racist canon that effectively perpetuated class biases (1988: 5). Hence, any claim to ‘objectivity’ in literary studies, Booth claimed, is *per se* null and void.

her novels, I am interested in the reader's response to her oeuvre and I therefore share in Fish's most basic question: What does literature *do* to the reader? I will bring the agenda, the rhetoric, of Morrison's novels into focus and I will put emphasis on the effects of her writing on her audience. Assuming that meaning of literary texts is always culturally constructed, I claim that literary critics *cannot* simply rule out cultural and historical contexts. Instead, I argue that author and reader stand in close proximity to one another: They share certain values, beliefs, and worldviews, but need not agree on all of them – most often, in fact, the reader's viewpoints are going to be challenged by the text. It is one of the following chapter's most fundamental assumptions that 'successful' literature encourages its reader to come into the closest communion possible with its author: Through careful reading and by equally careful acts of interpretation, the audience participates in the intricate process of creating meaning.⁹⁵ This also implies that literature is never received in a vacuum, that interpretation can never be absolutely neutral: Readers, unavoidably, bring their cultural baggage to the text. My reading of Morrison's work is thus guided by the supposition that she is well aware of this fact and that she interacts with her audience's positions: Simultaneously, her oeuvre challenges and supports its readers' beliefs – it changes and confirms their views.

Following Iser and Phelan, then, I interpret Morrison's novels as communicative acts. For one thing Iser's concept of the blank – to him one of the central characteristics of modern literature – links transmitter and receiver in a co-creative effort of meaning-making and requires an active participation on the part of the reader. For Iser, however, blanks are not didactic tools: The process of the reader actively filling in the gaps, he contended, does not "lead to enlightenment and reeducation of the reader" (211). Throughout my discussion of Morrison's novels I, however, challenge Iser's decidedly negative take on didactic literature, which according to him would equal conservative literature that supports and upholds a given system and does not alienate its reader (83): Here, I argue that her fiction may indeed be perceived as didactic – but didactic in a decidedly subtle sense that eventually leads to a personal development of her audience. Since Morrison's novels are replete with blanks and gaps (e.g., sudden shifts in focalization, non-linear plot development, etc.), it is one of the main concerns of the next chapter to actively seek and identify the narrative means by which she effectively secures a stable communication between reader and text. In this respect, I will claim that readerly figures close the distance between text and reader and facilitate a

⁹⁵ A clear indicator of the success of Morrison's novels is myself as the writer of this book: Despite the fact that there is an almost unbridgeable gulf between her and me, between storyworld and my 'real' life (e.g., in terms of race, gender, nationality, age, experience, etc.), Morrison's works have engaged me for several years now.

continuation of their mutual exchange.⁹⁶ Phelan's rhetorical reading, his approach to literature, by contrast, proves also instructive for my subsequent reading. While Fish and Jauß recognize that readers bring certain beliefs and attitudes to the text, Phelan goes one step further and claims that literature bears the potential to change them. Broadening the scope of reader-response criticism, he argues for at least a hypothetical reach of fiction into its flesh-and-blood readers' real life. While it does not constitute the next chapter's aim to conduct empirical research and thereby quantitatively check this thesis, I hold that some pieces of fiction in fact make a profound impact on their audience and that the most enduring works of literature do have something to say about our world.

Again referring to Phelan (and Fish), the exact nature of the receiving end of the communicative system of narrative comes, finally, into focus: Who is 'the' reader? However, since it is not the goal of the following discussion to unearth Morrison's 'real' intention in writing her novels, it is equally not my concern to analyze her oeuvre's impact on her flesh-and-blood readers. Rather, I will scrutinize the communication between the implied author and "a subset of the actual audience" (Phelan 2013: 28). Situated at the extradiegetic level of narration, I employ the term 'audience' – and 'reader' to avoid endless repetitions – to refer to a concept, which correlates with Booth's notion of the implied reader and Phelan's more detailed subdivision into authorial and narrative audience. Hence, unless explicitly stated, these terms shall not refer to the flesh-and-blood reader.

4.2 Readerly Figures in Morrison's Oeuvre

In focusing on Morrison's novels, it is important to briefly repeat one of the most fundamental questions that arises when literature is perceived through the critical lens of reader-response criticism as a communicative, rhetorical system: What does literature do to the reader? In theorizing senders' intents, Mark Butland differentiates between three basic speech situations: informative, persuasive, and other types, which he subsumes under the umbrella term 'entertaining' (399-432). Accordingly, any kind of rhetorical medium (e.g.,

⁹⁶ While the utilization of Iser's blank concept may appear problematic for some in the context of a book concerned with Morrison's works, I still believe that his theory is instructive for my reading. On the one hand, it is true that Iser conceived of this idea through his life-long engagement with (high) modern literati such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett (De Bruyn 1). On the other hand, however, one could also argue that almost all fictional texts show at least some blanks. Hence, his concept can be interpreted as either too narrow (with relevance only for modernist fiction), or too broad (as a universal feature of literature) to actually add something meaningful to a discussion of Morrison's novels. Yet, her works *do* intentionally alienate their audience, as I contend, by increasing the distance between story world and real world and by deliberately causing a gulf between text and reader that is to unsettle the latter. In this respect, I will argue that readerly figures function as counterforces, which facilitate a filling-in of these blanks.

texts or speeches) can be designed to either transmit knowledge, to exert influence over the audience and to actually change their standpoints, or to simply divert the receiver. In principle, then, critics should be able to find a straightforward answer to the afore-mentioned question. In practice, however, answers are of course not all that easily obtained. If literature is understood as a rhetorical system, therefore, not only the *what* but also the *how* needs to be addressed: How is communication between the producing and receiving end via a medium ensured? How does literature achieve its goal(s)? Concerning this, the underlying didactics of Morrison's works, ultimately, come into focus.

Literary critics and reviewers usually employ the term didactic in a decidedly negative sense: If pieces of fiction are attributed with this adjective, their artistic quality is questioned and their authors are denied artistry. In most cases, didactic translates to a lecturing, moralizing, and maybe even disagreeably authoritative language: To label a novel didactic, then, is certainly not a recommendation to buy.⁹⁷ However, in describing Morrison's novels as didactic, I develop a more positive understanding of that term. The semantic scope of that adjective is therefore far removed from didacticism, presumably the root of the first sense, and is intimately connected to the more positive meaning of the word didactics: "the science, art, or practice of teaching" (*OED* s.v. "Didactics"). In Morrison's oeuvre, then, 'didactics' does not translate to a simplistic instruction on how to live life. Her fiction generally avoids happy endings and even apparently positive characters – those with whom the audience usually most readily identifies and sympathizes –, are prone to fail in her novels: The ending of *Paradise*, for instance, does not only see the killing of the women at the Convent, but also the utter desolation of the all-black town of Ruby; it is left undecided whether or not the survivors will emerge out of the ashes changed.

If literature has the power to make an impact on its readership, there has to be a way to actually achieve this effect; there has to be a method that secures a fruitful exchange between text and audience. In short, there have to be certain didactic tools – and readerly figures, I claim, qualify as such: As role models for Morrison's audience, they allow for observational learning and negotiate between the three vertices of the rhetorical triangle of her novels. Yet, these figures are not thoroughly positive, since Morrison generally avoids a Manichaean differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' in her work (e.g., Eva Peace's inability to discriminate between Nel and Sula in the eponymous novel, *S* 168). Being anything but

⁹⁷ Reviewers have scorned some of Morrison's novels for being didactic in this sense. Most prominently, Michiko Kakutani attacked *Paradise* and *Love*, stating that the one was a "clunky, leaden" (1998) and the other a "haphazard novel" (2003).

stereotypical, these ambivalent characters/narrators provide a challenging range of interpretation and are thus more authentic figures.

Furthermore, these readerly figures ignite a mutual (gift) exchange between text and reader: Building on Lewis Hyde's understanding of the role of art (xvi), I read Morrison's works as gifts to her readership and the communication between text and audience as a complementary gift exchange. In this light, the interplay between the teaching and the philanthropic impulse of Morrison's oeuvre becomes apparent. "Teaching itself is a philanthropic activity," state Payton and Moody, "it is the gift of one generation to another to pass along what it knows and understands" (2008: 23/24).

Starting with Marcel Mauss' seminal essay "The Gift" (1924), gift-giving and reciprocity have been interpreted as "one of the human foundations on which societies are built" (5). In this study, gift exchange in certain 'archaic' societies is examined (e.g., the potlatch of the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America and the *kula* of the Trobriand people in today's Papua New Guinea). Through gift-giving, Mauss claimed, people come into intimate contact with each other: The initial gift creates a debt that has to be met by the receiver, who, in turn, becomes a future giver. Mauss also stated that the gift unfolds its complete power only if it is passed on (30). In stark contrast to today's prevalent market economy, with its central goal of amassing ever greater amounts of goods, money, et cetera in one spot (or person), the gift economy creates social cohesion through the very flow of the gift. Hence, Serge-Christophe Kolm perceives reciprocity as one, if not *the*, core characteristic of human cultures: "Reciprocity thus appears as a basic force of interaction that maintains a collection of individuals as a society" (2009: 17). Moody, moreover, highlights the "central importance of reciprocity, of 'giving back,' as a motive for giving, and perhaps even as a key philanthropic value" (409).⁹⁸

The rich abundance of Morrison's gift of literature manifests itself in two ways. For one thing, the production of meaning resembles a reciprocal relationship, which establishes an intimate relationship between the parties involved: Telling/writing and hearing/reading merge in a collaborative effort of text and audience, teller and hearer, author and reader. This mutual exchange passes on the gift of knowledge and ultimately leads to personal growth and

⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, however, launched a major attack on the very possibility of the gift. He thereby challenges not only Mauss' essay but also calls into question the by now canonical distinction of the gift and market economy, the crucial role of reciprocity in gift-giving, and the nature of the gift: "We know that as good, [the gift] can also be bad, poisonous (*Gift, gift*), and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to hurting, to doing harm" (12).

development on the part of the audience. Next to this basic reciprocity, for another thing, Morrison's stories are indeed stories to pass on in the traditional sense of this phrasal verb: Turning the original receiver into a future giver, her novels enable the readers to impart their newly acquired knowledge to a third party. In a process that resembles what Kolm has termed "chain reciprocity" (2006: 22), the category boundaries of giver and receiver dissolve and the readerly figure functions as a hinge between text and audience in this setting. It is hardly surprising, then, that some critics have compared characters – who shall be discussed as readerly figures below – to the author herself. By blurring the traditional borderline between sender and receiver, active and passive, Morrison's fiction enables its audience to actually pass the gift on and to participate in a chain of gift exchange: Just as Denver in *Beloved*, for instance, has been interpreted as future teacher, so the reader, having read the novel, may be able to pass the story of slavery, of the Middle Passage, and of African American experience on. Hence, readerly figures can be analyzed as go-betweens, as mediators between author, text, and audience that stabilize their mutual exchange – in other words, as didactic tools, ultimately meant to ensure that Morrison's stories will not be passed on in the sense of being neglected.⁹⁹

Didactics and philanthropy are inseparably intertwined in Morrison's works – there is an underlying philanthropic impulse in her oeuvre, just as there is also a subtle didactics in her fiction (and non-fiction). In this respect, it is important to repeat that philanthropy is a highly complex issue and that philanthropic acts and actors are not always only concerned with the literal 'love of humankind.' In her fiction, Morrison attempts a revaluation of the concept of philanthropy and enlarges her audience's understanding of this phenomenon (as I have shown in chapter three) – she alters and adds to this notion, she does not, however, reject it altogether; her novels are infused with a philanthropic spirit and yet she freely plays with certain of that phenomenon's conventions. Likewise, literary critics should not devalue Morrison or her fiction for her didactic impulse.¹⁰⁰

In an interview with Thomas Le Clair, Morrison contends, "Narrative remains the best way to learn anything" ("Language Must Not Sweat" 23). Combining her novels' didactic impulse with her creative prowess, her art is certainly not intended to be for art's sake only; instead,

⁹⁹ In this respect, it is interesting that the name 'Denver,' for instance, is of Old English origin and roughly translates to "Ford or passage used by the Danes" (*A Dictionary of British Place Names* s.v. "Denver"). As a link, then, between story world and 'real' world, between text and audience, writer and reader, she builds bridges and thus guides the reader through *Beloved*.

¹⁰⁰ In refraining from a (lame) compromise and makeshift solution, I hope to have provided enough reasons to actually stick to the term didactic. Besides, potential alternatives such as (political) rhetoric are equally conflict-laden and therefore unavoidably perpetuate problems in terminology.

writing has a procedural character for Morrison and spurs a development within the author herself. Jan Furman therefore maintains, “The writer must not enter the telling intact; the telling itself is a *becoming*, a journey to the site of new understanding for the writer” (2012: 87, her emphasis). Morrison’s work has also something to say to its audience, it attempts, as I hold, to make an impact on its reader’s real life. In her fiction, she does away with the longstanding opposition of aesthetics and ethics and boldly claims, “It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (“Rootedness” 64). In this respect, Morrison approximates Walter Benjamin’s storyteller – the person who provides education and transmits knowledge from one generation to another: “Seen in this way,” Benjamin wrote, “the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel – not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage” (108). Yet, his theory of storytelling and Morrison’s profession as a postmodern novelist seem to contradict each other, because Benjamin perceived an increasing detachment of teller and listener that runs parallel to the triumph of the novel as the predominating literary genre. He stated, “The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (87). According to his definition, then, the novel is entirely incompatible with orality. Moreover, this particular genre also leads to the isolation of both writer and reader: Whereas genuine storytelling implies a communion of teller and listener and also a sharing of experiences, the composition of a novel is a solitary task to Benjamin (ibid.).

Morrison’s novels, however, turn the reader into an active co-creator of the narrative and link teller (or writer) and hearer (or reader) intimately. Storytelling thus assumes a central role in her fiction and, as the novelist herself attests, her narrators become African griots who provide their collaborative listeners with some kind of “life-support system” (“An Interview with Toni Morrison” 153). As a means of community building and identity formation, storytelling stresses the importance of co-creative, communal, and dialogical patterns such as call and response, testifying, and witnessing. It also privileges the oral tradition at the heart of African American culture and storytelling, and emphasizes the significance of the African concept of *nommo*, the creative power of words. Hence, Page summarizes the utmost importance of storytelling for Morrison’s characters specifically, and for her novels in general:

Beset with the inversions, displacements, and fragmentations of a racialized society, Morrison’s characters have few viable options for developing fulfilled identities. One

such option, however, is storytelling. Characters' social and psychological health is dependent on their ability to articulate the stories of their pasts or to invent stories that parallel or reconstruct their own lives, and sometimes on their ability to listen sympathetically to others' stories. Storytelling and story-listening enable characters to transcend fixed, dead-end positions and instead to engage in the reconstructive processes of ongoing fusion and fragmentation. (178)

Consequently, voiceless characters usually fail in Morrison's works (e.g., Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*), whereas characters that find their voices become literal role models (e.g., Denver in *Beloved*). Likewise, if the audience is willing to engage in the co-creative, collaborative process of writing/reading, it too is going to have its say in the creation of meaning and they will benefit from Morrison's narratives. As a pivotal technique, storytelling is therefore employed to aesthetic and ethic ends in her oeuvre. "Morrison identifies with her readers and labors to achieve intimacy with them," as Furman explains:

She invites readers to share in the creative process, to work with her in constructing meaning in her books. She is the black preacher who, as she puts it, 'requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify.' (1999: 4)¹⁰¹

The implementation of readerly figures, positive role models who establish links to the reader and increase the level of (felt) immediacy, represent one narrative means to achieve this intimacy with her audience – in short, these are fictional characters to whom the audience can relate and with whom they can identify. Furman thus explains that didactic and philanthropic influences loom large in Morrison's fiction as well as criticism, and she claims that the novelist's "responsibility to truth corresponds to a theory of moral aesthetics – the concept of literature playing a role in producing and acquiring moral knowledge and education" (2012: 77).¹⁰²

Subsequently, the discussion will turn to four readerly figures in Morrison's oeuvre: Once again, her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* opens the interpretation, before the focus shifts to her trilogy consisting of *Beloved*, *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997). I will discuss Claudia MacTeer as a prototype of the readerly figure, which, however, shows certain growing pains and remains largely ineffective as a hinge between text and audience in *The Bluest Eye*. Denver Suggs and Patricia Best, in turn, are more mature variants of the readerly figure that function as role models for *Beloved's* and *Paradise's* readers. Since both appear to be closely

¹⁰¹ The quote within this Furman citation is taken from Morrison's essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (341).

¹⁰² Dwelling on her prominence as a novelist, essayist, social critic, and public person, Justine Baillie elevates Morrison even to the position of role model, teacher, and leader of (African) Americans: "As a leading intellectual, academic and literary figure, Morrison, like Du Bois before her, bears a pedagogical responsibility" (13).

related to each other and since their functions in these novels are roughly equivalent, I will not devote a separate chapter to *Paradise*. Instead, I undertake an excursus at the end of chapter 4.2.2 that analyzes Pat Best in comparison to Denver. I will close this chapter with a discussion of *Jazz*' narrator: In realizing her own unreliability, this somewhat unusual readerly figure troubles her audience's understanding of omniscience and thereby leads her listener-readers to a reevaluation of their belief in Western epistemology. Throughout the entire chapter, I argue that readerly figures function as mediators between sender, message, and receiver in Morrison's novels – securing a stable communication, readerly figures link writer/teller and reader/listener in a reciprocal, intimate relationship. In so doing, they increase the degree of reader participation: "What I really want," explains Morrison, "is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along" ("The Site of Memory" 78). In discussing Morrison's novels as philanthropy, this chapter seeks to follow the second major strand concerning this subject in literary studies: Referring to Turner, once again, I will claim that "most works of literature aim to make some lasting impact on the world and so constitute philanthropic acts" (308).

4.2.1 Claudia MacTeer as Mediator between Implied Author and Audience

In her foreword to the 2007 edition of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison states that she did not want to grant her readers "the comfort of pitying [Pecola]," but instead wanted to lead them "into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing" ("Foreword" xii). Setting out to write a novel intended to elicit self-reflection from her audience, she employed a non-linear way of storytelling that provides her readership with bits and pieces, she created a polyphonic work with several different viewpoints, and she dealt with controversial topics in a manner that forestalls easy judgment. As a consequence, her debut novel – with all its idiosyncratic characteristics that have, by now, become Morrisonian signature features – heavily relies on participatory readers: They have to speculate about the goings-on and to formulate hypotheses; they have to constantly revise and reject their theories; and, by doing so, they are eventually going to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the novel. However, Morrison's "solution – break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader [...] does not satisfy [her] now" ("Foreword" xii), as the author readily admits. Apparently, then, just as the soil is unreceptive to Claudia and her sister's seeds, so Morrison's aims have not been well transported by her emerging literary prowess. Nevertheless, I claim that the seeds for certain recurring motifs and techniques, which have come into full bloom in her

later works, were already planted in her very first novel. This first subchapter is therefore intended to discuss *The Bluest Eye* as paradigmatic, once again, for certain narrative devices in Morrison's oeuvre. I will argue that there is a first timid parallel between the implied reader and one of Morrison's characters, Claudia MacTeer: While both have to make sense of a chaotic, violent, and incomprehensible (story-) world, Claudia finds answers in fictionalizing her childhood memories and the audience will find answers in piecing together the various parts of Morrison's debut novel.

Even before the narrative proper, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* unsettles the reader with an ambivalent title and a short primer that precedes the novel. While I have dealt with the epigraphic primer in the previous chapter in greater detail (see chapter 3.3.1), the novel's title can be analyzed as an early glimpse at the ensuing narrative's complexity: It refers simultaneously to Pecola's vain pursuit of an imposed beauty ideal, to a distinctly African American form of music, and to Claudia MacTeer's belated realization that she and everybody else in Lorain are also partly responsible for Pecola's madness (Surányi 11/12). *The Bluest Eye* almost instantly evokes certain expectations on the side of the novel's audience: Actual blue eyes come to mind; the blues as an expression of African Americans' sorrows and hardships is recalled; and the metaphorical meaning of blue (sad) together with the apparent homonyms 'eye'/'I' may be discovered. The narrative as such, then, continues to destabilize the reading process with its ambivalent narrative situation, its perplexing structure, and its striking typeface as well as typesetting.

Referring to Morrison's debut novel as a "narratological compendium" (251), Malmgren, for instance, dwells on the diegesis of *The Bluest Eye*. First of all, he identifies a frame around the story narrated by Claudia MacTeer and tentatively proposes the labels "'overture'" and "a kind of coda" (ibid.). Then, he comments on the split main part that consists of chapters that are either preceded by seasonal or primer headings: While Claudia again narrates the seasonal chapters, the primer ones seem to be told by an omniscient narrator. And even within the seasonal section, Malmgren discovers yet another level; he claims,

The novel is not only multitextual; it is also polyphonic. The seasonal sections are in the first person, but even they are double-voiced, aware of the difference between the experiencing 'I' and the narrating 'I.' In places Claudia speaks as the nine-year-old girl going through the experience [...]. Elsewhere, she switches to an adult perspective

on the incident being narrated [...]. And sometimes she speaks from the moment of the enunciation itself. (251/252)¹⁰³

Having established *The Bluest Eye's* narrative density, Malmgren adds still another layer to the already multifaceted narrative situation of Morrison's novel and comments on the typesetting of the seasonal sections. While the rest of the text is set in full justification, these parts have irregular margins.¹⁰⁴ To him, then, this "suggests a particular narrative form, the diary" (256). Echoing an earlier observation by Linda Dittmar about the formal devices of italics and uneven margins (141), both seem to agree on the informal, potentially oral nature of Claudia's autodiegetic narration.¹⁰⁵

What the audience is left with is a multilayered narrative that, for one thing, shows a "Chinese-box arrangement" (ibid.); that is, there are multiple frames in *The Bluest Eye*: As an epigraph, the primer is a constant frame of reference for the entire novel and parts of it are reiterated in sections that explicitly contrast the ideal, white picture with Pecola's bleak, black reality; the grown-up Claudia's introduction and conclusion frame her own childhood memories as well as Pecola's story, which, in turn, is framed by certain background narratives that are somehow related to her fate (e.g., about neighbors, her mother, and her father); the seasonal headings, lastly, usher in the four major parts of the novel and, similar to the primer excerpts, exert a decisive influence on Claudia's memories. For another thing, Morrison's novel seems to revolve around a set of striking dualities. Firstly, there are two very distinct temporal dimensions: While the bulk of the novel is set in 1941/42 (both Claudia's childhood memories and Pecola's story), the adult Claudia reflects on her experiences decades after the events. According to the critical consensus, there are, secondly, two different narrators: Claudia and an omniscient, authorial narrator (Malmgren 253). Disregarding the epigraphic primer, thirdly, the reader has to deal with two completely different narrative genres – Claudia's diary and the narrative of Pecola's fate. Hence, *The Bluest Eye's* design makes for a 'problematic' reading and Morrison's debut novel shows many blanks that need to be filled by a very active, willing, and dedicated audience – quite consciously, the narrative situation endangers the communication between sender and receiver of Morrison's text.

¹⁰³ In the autumn section, for example, Claudia recalls memories of their house and of a sickness she had contracted in present tense (*TBE* 9-12). Having described the rather harsh treatment at the hands of her mother, however, she asks herself: "But *was* it really like that? As painful as I remember?" (*TBE* 12, emphasis added). For the rest of the paragraph, then, she would reflect on her childhood memories from her adult perspective, change and correct them, which is clearly indicated by the shift from present to past tense.

¹⁰⁴ The only exception to this being the first-person sections told by Pauline Breedlove, which are also set flush-left and in italics (*TBE* 110-131).

¹⁰⁵ Below, I will further elaborate on this point.

In order to secure a communication between these two sides, then, Morrison employs Claudia MacTeer as negotiator who acts as a link between implied author and audience. Her prominent role becomes even more apparent following Malmgren's interpretation, because contrary to critical consensus, he proposes another option: While most critics agree on a split narrative situation with Claudia as an overt autodiegetic narrator in the frame story as well as in the seasonal parts, and a covert heterodiegetic narrator who provides the primer and, as a result, speaks in the primer parts, Malmgren identifies Claudia as the single narrator of *The Bluest Eye*.¹⁰⁶ Since she opens and closes the narrative, his most basic assumption goes, "Occam's razor should dictate that what comes between the beginning and end belongs to her as well" (254). Malmgren also establishes links between the seemingly unrelated frame story and seasonal parts on the one hand, and the primer sections on the other. For one thing, there are many thematic parallels between both, because they deal with the detrimental effects of a dominant white, racist society and its dictates on the most vulnerable portion of *The Bluest Eye's* population – black girls. Malmgren uncovers certain rhetorical, stylistic, and argumentative connections here: In the coda, he claims, Claudia echoes Soaphead Church's style, repeats Geraldine's view of Pecola with a twist, and reiterates the assumption that Cholly is 'dangerously free' (254-256). Furthermore, the use of the first-person plural pronoun "ours" (*TBE* 126) in the section on Pauline Breedlove indicates a certain closeness between Polly's experiences and the narrator's. From that, I myself infer that the narrator is an African American, most likely a woman, maybe even a black Lorainite. Altogether, then, there is ample evidence that Claudia is indeed the eponymous 'bluest I,' the grieving witness of Pecola's downfall and, as Malmgren states, "it is possible to conclude that *The Bluest Eye* is entirely her composition" (256).

As the single narrator, then, Claudia does not only tell all of the diverse stories at various times and, presumably, in different media, but she is also the text's primary narrative instance who transports the narrative's meaning to and translates it for the audience. It can therefore be argued that right from the opening words of the novel, Claudia and her addressee enter into a dialogical process of storytelling. This becomes especially evident in the frame story which opens with the words "*Quiet as it's kept*" (*TBE* 5, her emphasis). To Morrison, then, the first words of the overture imply the familiarity of female talk as well as the closeness of community and family: "it was a phrase familiar to me as a child listening to adults; to black woman conversing with one another; telling a story, an anecdote, gossip about some one or

¹⁰⁶ Dittmar, in turn, offers a third interpretation: Seeing a communal narrative situation in Morrison's novel, she rejects the duality of an auto- and a heterodiegetic narrator. Instead, she perceives different narrators in *The Bluest Eye* and claims that Claudia is only one among many tellers (143, especially note 10).

event within the circle, the family, the neighborhood” (“Unspeakable” 218). Moreover, as “a figure of speech that is written, in this instance, but clearly chosen for how speakerly it is” (ibid.), these words have a distinctly oral quality. With the opening, which is, additionally, set in italics, Morrison mimics a colloquial conversation between Claudia and her addressee in which speaker and hearer are about to share a secret. She attempts to transport the audience right into the narrative. Her goal is therefore to create an immediate “intimacy between the reader and the page” (“Unspeakable” 219).

Despite the fact that Morrison wants to close the gap between Claudia and her audience, however, there are no direct links between storyworld and ‘real’ world, there is no direct address toward the reader in the form of the second person singular pronoun ‘you’ in the narrative frame. Instead, there is a gradual expansion of the ‘we’ – the first person plural pronoun that increasingly includes the audience. In the second paragraph of the overture, ‘we’ is further specified to include Claudia and her sister only (Malmgren 254). Apparently, the narrator seems to distance herself from the reader and to exclude her audience. Yet, before the actual storytelling takes place, the beginning concludes with these two sentences: “*There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how*” (TBE 6, her emphasis). The impersonal ‘one’ can be seen as a variation of the ‘we’ – a slight difference in meaning that now begins to include the audience in a mutual process of storytelling. Especially within an African American context, storytelling is seen as a communal, reciprocal interaction, a giving and taking that is based on the audience’s participation and its willingness to share in the co-creative process of meaning-making. Ideally, moreover, storytelling is designed to enable the listener to become a teller herself, as the audience makes the story its own and passes it on.¹⁰⁷ In the coda, then, Claudia extends the scope of the first-person plural pronoun to “All of us – all who knew [Pecola]” (TBE 205). While it still refers primarily to the Lorainites who watched Pecola’s fate but did not attempt to change it, this time, by extrapolation, it also includes the listener-reader: Having read/heard Pecola’s story, she too is introduced to the ‘circle’ and may be able to reiterate Pecola’s story to others. It becomes therefore evident that the audience can (only) make sense of the chaos and complexity of the narrative – of Pecola’s extreme story, and of the underlying harsh

¹⁰⁷ Hence, there are many parallels between storytelling and intraracial philanthropy: Both foreground the role of the community and blur the rigid boundaries between active and passive, giving and receiving. John Edgar Wideman’s *The Cattle Killing* makes this point clear, as mutuality, reciprocity, and interconnectedness appear as fundamental qualities in this novel’s depiction of storytelling. Throughout the novel, the itinerant preacher – the main protagonist and narrator – is involved in several different occasions of storytelling that are all connected to healing and helping. The story itself is narrated to a mysterious sick black woman whom the itinerant preacher tries to cure. Eventually, he realizes that they are both engaged in a mutual effort of call and response that furthers her healing and his knowledge (*The Cattle Killing* 40).

criticism of the United States as a racist society – by accompanying and assisting Claudia in her effort of storytelling.

While Claudia’s frame narrative moves from oral to written – indicated by the shift from italics in the overture to regular typeface in the coda –, the audience likewise undergoes a developmental process: Just as Claudia assumes responsibility for her part in Pecola’s downfall, so the reader as close confidant will have to come to terms with her beliefs and attitudes. Sender and receiver engage in a communicative process that broadens their horizons, that attempts to explain certain aspects of America society, and that finally raises crucial questions about their own responsibilities. As a result, the narrative makes a deep impact on the reader who, through Claudia’s storytelling, has gained insightful knowledge and the potential to pass Pecola’s story – or, by extension, the dire history of racism in the United States – on. “If the conspiracy that the opening words announce is entered into by the reader,” Morrison states, “then the book can be seen to open with its close: a speculation on the disruption of ‘nature,’ as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences in which the reader, *as part of the population of the text*, is implicated” (“Unspeakable” 220, emphasis added). It can then be concluded that Claudia and her reader share in a reciprocal activity: Both create meaning and both are thus intimately related to each other.

This closeness that storytelling can effect is vividly depicted in a metaphor: Recalling a conversation between the black women of Lorain in her mother’s kitchen, which she has overheard as a nine-year old, Claudia compares their gossip to a “gently wicked dance” in which

sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter – like the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre. (*TBE* 15)

In the frame as well as in the seasonal sections, this dance is mirrored twice in *The Bluest Eye* – firstly, in the dialogical situation between Claudia as experiencing and narrating I and, secondly, in the dialogue between text and reader. Since this excerpt is set in present tense, this further underlines the immediacy and intimacy it is intended to produce. As one of many childhood memories “in an indeterminate present tense, as if in a-temporal space” (Dittmar 148), it seems to transport Claudia right back into the middle of the events: Suddenly, she is the nine-year old girl and vividly recalls her experiences. Hence, this metaphor indicates that

the reading process of Morrison's novel has to be regarded as a collaborative effort of sender and receiver that can be mastered through observational learning (on the part of the audience) and that can reveal 'truth in timbre' (in co-creation between text and reader).

While Claudia and her audience are close to each other in the narrative frame, the double-voiced main part of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* has a contrastive impact on their relationship. The interplay of Claudia as overt autodiegetic narrator in the seasonal parts and as covert heterodiegetic narrator in the primer parts signifies the gradual movement from diary to novel. In the end of the overture, for example, the adult Claudia states, "*There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how*" (TBE 6, her emphasis). Hinting at the discrepancy between telling and explaining, story and history, as well as indicating the difficulty involved in actually getting from the how to the why of things, Claudia provides the very reason for the dual narrative situation: While Claudia's diary entries answer the how, only the 'fictional,' novelistic rendering of experiences can provide answers to the why. The seasonal parts are thus presented from an inchoate, unordered, and limited perspective – they focus on the experiences of an ignorant child that are interspersed with an adult's reflections on and memories of them. The primer parts, in turn, provide a fictionalized account – background that explains Pecola's fate not only to the audience but also – and quite probably even primarily, to Claudia herself. "The conclusion would seem to be that diaries can tell us *how* or *what*," explains Malmgren, "but only novels, and the narrative resources belonging to them, can tell us *why*. Diaries render the experience of victimization; novels explain it" (257/258, his emphasis).

The effect of the double-voiced body on the reading of the novel is twofold. On the one hand, Claudia's 'invention' of that narrative instance parallels her creative effort: In fabricating a rather impersonal, authorial narrator – virtually, an alter ego –, Claudia is able to fictionalize her childhood experiences and to invent background information that (may) have contributed to Pecola's downfall. She attempts to provide answers to things that have troubled her ever since, to finally overcome her childhood trauma, and to assume personal responsibility. In the overture, for instance, Claudia states that it took her the longest time to come to terms with Pecola's fate and reflects from her adult perspective that her and her sister's "*innocence*" (TBE 6, her emphasis) has been dead all along. Finally, she acknowledges her complicity in the downfall of her childhood friend in the coda:

We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were

eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares. [...] We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (*TBE* 205)

Concluding that “It’s too late [...] much, much, much too late” (*TBE* 206) for Pecola, Claudia – and, parallel to her, the audience – arrives at a bitter realization that, nevertheless, furthers the protagonist’s understanding and her insight. In this respect, *The Bluest Eye* can be interpreted as a form of testimony therapy, a therapeutic life-writing, for Claudia. Her retrospective moment of acquiring knowledge is then a clear sign that she has finally incorporated the traumatic episode of Pecola’s fate into her self-narrative – a process in which the reader, ultimately, has had her share. Furthermore, the novel can also be read as bibliotherapy for the reader. In bibliotherapy, which is often complemented by writing therapy, “reading is,” as Lakeisha Meyer explains, “considered to be a therapeutic experience that can promote psychological and/or emotional healing” (239). She perceives Morrison’s oeuvre as “a potent model for an ideal therapeutic relationship” (*ibid.*). Parallel to Claudia, the audience will mature psychologically through the three-step process of this particular form of counseling: firstly, the reader identifies with a fictional character (Claudia, in this case); secondly, she begins to relate to this character and to share her emotions; and thirdly, the reader is able to address her own problems through identification with the fictional character (*ibid.*). Claudia therefore rightly emphasizes the collaborative, quasi-therapeutic, effort at the heart of *The Bluest Eye*’s frame story: “Little by little *we* began to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story” (*TBE* 188, emphasis added).¹⁰⁸

On the other hand, however, the two voices are rather unsatisfactory to Morrison now: As a covert heterodiegetic narrator, Claudia seems to increase the distance between text and reader instead of affecting a more immediate response to Pecola’s fate. First of all, there is quite a hard break between the first seasonal and first primer section, one which hits the audience absolutely unprepared: From a child’s limited perspective and the adult’s reflections on her memories, the narrative situation shifts to an authorial, omniscient narrator who describes the things she sees with precision, who freely judges the characters and interprets their actions – in short, a narrator who seems to grow beyond any doubt about her story. Especially in talking about Pecola’s family, the heterodiegetic narrator is very outspoken, almost bordering on the verge of judgmentalism. She explicitly states that the Breedloves’ ugliness is their *only* reason to stay in their decrepit storefront (*TBE* 38), informs the reader that Polly fights her husband *only* in order to feel good about herself (*TBE* 41/42), and

¹⁰⁸ Grewal, for instance, even goes so far as to perceive Morrison, in her capacity as author, “as a novelist-healer whose abiding subject is the healing of the self and community” (40).

discloses that Cholly has stayed with his wife *only* because through “Hating her, he could leave himself intact” (*TBE* 42). Interestingly enough, moreover, Claudia is entirely absent in the primer parts. Her absence, for one thing, contributes to the view of a split narrative situation of *The Bluest Eye*: While Claudia, for instance, refers to one of the three prostitutes living upstairs from Pecola’s storefront as “Maginot Line” (*TBE* 77), the narrator calls her (Miss) Marie (*TBE* 50-58) – hence, auto- and heterodiegetic narrator appear to be unrelated to each other. For another thing, however, it also signifies the audience’s distance to the text: Without a readerly figure who manages to talk about Pecola’s fate in an immediate manner, the reader is left with a less emotional, more authoritative way of storytelling. Lastly, there are some formal inconsistencies. Parallel to the time changes in the seasonal parts, the heterodiegetic narrator would shift from past to present tense in the primer parts: For example, in the scene when Pecola enters Mr. Yacobowski’s candy store (*TBE* 47-50), or when said narrator describes the ‘girls from Mobile’ (*TBE* 81-86). Unlike in the interplay between Claudia as experiencing I (present tense) and narrating I (past tense) in the seasonal sections, however, I cannot detect an ulterior pattern here. The effect therefore wears off. In the primer sections there is also almost no dialogue between narrator and narratee; there is no intimacy between text and audience – sender and receiver do not perform the, if you will, couple dance of storytelling. What is to be found here, rather, is a tendency toward monologue. In the chapters on Polly and Soaphead, this tendency is then taken to the extreme: While the former’s direct speech takes up increasingly more space in her section (*TBE* 110-131), the latter writes a lengthy letter to God (*TBE* 176-182).¹⁰⁹

The relationship between Claudia and her audience is too indirect, their communication too instable. As a character, she is more of a writerly than a readerly figure; she is closer to Morrison in nature than to any of her addressees. Malmgren, for instance, sees in Claudia the author’s “fictional ‘second self’” (254) and provides an impressive list of parallels between them: Both are born in Lorain, both are approximately the same age (nine years old in 1941/42 and 39 in 1970), and Claudia is gifted with an almost artistic imagination that strongly reminds him of Morrison’s craftsmanship (*ibid.*). Hence, the dialogical situation between her and the narratee – an interaction that ultimately leaves an impact on the narrative’s audience – remains superficial. Claudia fails to make her story into that of the audience and the reader still enjoys the privilege of distance: The narrative situation of *The*

¹⁰⁹ In stark contrast to the role of the co-creative, potentially ritualistic healing dance that storytelling takes up in the frame and the seasonal parts, the narrative situation in the primer sections resembles the psychologically destructive, debilitating dialogue of Pecola and her alter ego (*TBE* 193-204): Just as Pecola’s split personality leads her to madness, so *The Bluest Eye*’s split narrative situation remains largely unfruitful.

Bluest Eye does not provide the reader with the hoped-for immediate reading experience of Pecola's tragic fate, it does not turn the audience into a(n) (eye-) witness of her downfall, and it does not transport the reader to Lorain, after all.

4.2.2 Between the Narrative Cracks – Denver Suggs as Readerly Figure

In the opening chapter of Morrison's *Beloved*, a complete blueprint of the novel is laid out before the audience's eyes.¹¹⁰ The reader, however, is rather unable to comprehend this house of fiction's plan, just as she is unable to fully read Sethe's house on 124 Bluestone Road. She lacks the knowledge to actually make sense of the inchoate and allusive pieces of information that are provided about the main characters, their past enslavement at Sweet Home, and the bloody infanticide as the central problem at the heart of the novel (*B* 3-23). While the entire plot of *Beloved* is presented here in a condensed form, the first twenty pages leave the reader startled. Only through certain narrative and stylistic devices – primarily by accompanying the readerly figure Denver Suggs – is the audience able to eventually read the novel's building plan.

In referring to the very first sentence of *Beloved* – “124 was spiteful” (*B* 3) –, Morrison explains her problematic opening:

Whatever the risk of confronting the reader with what must be immediately incomprehensible in that simple, declarative, authoritative sentence, the risk of unsettling him or her, I determined to take it. Because the *in medias res* opening that I am so committed to is here excessively demanding. It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance – a gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching – this kidnaping – propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, like the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed. (“Unspeakable” 228, her emphasis)

Attempting to effect a more immediate reading experience and to hit common ground between the audience and *Beloved*'s African American protagonists, she creates an entry into her novel that is to imitate the slaves' experiences during the Middle Passage; arguably, an experience that none of Morrison's flesh-and-blood readers have had to make. While the opening is to bring about intimacy between (flesh-and-blood) readers and (fictional) characters, here, it may, paradoxically, also cause the alienation of the audience: This rather

¹¹⁰ This can also be observed in other Morrisonian novels such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*.

abrupt, *in medias res* introduction leaves the unprepared reader defenseless and potentially inflicts psychological pain. Through estranging her readership, then, Morrison takes the very real danger of losing her audience on the first few pages of her novel – she risks that her readers fall through the narrative cracks.

Another means of achieving intimacy, but one that actually helps to ensure a stable communication between text and audience, is the narrative situation in *Beloved*. While there is a heterodiegetic narrator in this novel, Klaus Brax maintains, “the narrator’s explanatory role is limited” (253). The crucial question to ask, therefore, is not who *speaks* but who *sees*. Observing the narrative world through the eyes of a host of focalizers – Sethe, Paul D, Denver, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, schoolteacher, Edward Bodwin, and a couple of minor focalizers (e.g., Lady Jones, Ella) –, Morrison’s audience is provided with a “multi-perspectivity” (Brax 253/254) that greatly enriches the reading experience: On the one hand, Morrison avoids a simplistic Manichaean worldview as even the cruel schoolteacher and the dubious Edward Bodwin are granted their due share of narrative space. More important, on the other hand, is that, according to Brax, “the novel aims to unearth the private and collective experiences that official history or earlier slave narratives have not brought to light” (254). Hence, the storytelling technique employed in *Beloved* underlines the inseparability of ethics and aesthetics in Morrison’s oeuvre, and it shows that her artistic choices are consciously employed to specific political ends – this time, to give a voice to the silenced and unheard, and to counter and correct the official record.

Accrediting a performative character to *Beloved*, Wolfe claims that this novel uses black music to reduce the distance between text and audience (265). Just like many African American forms of music rely on a participatory audience (e.g., through call and response), so Morrison’s novel demands an active reading and strongly encourages the reader’s participation. The author herself has claimed, “I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance” (“Rootedness” 59). Especially the novel’s ending, which resists narrative closure, directly challenges the reader: Encountering openness and flexibility at the end, the audience is literally forced into a collaborative processes of storytelling and meaning-making. “Because listening calls for participation,” as Wolfe explains, “Morrison essentially invites her readers to participate in the simultaneous telling and untelling of this text – and thereby summons the musical and narrative power of *nommo*” (278).

Obviously, then, storytelling is of paramount importance in *Beloved*. Here, however, it goes far beyond its usual function of entertaining and teaching, and has literally the ambivalent power to heal and kill. Beloved, for one thing, draws out her very life from Sethe's and Denver's stories, and thereby almost kills the former. Yet, listening to and telling stories, Trudier Harris claims, "provide [Denver with] self-definition in the way that legends, anecdotes, and personal experience narratives define their subjects" ("Shaping the Tales in the Tale" 93). Quite contrary to Sethe's evaluation of Denver and Beloved's relationship – according to her, "the two were alike as sisters. [...] What one had to give the other was pleased to take" (*B* 117) –, both can thus rather be seen as counterparts: Beloved is an embodiment of the unspeakable, the uninterpretable, a character loaded with different and even contradictory characteristics. As a readerly figure, however, Denver functions as the reader's guide to understanding without solving all the tension of the novel: By finding a voice, she reduces the alienating effects of *Beloved*, closes the distance between the text and the reader's experience, and fills in the blanks of Morrison's novel. Parallel to her maturation, which is tellingly triggered by Denver's leaving of the confined space of her mother's house on 124 Bluestone Road, the reader is also liberated from Morrison's (mental) imprisonment and from the Western 'prison house' of language: By following closely the example of Denver, the audience is able to integrate Morrison's story into her own worldview and to adapt her positions – in short, writer/teller and reader/listener create an environment in which the traumatic experiences with American slavery are no longer harmful. Telling/writing and listening/reading are thus complementary processes in Morrison's novel – Denver's and the reader's simultaneous and parallel efforts effectively fill the narrative cracks: Seen in one way, reading *Beloved* is a creative and life-giving process that leads to personal growth on the part of the audience. "Storytelling," as Harris sees it in another way, "is [Denver's] continual birth process, her continual bid to find herself, in the family portrait and to find value within the family" ("Shaping the Tales in the Tale" 94). Hence, Denver's stories are identity-establishing and they usher in her psychological maturation as well as her individual liberation – quite similarly as *Beloved* is a philanthropic gift to its readers that offers them crucial insights into American history.

The exposition of Morrison's novel, with its ambivalent power to create intimacy and to cause alienation, establishes clear links between the reader and Denver as both experience isolation and encounter a largely hostile environment. As a haunted mansion, 124 Bluestone Road is a prison-like confinement for its inhabitants, a dead-end from which people run away (e.g., Denver's brothers), or in which people are on their deathbed (e.g., Baby Suggs and

Sethe). As a ghost story, the novel as such likewise exceeds the audience's logical explanation. Both the reader and Denver feel estranged by the narrative(s). Before Denver's first entrance (*B* 13), Sethe and Paul D have been talking about their past briefly. Their memories are reported primarily in lengthy interior monologues that, however, leave just as much in the dark as they reveal. Consequently, questions arise and remain largely unanswered at that point: It is unclear what transpired at Sweet Home; Halle's fate is left unanswered; and no one really knows what happened to Sethe's daughter. Just as the infantile Denver enters "the dimness of the room in which they [Sethe and Paul D] sat" (*B* 13) with her childish, snow-white innocence, then, the unprepared reader enters the dimly lit narrative of *Beloved*. And parallel to the so far rather inexperienced audience, the adolescent feels excluded from the talk of the adults and consequently reacts defensively and even violently: Denver, for instance, "was suddenly hot and shy" (*B* 14) when she sees Paul D for the first time. Disconcerted with her mother and Paul D talking and with Sethe looking away from her, Denver realizes that she has to share her mother's attention. Rather inappropriately for a person her age, she feels lonely and forsaken (*B* 14).

Additionally, she is unable to comprehend Paul D's and her mother's stories about (or near obsession with) Sweet Home. As a result, she feels excluded from their conversation: "They were a twosome, saying 'Your daddy' and 'Sweet Home' in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers" (*B* 15). This clearly exemplifies that Denver has never been initiated to this part of her family's history and rather detests her mother's nebulous past.¹¹¹ Phelan therefore claims that Paul D's entry into the narrative world represents "an overt threat and a covert hope" (2007: 61): Although he changes the stern woman Sethe into a flirty girl, "Paul and Sethe with their talk of Sweet Home and [Denver's] father seem to share a world in which she has no place" (*ibid.*). Exasperated by this situation, she attempts to discourage further conversation between Sethe and Paul D, and acts up. Denver, for instance, provocatively asks them: "How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (*B* 16). Finally, however, she bursts into tears and screams: "I can't no more. I can't no more" (*B* 17). Despite the fact that she has not lived a single day of her life on Sweet Home, Denver's self-conception depends on her mother's distant time of enslavement to a significant degree: Sethe's reluctance to introduce her into her family's story and into the history of American slavery has led to a trans-generational transmission of the

¹¹¹ Later on, the narrator states, "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it. Not being in it, she hated it" (*B* 74).

mother's trauma onto the first generation to have made no firsthand experiences with the peculiar institution. Tellingly, Denver was born "on the bloody side of the Ohio River" (B 37) – pointing to the state of Kentucky where slavery was legal and metaphorically foreshadowing her inherited trauma. Just like the reader is haunted by the ghost of slavery and would probably like to simply evade these stories, therefore, Denver has reached a dead-end. She cries: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here [...]" (B 17). Both the adolescent fictional character and the reader will yet have to shake off the shackles of slavery – a slow and hard process through which both will guide and help each other.

Beloved's first chapter ends with the focus on a lonely, even isolated Denver who reminisces about stories by her brothers and her grandmother – narratives that, unlike the one(s) that her mother and Paul D speak about, comforted and settled her. Since Paul D has just driven out the ghost of 124 Bluestone Road, Denver has lost connection to the last, vague link to a distant, nebulous past. The narrator therefore states, "Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had. Denver dipped a bit of bread into the jelly. Slowly, methodically, miserably she ate it" (B 23). Parallel to Denver, then, the reader feels isolated, lonely, and left to her own devices upon the introductory chapter of *Beloved*: Just like the adolescent eats her bread and jelly, she has to consume Morrison's narrative 'slowly, methodically, miserably,' since a pathway to understanding only opens up through a continued, active, and participatory reading and rereading of the novel – a process that shall be guided by the readerly figure Denver. Especially the adverb 'methodically' gives this sentence a strangely technical, almost scientific connotation that links Denver's situation to the audience's reading of *Beloved*. Hence, Phelan concludes, "Denver is the character whom we can interpret and judge most readily" (2007: 63) – the audience can relate to her feelings, because both share their experiences of alienation, isolation, and frustration.

In order to escape this precarious situation, then, Denver and the audience will have to face the utmost importance of storytelling – they will have to come to terms with their responsibility for the meaning(s) of the narrative(s). The twice-told story of Denver's birth, for instance, can be read as meta-reference to the reciprocal relationship of producing and receiving meaning in *Beloved*. The two versions of this story show significant variations: While the first is presented as Denver's interior monologue with no audience whatsoever (B 36-45), the second is dialogical and has a very active, engaging, and demanding audience in

the person of Beloved (*B* 90-100); while one is a “told story” (*B* 36), I claim that the other can be coined a ‘felt story.’

Triggered by snowfall and the sight of Sethe kneeling in the keeping room with a white dress at her side, Denver is reminded of the story of her birth (*B* 35). What is especially striking about this entrance into the first version is the pervasive motif of whiteness. On the one hand, it can be argued that this color is a symbol for Amy Denver, the white girl who helped Sethe give birth and after whom Denver is named. On the other hand, however, especially the weather conditions indicate a certain distance between the actual birth scene and Denver’s recollection of her mother’s telling of the story: While Denver was born on a very hot day at the banks of the Ohio River during summer, the snowfall of an autumn day reminds Denver of “a thin and whipping snow very like the picture her mother had painted as she described the circumstances of Denver’s birth” (*B* 35). Apparently, Denver’s account lacks accuracy and underlines the fact that she has not yet fully understood her mother’s story or incorporated it into her life narrative. As a result, this first narrative is told in a rather passive and uninspired way. Denver, for example, attempts to – rather painstakingly – remain faithful to “[Sethe’s] exact words” (*B* 37). After this brief introduction, the largest part of this story is, in fact, presented through Sethe’s direct speech and resembles an imagined conversation between mother and daughter about the birth-scene, which Denver recalls almost verbatim (*B* 37ff.). Clearly, then, Sethe is the focal character of this version: Throughout this passage, she refers to herself in pseudonyms such as “her children’s mother” and “this baby’s ma’am” (*B* 36 and 37, respectively), which highlight Sethe’s centrality. The first narrative is therefore indeed a ‘told story’ – it is not the story of Denver’s birth, but the story of Sethe giving birth to her. The emotional and thematic gaps between Denver’s birth and her version of Sethe’s narrative signal the distance between mother and daughter, past and present: Sethe tries to keep Denver away from her harmful past thinking that it will damage her daughter. The narrator states, “As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (*B* 51). Paradoxically, however, the denial of a full initiation into her family’s history paralyzes Denver; she remains in a prolonged state of childhood and is afraid to leave the house on Bluestone Road. The absence of a co-creative audience results in Denver’s inaccurate, cold soliloquy. If the audience, in turn, refuses to become actively engaged in the construction of meaning – in other words, without the benefit of a participatory reader –, *Beloved* will not unfold the power of its philanthropic gifts either. The way Denver recounts the narrative of her birth therefore functions as a reminder for Morrison’s readership to assume responsibility for this novel. The differences between both

versions and especially Denver's changed role in the second narrative make this point sufficiently clear.

Markedly different from the first version, the second narrative of Denver's birth is characterized by a more immediate (reading) experience. Firstly, Beloved surfaces as a very demanding audience. Commanding Denver, she urges her to continue her storytelling: "'Tell me,' Beloved said. 'Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat'" (B 90). Instead of a silent inner monologue, then, Denver faces an active and collaborative listener. Hence, the narrator describes their mutual effort as follows:

The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. [...] Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it: the quality of Amy's voice, her breath like burning wood. (B 92)

Their communal, mutual process of storytelling and meaning-making once again highlights the inseparability of telling and listening. Especially the motif of music, encapsulated in the allusion to Denver and Beloved's performing of a 'duet,' indicates the importance of call and response techniques that are so pervasive in Morrison's novels in particular and African American culture in general (e.g., in religious sermons or spirituals). Secondly, in contrast to the 'told story,' the second version really is a felt story. Instead of the conversation of the first version, which Sethe clearly dominates and her daughter only recalls, this second version starts with Denver reporting what she has been told by her mother, moves on to the daughter's (re-) creation of her birth narrative, and gradually shifts focalization to Sethe's experiences of her flight: Through this onward movement from the outside to the inside, Denver – and with her the reader – are closer to the actual events. Especially the intermediate level is of importance here, because it can be taken as a metaphoric reference to the reading of *Beloved*. Since Sethe has never introduced Denver to the entire story, her daughter has to construct and invent things – she has, in other words, to become creative: "She swallowed twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved" (B 90). Parallel to the effort that the reader of *Beloved* has to make, therefore, Denver recreates a coherent narrative out of the bits and pieces she has been offered and thereby unearths the fine details of Sethe's narrative. Through Beloved's inquiries, urges, and demands – in short, through her active participation –, storytelling becomes a mutual process. Since both teller/writer and listener/reader shoulder responsibility for the story and its meaning together, this particular communicative situation seems to offer a far more

immediate (reading) experience: Denver, for instance, “began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it” (B 91). Through this collaborative effort, she is finally able to incorporate her mother’s story into her own life-narrative: “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it – through *Beloved*. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more *Beloved* liked it” (B 91/92). Hence, it is only the co-creative process of telling, listening, and retelling that eventually makes the story come alive: “So [Denver] anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her – and a heartbeat” (B 92).

The twice-told story of Denver’s birth can therefore be interpreted as an almost allegorical comment on the novel’s discourse about storytelling. Firstly, it highlights the damage Sethe’s *Geschichtsflucht* does to her daughter and it underscores the fact that traumas can be bequeathed to future generations. It seems to suggest that only a healthy amount of understanding of the past paves the way to a present and a future. Secondly, the centrality of an active audience is pronounced. In Morrison’s novel, then, meaning-making is not the sole prerogative and responsibility of the narrative message’s sender; instead, both teller/writer and listener/reader share in this collaborative effort. Lastly, the discrepancies between the two narratives of Denver’s birth indicate that this story, and *Beloved* by extrapolation, is a story to pass on to future generations. Just like Denver had to make a major effort to actually introduce herself to her family’s history and to invent things, so the reader of Morrison’s novel has to labor hard to come to terms with this narrative. Having read *Beloved*, however, the audience has ideally acquired new knowledge about the history of American slavery and may be able to actually add something meaningful to this discourse in the future. In this respect, the two versions of Denver’s birth function as blueprints for a more effective reading of *Beloved* and secure that the reader will not fall between the narrative cracks. Additionally, Denver assumes an active role in the creation of meaning in her mother’s story – or the history of American slavery. As a readerly figure, she thus guides and directs the audience: Through her example, it becomes evident that only a participatory reader will be able to unpack this novel’s philanthropic gifts.

In close contact with *Beloved*/Beloved, both the audience and Denver as readerly figure undergo a considerable change throughout Morrison’s novel. It can therefore be claimed that the novel stimulates the reader’s development, just like the eponymous character triggers Denver’s maturation. Right upon *Beloved*’s first entrance, Denver is deeply moved and greatly excited. The narrator, for instance, states, she “was shaking. She looked at this

sleeping beauty and wanted more” (*B* 63). Shunned by Cincinnati’s black community and confined to Sethe’s (prison-) house, she desperately longs for friendship – and the contact with Beloved alters Denver’s personal conduct dramatically: She develops from an insecure, childish girl to a caring, planning adult. Consequently, the narrator claims that Sethe’s daughter is suddenly overcome by “Patience, something Denver had never known” (*B* 65) and summarizes her positive development as follows:

Denver is a strategist now and has to keep Beloved by her side from the minute Sethe leaves for work until the hour of her return when Beloved begins to hover at the window, then work her way out the door, down the steps and near the road. Plotting has changed Denver markedly. Where she once was indolent, resentful of every task, now she is spry, executing, even extending the assignments Sethe leaves for them. (*B* 142)

With Beloved at her side, Denver matures and she is able to actually carve out her own identity.¹¹² The specific wording – Denver as ‘strategist’ who ‘executes’ her tasks – describes her as a determined, resolute character and connects her personal development to the reader’s growing experience in reading *Beloved*: Through approaching their tasks methodically, as I have already pointed out above, both are able to develop a range of skills in contact with the novel and the eponymous character. With the benefit of a person to interact with, someone who shares in the creative (re-) construction of (hi-) story, Denver experiences the therapeutic effect of storytelling for the first time. And her desire to please Beloved is only met by Beloved’s insatiable appetite for stories.

The power of their mutual effort of storytelling is once again compared to dancing: Just like Claudia equates the gossip of her mother and her female neighbors with a dance, so Denver and Beloved perform a couple dance that triggers Denver’s storytelling and starts her initiation into her family’s history:

Beloved took Denver’s hand and placed another on Denver’s shoulder. They danced then. Round and round the tiny room and it may have been dizziness, or feeling light and icy at once, that made Denver laugh so hard. A catching laugh that Beloved caught. The two of them, merry as kittens, swung to and fro, to and fro, until exhausted they sat on the floor. (*B* 87/88)

It is hardly surprising, then, that shortly thereafter Beloved urges Denver to talk about her birth (*B* 90) and that both will finally start their co-creative, collaborative framing of Denver’s birth.

¹¹² Her desire to care for and entertain Beloved, grown out of her great despair, also explains her extreme parting fears when Beloved momentarily disappears during the coldhouse scene: a loss of Beloved, it appears, equals a loss of self for Denver: “This is worse. [...] Now she is crying because she has no self” (*B* 145).

On an allegorical level, this can be interpreted as a reference to the reader's development while reading *Beloved*. Morrison's novel is directed at the personal development of her audience – or it may be even seen as an educating of the reader – and it provides its active, engaging readership with a rewarding reading experience. Just as Denver is Beloved's focus, so the reader is clearly at the center of attention of the novel. When Beloved is closely scrutinizing Denver's face, the narrator describes the latter's feelings as follows:

It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other. Having her hair examined as a part of her self, not as material or a style. Having her lips, nose, chin caressed as they might be if she were a moss rose a gardener paused to admire. Denver's skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother's waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was. (*B* 139)

Parallel to Denver being tried and tested, examined and challenged, urged and pushed by Beloved, the audience of Morrison's eponymous novel is brought into the center of critical attention. *Beloved* plays with the reader's expectations and with their cultural package that they, unavoidably, bring to the text. It offers its audience knowledge, insights, and development just as much as it demands the reader's active participation, constant cooperation, and willingness to except challenges to their worldview: In short, its philanthropic gifts have to be hard won by the reader. Hence, storytelling and reading are not one-way streets, and reading, in particular, resembles collaboration between text and audience, sender and receiver, which appears to be intimately connected to the special status of storytelling in African American culture.

Yet, Denver has to realize that telling stories about the past will not be enough; she has to develop a strong personality upon the sound basis of history and move on. Likewise, the reader has to struggle to integrate Sethe's and Paul D's horrible experiences during American slavery into their own version of American history; they have to critically incorporate the largely neglected slaves' experiences into their own knowledge. Both will have to prove that this is indeed not a story to pass on, as they have to emancipate themselves from the trauma of American slavery: For Denver, this means to live with her mother's and her people's slave history; the reader, in turn, has to revise the official record. Both, however, need to move beyond *Beloved/Beloved*.

Denver's maturation, although initiated by Beloved, is also a process that will eventually distance her from Beloved. Located somewhere between Beloved and Sethe, between past and present, Denver assumes an intermediate position that is vividly depicted in the ice-

skating scene. Here, Beloved wears the pair of ice skates, Denver wears only one, and Sethe wears none. Attempting to stand on her own two feet, “Denver stood up and tried for a long, independent glide. The tip of single skate hit an ice bump, and as she fell, the flapping of her arms was so wild and hopeless that all three – Sethe, Beloved and Denver herself – laughed till they coughed” (*B* 206). At this point in the narrative, she is utterly dependent; her intermediate position effectually prevents Denver from having a future and she is caught in a temporal dead-end – she is literally between the (narrative) cracks. Finally realizing that neither Sethe’s silence about her past, her *Geschichtsflucht* or ahistoricity, nor Beloved’s insatiable appetite for stories past constitute solid foundations for a life, Denver eventually assumes responsibility for her own future, her mother’s present, and for their past (partly represented in Beloved): “So it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would” (*B* 281). Guided by Baby Suggs’s spiritual advice to know her mother’s, her grandmother’s, and, thereby, black America’s history and to move on (*B* 288), she is able to leave 124 Bluestone Road’s narrow confines and Beloved behind. She comes to realize that there is a larger community that can provide further instruction and guidance. Ella, Lady Jones, and Janey Wagon, primarily, are the ones who actually reintroduce her to the black community and welcome her among their midst. Additionally, Denver learns that there are people who may benefit from her experiences and many critics see a future teacher in her (e.g., Krumholz 1992: 405). She develops an awareness of herself and a certain amount of self-esteem (*B* 297). As a readerly figure, in turn, Denver functions as a guide for the audience which, likewise, learns to integrate these stories – that is, to know them and to live with them – into its own life narrative. For the reader, this implies the pursuit of an active engagement with (African) American history and staying alert to any forms of racism that still pervade (American) society today. In short, the inherent reciprocity of the mutual effort of storytelling does not come to a sudden halt with Beloved/*Beloved*.

Therefore, the philanthropic impulse of storytelling surfaces most prominently in Morrison’s *Beloved* and her novel indeed has “life-changing properties” (“Goodness” n. pag.). In this regard, the character of Denver is of utmost importance: While storytelling initializes her personal growth, the reader can consider her as an example. Parallel to her maturation, then, the audience undergoes a considerable change and Morrison’s novel stimulates developments on a level immanent and non-immanent in the story proper. Within the text, Denver develops from an insecure, childish, and immature eighteen-year old into an adult who may become an integral and vital part of the community. Facilitated by Beloved as her participatory, co-creative audience, she is finally initiated into her family’s history and offered

the chance to actually develop a sense of self. Their mutual effort of storytelling transmits the gift of knowledge to Denver – and knowledge, ultimately, is key to her individual liberation and subjectivity. Beloved, however, only initiates her necessary process of coming to terms with her mother's past. Under Baby Suggs' spiritual guidance (*B* 288) as well as through the (female) black community's supportiveness and caring, her initiation into adulthood and their circle is completed (*B* 292). Her maturation thus finally distances her from Beloved.

As a readerly figure, then, Denver guides the audience's development outside of the story. Just as she had to integrate her mother's past enslavement into her own identity-narrative in order to mature, so the reader learns about the hitherto largely neglected slave experience. Hence, *Beloved* can be analyzed as a corrective to U.S. history that attempts to revise the official record. The novel, however, is only an incentive for the reader to reconsider their preexisting knowledge. The last chapter/coda especially challenges the reader's assumptions and understandings: Resisting narrative closure, it urges them to reread and refers back to the title, and thereby to the beginning of the novel, with the very last word "Beloved" (*B* 324). This repetition points into the direction of circularity as one of the most pervasive motifs in Morrison's novel.¹¹³ More important, however, is that it also underlines the similar effects of Beloved on Denver and of *Beloved* on the audience. This end of Morrison's novel highlights the intimate interrelationship of text and reader, a strong connection that is mirrored by the readerly figure's relation to Beloved. Finally, it is important to note that the agenda of *Beloved* does not resemble a simplistic lecturing of the audience. While the novel's impetus is unquestionably didactic, I content that it is so in a very positive sense of the word (closer to didactics than to didacticism). The knowledge, which the text provides has to be compared critically to the reader's, and the ultimate goal is to arrive at a more thorough knowledge by co-operation, collaboration, and communication. In an almost dialectical negotiation of different positions, then, a synthesis is derived out of competing standpoints. *Beloved* thus presents its audience with a threefold philanthropic gift: It introduces the reader to the crucial cultural technique of storytelling, it offers them knowledge about the American history, and it enables the participatory reader to pass the newly acquired knowledge on. Just as Denver may become an integral part of her community, so is the reader well prepared to participate in the discourse about race in the United States.

¹¹³ Here, the numerous repetitions of the characters' traumas – of Sethe's rape and Paul D's chain gang experiences – could be listed as proof. Moreover, *Beloved* consists of 28 chapters that signifies the female menstrual cycle, which is especially important in a novel that puts emphasis on recurring image of nursing and the topic of fertility, and that also symbolizes the full moon cycle. The novel's temporal narrative elements indicate circularity rather than Western linearity.

Denver shares many characteristics with Patricia (Pat) Best Cato in *Paradise*. For one thing, both are outsiders. Shunned for being too light skinned, Pat is not only a pariah within Ruby's community, but she is also virtually excluded from this town's history. Parallel to Denver's ambivalent feelings about her mother's past, she develops a love-hate relationship with Ruby: Even though she feels disgusted by its high airs and its exclusivity, she wants to belong to it. She thus defends her hometown's principles against outsiders (e.g., Reverend Misner) and she even attacks her own daughter Billie Delia, who is also groundlessly ostracized by the town for her alleged promiscuity. As many literary critics have also highlighted the parallels between Denver and Morrison, so, by extension, has Pat Best been seen as an embodiment of the author (Duvall 151; Roynon *Classical Tradition* 60): In her novels, Morrison sheds light on largely neglected aspects of U.S. history and gives a voice to formerly silenced people. Similarly, in tracing the genealogies of Ruby's families, Pat reveals gaps in their histories. By bringing to light people who have simply been erased from the town's official canon and said town's firm belief in racial purity, Pat's effort opposes the mythologized stories about the Old Fathers and their way to Oklahoma and about the "Disallowing" (*P* 189). Her genealogical research sharply contrasts with the apotheosis of the Old Fathers and their families and offers a more nuanced picture of Ruby. Both Denver and Pat have thus been interpreted as pedagogues who can provide knowledge about previously neglected sides of American history – the one by correcting our understanding of American slavery, the other by enriching our outlook on the founding of the nation.

Most importantly, however, both Denver and Patricia become engaged in an arduous task that resembles the audience's reading experience of the respective novels. Consequently, Pat can be interpreted as *Paradise's* readerly figure: Where the former's storytelling guided the audience's reading of *Beloved*, the latter's effort to interpret and disentangle Ruby's history mirrors the reader's work to excavate meaning from Morrison's novel. Valerie Smith, for instance, claims that as Ruby's historian, chronicler, and genealogist, Pat's labor resembles and seconds the reader's attempts to piece together the various narrative strands, numerous characters, and different subplots (93). Her ambivalent feelings toward Ruby are also echoed in the audience's stance toward this town – both take an inside-outside role with regards to Ruby. Provided with a substantial amount of background information by the narrative, the reader ought to understand the Old Fathers' reasons for their westward migration and ought to share their feelings during their journey. In *Paradise*, descriptions of the state of affairs at the *de jure* end of Reconstruction in the late 1870s and the ensuing legal restitution of racist legislation known as Jim Crow laws demonstrate how federal politics aimed at regional

compromise – effectively destroyed all African Americans hopes for equality: After years of continual hardships, following a brief if glorious time of political participation, the Ruby forefathers decided to join the so-called Exoduster Movement in 1890, a westward migration of African Americans from the South to Kansas and Oklahoma. Instead of the Promised Land, however, they too had to encounter racism, rejection, and even colorism, a form of intraracial discrimination. Vividly remembered in Ruby’s history, the Disallowing had a lasting effect on the Rubinites’ collective identity: Having been turned down by an all-black town – that is, by other African Americans –, the Old Fathers decided that they can only rely on each other, on the nine “eight-rock” (*P* 193) families who originally set out on their journey. Since this mythologized story “explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (*P* 13), the audience is able to understand Ruby’s story of origin and sympathize with its community’s protective isolationism and arrogant self-sufficiency – things that Pat is willing to defend against (or explain to) outsiders.

Despite all that, however, the audience becomes increasingly alarmed the further the reading takes them into the narrative of Ruby: Slowly, the reader discovers the New Fathers’ secrets and unearths the insurmountable problems at the heart of their alleged paradise. Repelled by their exclusiveness, oppressive patriarchy, and open hostility toward any stranger – toward the ‘Other’ (be they white, lighter skinned, or female) –, the audience shares Pat’s horror upon her discovery of the unwritten “blood rule” (*P* 195) at the heart of Ruby: Her history project, initially designed as a gift to the community (*P* 187), turns out to be a threat to the Rubinites’ integrity and their ostentatious righteousness, just like reading *Paradise* exposes the hypocrisy of this all-black town and its leading figures.

Parallel to the reader, who sets out on a (futile) quest to identify the ominous white woman from the opening words, Pat inquires into the identity of women mainly. During her research, she finally reveals Ruby’s dark secrets and unearths a systematic incest in order to preserve this town’s ‘eight-rock’ purity as well as its male leaders’ position of power (*P* 196/197). Comparing the Old and New Fathers, Haven and Ruby, ultimately, Pat also notices an increasing radicalization of the current male leaders. Having had to experience the Disallowing, the older generation’s isolationism, its mistrust of other people, and its tendency to solely rely on each other may be to some extent justifiable. Yet, the younger generation’s attitudes can hardly be defended at all. Returning from World War II, the Morgan twins and other men experience the “Disallowing, Part Two” (*P* 194) – the irony of returning from a war against racism to a violently racist country – and they find their hometown in decay. The

decision to desert Haven and start all over somewhere even farther removed from the rest of the world, however, results in a glorification of the past, bigotry, and violence: Claiming to follow the Old Fathers' principles, the younger generation breaks with what they identify as reasons for Haven's downfall and they part from the people with opposing views. Especially the Morgan twins would exercise the prerogative of interpretation of their forefathers' past and they would assume the role of the community's leaders. But, in mythologizing Haven and apotheosizing its Old Fathers, they bend and stretch communal history and undermine its underlying message. Hence, Pat states, "the ramifications of those ramifications [of the Old Fathers' history] were another story" (P 189). And one of the most severe consequences of the New Fathers' exegesis of their forerunners story is indeed the blood rule – a code effectively blocking marriage outside Ruby's small boundaries. Intended as an answer to the racist and colorist rejection of the original founders, this unwritten law, however, leads to incest, adultery, and hatred toward strangers. What once may have been a necessity of survival is now a weakness that leads to Ruby's stagnation, as best symbolized in its many dead or impaired children. Through Pat's research the negative consequences of the New Fathers' zealous efforts come to light: Their desperate attempt to hold on to their power and to uphold Ruby's patriarchal system leads to increasingly violent attitudes toward women and outsiders – the (racial/gendered) 'Other,' in fact, becomes a scapegoat for the town's shortcomings. Hence, Pat comes to the following conclusion: "That was their recipe. That was their deal. For immortality. [...] In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women" (P 217).

By extrapolation, then, the United State's grand narrative is also revealed as a story of oppressive patriarchy and racial violence. Tellingly, the present time of the narration (i.e., the shooting of the women at the Convent) is July 1976, the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. Bringing together two seemingly irreconcilable aspects, *Paradise* exposes one of America's pillars – the Declaration's famous dictum 'that all Men are created equal' – as mere pretense: Historically, the mythological 'land of the free' has, as the reader comes to realize, been based on bondage and suppression of large proportions of its inhabitants. The New Fathers' intense hatred of the women at the Convent and their firm belief in their racial stock's superiority resemble the U.S. being dominated by a WASP ruling class – that is, by male domination and racial subjugation. Moreover, throughout the novel numerous references are made to decisive moments and to several prominent figures in U.S. history: to the Revolution, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement; to Thomas

Jefferson, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and John F. Kennedy.¹¹⁴ By paralleling Haven's/Ruby's history with that of the United State, Morrison's *Paradise* may be read as allegory. In writing this historical novel, then, Morrison contrasts the U.S. nation's self-congratulatory self-image with a "counterhistory" (Byerman 2005: 24). Similarly, Pat's work as lay historian contradicts Ruby's sanitized founding myth and unearths the Old and New Fathers' dark secrets. Morrison's novel reveals history as myth and challenges its audience's understanding of historiography. *Paradise's* ending, then, at least concerning Ruby, is gloomy as the town faces disintegration: Its leaders are at war with each other and even the Morgan twins separate after the shooting at the Convent. Having betrayed and misinterpreted their forefathers' history, the very foundation of the Oven is shaken and the community's center is about to collapse (*P* 287). Likewise, the U.S. nation has not yet lived up to the ideals of its founding era and its principles, as enshrined in the Declaration and Constitution, do not apply to each and every American.

Comparable to Denver in *Beloved*, then, Marni Gauthier interprets Pat as a hinge between author and reader: "In *Paradise*, both Patricia and the reader are made to walk in Morrison's footsteps, and it is largely through Patricia's own literary archeology that the reader can creatively probe Ruby history" (411). In this respect, Pat guides the audience's reading and parallels its effort of meaning-making. Despite these parallels, there is, nevertheless, one major difference that also separates them: While Denver finds a voice and has prospects of a brighter future, Pat defends Ruby even against her own, better knowledge and judgment, loses connection to her daughter Billie Delia, and finally burns all her books. I therefore claim that she does not come to terms with Ruby's past, or with her past, ultimately. Having found out about the unwritten blood rule, for instance, she writes, "there is something wrong with that but other than number and the blood rules I can't figure out what" (*P* 197) and she even underlines the last five words in her genealogy. On the one hand, her indecision replicates the reader's feelings upon reading and attempting to decipher Ruby's intricate family relations – a process that poses a strong challenge to her abilities. On the other hand, however, this can also be taken as a clear sign for her inability to face the town's myth and to actively battle its ongoing mythologization – having discovered Ruby's dark secrets, she is unwilling to confront her town (or herself, for that matter) with it. Consequently, she burns her books in a desperate attempt to destroy what she herself cannot handle or admit, regretting what she has done almost instantly (*P* 216/217). As a readerly figure, Patricia's impact on the reading process is twofold: Indeed guiding the audience in its effort to disentangle the various

¹¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of the historical dimension of *Paradise* see Widdowson.

narrative strands, she, however, does not offer the reader a technique to really come to terms with the novel and its agenda; while storytelling in *Beloved* was Denver's and the reader's bridge to knowledge, Pat's scientific research can only be seen as an auxiliary to finding meaning.

4.2.3 'How Unreliable I Am' – *Jazz*' Unusual Narrator

Toni Morrison's sixth novel *Jazz* can be considered her most daring, her most challenging work to date. In style and content modeled after the eponymous African American music genre that gave name and substance to an entire age of U.S. history, it requires a very engaged reading and problematizes its audience's preexisting knowledge. Central characteristics of jazz thus permeate the novel: repetition (e.g., the two triangles Joe-Dorcas-Violet and Joe-Felice-Violet), variation (e.g., Joe hunting Wild and Joe hunting Dorcas), and improvisation (e.g., the 'solos' by Joe, Dorcas, and Felice in direct speech, which break up the narrator's tale) feature prominently in *Jazz*.¹¹⁵ Morrison's novel also draws a large historical canvas: Covering a time span of about half a century – from the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War to the mass exodus of African Americans from the rural South toward the urban North known as the Great Migration to the Jazz Age of the 1920s –, *Jazz* continues approximately where *Beloved* stops and ends roughly where *Paradise* completes Morrison's trilogy. Moreover, in juxtaposing "the City" (J 6) and a small Virginia county, Morrison shows how the past infiltrates the present should the characters of her novel fail to come to terms with their traumas. As the literal embodiment of a glorious present and a promising future for Joe and Violet Trace, the novel's main protagonists, Harlem is the complete antithesis to the middle-aged couple's rural background. Escape from the haunting ghosts of their pasts (e.g., Violet's and Joe's orphan status and their pronounced motherlessness), however, causes almost insurmountable obstacles for them: Joe and Violet hardly talk to each other; only when it is much too late, she desperately longs to be a mother; and he dives headlong into an ill-fated affair with a teenage girl. Once again, Morrison's shows that *Geschichtsflucht* is no viable option and that her characters will have to face their pasts in order to have a future.

This complex and intricate temporal layering, in which bits and pieces of Joe's and Violet's history are narrated, is again further complicated by an embedded story set in the

¹¹⁵ In an interview with Sheldon Hackney, Morrison has openly discussed her understanding of jazz and explained how it shaped the content, language, and form of *Jazz* ("I Come from People Who Sang All the Time" 126).

1870s featuring a mulatto man, a ‘wild’ black woman, and a skilled African American hunter, who all, to varying degrees, have wielded influence over the main protagonists. Additionally, the narrative situation is anything but simple: Although a first-person narrator conveys almost the entire narrative, it is virtually beyond any literary critic’s prowess to pinpoint the exact nature of this “impossible speaker” (Rody 622). *Jazz*’s narrator transcends and transgresses certain narrative boundaries and troubles the reader’s understanding: As a first-person speaker, she is naturally limited and unreliable; yet, she repeatedly makes claims to omniscience.¹¹⁶ “The combination is a logically infeasible voice,” explains Caroline Rody, “that of an individual present on the scene who yet can see through walls and across time to report everything from the private lives of individuals to the epic history of a people” (ibid.).

In contrast to *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, *Jazz*’ is not mainly concerned with “unspeakable thoughts unspoken” (B 235). Rather than foregrounding the ability to actually talk about one’s traumas, *Jazz*’s leitmotif of jazz implies that it puts emphasis on the capability and willingness to listen actively and closely: Just as a jazz concert draws its energy and uniqueness from the interplay of the performers as well as from the audience’s participation, so the characters in *Jazz* learn to listen to each other and so has the reader of this novel to sprout a sympathetic ear for the characters’ stories. In this respect, Nicholas Pici states that Morrison creates “a literary environment that necessitates reader involvement [and] reflects strikingly the dynamics of a live jazz performance, during which call-and-response audience participation invariably engenders an interactive musical discourse between musicians and listeners” (387). Unlike Claudia MacTeer and Denver Suggs, then, there is no character in *Jazz* that needs to find her voice and thereby guides the reader’s understanding. Quite to the contrary, the first-person narrator of Morrison’s sixth novel has a very loud voice – she, however, needs to activate her hearing capacity and, in that, the speaker mirrors the audience’s slow process of casting off its reading habits.

I therefore read *Jazz* and its unique narrator as a critique on Western reading, on the tools and attitudes readers bring to literature, and on the training behind these. Especially the historical context of this novel’s writing sheds light on *Jazz*’s agenda: Morrison began

¹¹⁶ I should strongly content that it is more instructive to follow Franz Stanzel’s terminology here because it cannot be decided whether or not the narrator of *Jazz* is indeed part of the story – her exact relation to the diegetic level of the novel is debatable. Further, the personal pronoun ‘she’ is not gender-neutral in this case and very many clues point to the fact that *Jazz*’ narrator is female; for instance, she uses certain expressions, such as the initial sound “Sth” (J 3), that Morrison connects with female characters in her other novels. However, just as her place in the novel is indeterminable, so is her identity. Regarding *Jazz*’ narrator Morrison has consequently stated that she “didn’t want gender or age or even race or anything to be identified” (“I Come from People Who Sang All the Time” 127).

working on the project, which would later develop into her *Beloved*-trilogy, in the early 1980s – at a time, then, when literary critics started to wage the so-called canon wars in the United States. Referring to an academic controversy in the 1980s/1990s, the canon debate was not at all restricted to cultural studies, but was also present in neighboring disciplines such as history or legal studies. During this debate, more liberal multiculturalists challenged the traditional ideal of humanist education (Banks 4). Attacking the teaching of ‘dead white men,’ they argued for a more open, a more inclusive canon that would also embrace so-called minority writers and positions (e.g., concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). Their attack on academic, social, and political conservatism demanded fundamental revision. Consequently, the canon wars did not only cause a diversification of the catalogue of standard works of literature, but also facilitated the emergence of new approaches to fiction. Moreover, a more inclusive canon triggered the development of a heterogeneous teaching staff as well as body of students. Apparently, then, the multiculturalists have emerged victorious from the battlefield and the canon wars have turned the humanities into vital, interdisciplinary, and open fields of study.

In this war, Morrison herself saw action in more than one theatre and contributed in various ways to the reform of the American canon. Historically, works by African Americans – especially female African Americans – had been virtually neglected by the academic establishment. As an editor, Morrison actively sought out literati and scholars who would normally not be published in major publishing houses and thereby transcended and expanded the canon’s boundaries step by step (e.g., through editing works by Gayl Jones, Angela Davis, and Toni Cade Bambara). As an intellectual and professor, she has been a very outspoken person in the critique on Western humanism’s primacy. In her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” originally published in 1989 and actually planned to be called ““Canon Fodder”” (“Unspeakable” 201), she, for instance, theorizes canon formation: “Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range [...] is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested” (“Unspeakable” 207, her emphasis). As a novelist, lastly, her works, too, had been pushed to the margins. After winning the National Books Critics Award in 1977 for *Song of Solomon* and especially after *Beloved*’s publication and her being awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, however, she became canonized. Hence, the reception of her novels clearly mirrors the transformation of the American canon and Morrison’s multifaceted involvement in the canon debates can hardly be argued away.

Her sixth novel, published in 1992 when the hostilities between traditionalists and multiculturalists had not yet fully ceased, can therefore be seen as a contribution to a still ongoing struggle: Here, Morrison engages critically with the production of knowledge in the Western world. Trained in the humanistic tradition, she possesses a firm grip on Greek antiquity as well as on the traditional (white) canon – after all, she completed her Master’s degree with a thesis on Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. With *Jazz*, however, Morrison wrote a quintessentially postmodern novel that shows a conscious play with certain literary conventions. Especially the unusual speaker – *Jazz*’ first-person narrator – and her know-it-all mentality can be interpreted as a critique on Western epistemology since Enlightenment: For all their scientific knowledge, for all their experience in analyzing literature, and for all their alleged insights, the example of *Jazz*’ narrator’s futile claims to omniscience seems to imply that Western readers and critics simply forget to listen closely to the texts and thereby miss the point. Their interpretations can lead to a totalization, essentialization, and universalization of meaning and knowledge. In her comparative study of Morrison’s novel and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Jane Lilienfeld, for instance, states, “Through content and narrative method, each text questions the meaning of knowledge, its origins, and its circulations” (44). Below, I therefore claim that *Jazz* puts into question the hegemony of Western thought and philosophy.

In stark contrast to ancient Greek dialectics, in which the dialogical process of knowledge acquisition starts with the admittance of one’s ignorance – most famously encapsulated in the idiomatic expression ‘I know that I know nothing,’ attributed to Socrates –, humankind’s reason and intellectual prowess have dominated Western thought ever since the Enlightenment. Today, curricula at universities and schools across the globe are shaped after that pattern and generations of school and university teachers, who continue to pass this technique on, are trained by the principles of that practice. As a result, Western epistemology is neither restricted to America nor to white people. Placing the mind over the body, reason over perception, interpretations by literary critics and students alike are steered by their thorough study of literature in schools and universities. Equipped with a firm knowledge of literary periods, of literary genres, of literary techniques, of certain masterpieces, and of the masterminds behind them, Western readers bring this cultural baggage with them to texts and apply their knowledge to the pieces of literature they encounter: They judge and compare, they look for similarities and differences, and they probably rank the works according to either ethical and/or aesthetical scales – in short, they interpret works. While hardly any literary critic will raise objections to this common practice, Western readers are nevertheless

susceptible to develop a know-it-all mentality: In their attempt to find answers to all questions and to solve all problems, they are unable to allow for contradiction, openness, slippage, and change. Instead of excavating meaning from texts, they also tend to impose their literary, historical, philosophical, et cetera, knowledge on fiction. And this is especially detrimental to literature: Once Western reading has formed a dominant reading practice for a piece of literature, academic discussions tend to stagnate. If, in addition, theories are simply mapped on the literature, fiction ceases to speak to its audience.

In its striving for ultimate truths, Western epistemology remains largely unaware of its inherent subjectivism. “In the Western empirical tradition, the ideal within each academic discipline is the formulation of knowledge without the influence of the researcher’s personal or cultural characteristics,” explains James Banks, “However, as critical and postmodern theorists have pointed out, personal, cultural, and social factors influence the formulation of knowledge even when objective knowledge is the ideal within a discipline” (5). What is important, Banks seems to caution, is to be aware of and to clearly identify the academic, ideological, and cultural corner one is speaking from, as well as to realize that there are many other perspectives from which to express oneself, which are equally instructive and productive for the development of academic discussions. It is exactly this potential slippage of meaning, this inherent flexibility and fluidity of knowledge, which *Jazz* offers its readers. “The text,” Eusebio Rodrigues maintains, “vibrant with sound and rhythm, invites us, we slowly realize, to set aside Cartesian logic in order to enter a magic world that cries out for deeper models of knowing” (734). In this setting, then, the enigmatic narrator of Morrison’s novel is of central importance: “it seemed natural, inevitable,” Morrison states, “that the narrator could – would – parallel and launch the process of invention, of improvisation, of change. Commenting, judging, risking, and learning” (“Foreword” xiii). Once again, a readerly figure guides the audience’s process of learning and secures its progress – just like *Jazz*’ unusual speaker comes to realize “how unreliable [she is]” (*J* 160) toward the end of the novel, so will the readers have to engage critically with their reading habits.

The opening pages of *Jazz*, which offer the audience a brief synopsis of the plot (*J* 3-6), establish the first-person narrator as omniscient. First, this passage is almost entirely narrated in past tense, the traditional narrative tense in English fiction. The use of the past implies a greater insight on the part of the speaker, since the events she is going to inform the narratee about have already taken place. This tense indicates a certain professional or objective distance between narrator and story, which greatly contributes to the overall impression of

the teller's certainty and self-assurance. Consequently, the first-person narrator appears to show an intimate knowledge of the characters and of the events. In the very first sentences she states, "Sth, I know that woman [Violet]. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband [Joe], too" (*J* 3). Assuming the role of a neighborly friend of the Traces, the narrator judges and interprets the main protagonists quite freely. She, for instance, comments on Violet's motivation to find out more about Dorcas and "the mystery of love" in a rather pejorative way with the offhand remark: "Good luck and let me know" (*J* 5). Concluding this passage and allegedly summing up the ensuing narrative, finally, the narrator makes a bold claim. Reading history as a broken record repeating itself, she asserts, "that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom" (*J* 6). In short, then, the opening of *Jazz* is designed to present the narrator as a trustworthy, reliable source that, with plenty of background knowledge and familiarity with the protagonists, can give her audience a detailed, accurate account of what happened. From these first words the reader is set on a quest to identify the roles of perpetrator and victim among the novel's cast – and, of course, to determine the narrator's place within this setting.

In addition, the audience also finds reassurance in *Jazz*' opening and in its seemingly reliable, omniscient narrator. For one thing, the inherently oral speech situation between narrator and narratee appears to imitate a colloquial conversation, which establishes clear links and sympathy between teller/writer and hearer/reader. From the initial sound of the narrator – "Sth" (*J* 3) –, the entire entry into Morrison's novel is replete with informal verbal and bodily language. When describing Violet's awkward dance steps, for instance, the narrator seems to demonstrate her dancing to her narratee (*J* 6). Many idiomatic and non-standard expressions permeate the narrator's speech: Ellipses are a rhetorical device that she uses frequently (*J* 3, 7, and 9). The vernacular phrases 'to have something down pat' (*J* 5/6), which translates to 'to master', and "what with" (*J* 6), meaning 'because,' further underline the oral quality of the narration. The interjection "Hep" (*J* 7), lastly, expresses her emotions and emphasizes her feelings about the city. Since it is also a slang term that roughly translates to 'cool,' this interjection contributes to the overall colloquial style of this passage. Additionally, the orality as well as aurality of *Jazz*' beginning is stressed by the narrator's jubilant description of the City and its musical undertones. Introducing her ode to Harlem with the sentence "I'm crazy about this City" (*ibid.*), she puts emphasis on her love for this New York neighborhood. Though not followed by an exclamation mark, this expression takes up an entire line – as a result, the speech pause that needs to be made after its uttering/reading clearly pronounces it and it produces an echo of the phrase. Further, her singsong – "Here

comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff” (ibid.) – refers to the energizing jazz music as well to its optimistic lyrics: The narrator’s words seem to capture the sentiments of the 1920s. Throughout the entire opening, lastly, she makes numerous uses of the second person singular pronoun (*J* 4-9, especially on page 9). While ‘you’ also has an impersonal meaning, roughly equivalent to ‘one,’ it is striking that the narrator refrains from the latter option. Hence, it is fairly safe to assume that the second person singular pronoun is a direct reader address in some, if not most instances. *Jazz*’ speech situation – its tone, style, and content – “activates a sense of immediacy,” explains Veronique Lesoinne: “the narrator is addressing someone who is looking at the same scene as he/she is, in a tone of gossipy friendliness between the speaker and the reader who thus turns listener and eyewitness” (152). Narrator and narratee – and, by extrapolation, author and reader – are linked by a close bond built on trust, friendship, and sympathy for each other.

The parallels between narrator and audience, between telling and reading the story, can, for another thing, also be found on a figurative level in *Jazz*. Commenting on the idea of a city map, the speaker states, “if you pay attention to the street plan, all laid out, the City can’t hurt you” (*J* 8) and just a few lines later, “All you have to do is heed the design – the way it’s laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow” (*J* 9). Apparently, then, the map decodes the design of the City, it makes it predictable, accessible, less threatening; it makes it known and legible, eventually. If we read the narrator’s comments as a metaphor, the mapping of the city translates into a trained reading of literature: Through scientific measures and the knowledge thereof (e.g., the map and the weapons of literary studies, respectively), the unknown becomes accessible – just as the narrator is able to read the city, the narratee/reader should be able to decode/read the text. Undeniably, these instruments are helpful and comforting, especially when approaching new, unconquered territory. Nevertheless, they, as will become clear during the course of the novel, should not be taken for anything else than what they actually are: auxiliaries. While reason and science are seemingly championed, and perceptions and the senses take only second place, the narrator, and through her example the reader as well, will soon question Enlightenment epistemology and its Cartesian dualism. For the time being, however, the audience finds comfort in a narrator that is not only on friendly terms with it but also appears to lend legitimacy to their well-established and learned reading habits.

With an allegedly knowing and reliable narrator firmly set in place and with the reader's understanding about the production of knowledge and handling of literature apparently confirmed, the largest part of *Jazz*, I argue, leads to a deconstruction of both the unusual speaker as well as the audience's beliefs. This corrosive process is initiated early on in the novel. While the first pages are almost entirely narrated in past tense, the following pages of the first chapter shift primarily to present (*J* 7ff.). In fiction, the use of present tense appears to be a more recent development, as for example the extremely successful *Hunger Games*-trilogy (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins shows. Moreover, people have claimed that the present is a tense more 'natural' to African Americans. Morrison, however, is rather skeptical of the latter hypothesis ("I Come from People Who Sang All the Time" 130). Regardless of whether the shift from past to present tense may be considered an indicator of a split narrative situation (Khaleghi 1), or a stylistic device forming the temporal and/or cultural background of *Jazz*, it in any case clearly differentiates both passages and strongly questions the reliability of the narrator. For example, the part set in present offers a contrastive view on Joe's and Violet's earlier responses to a picture of Dorcas. While, in past tense, the narrator described a uniform reaction by both – "both [...] looked at it in bewilderment" (*J* 6) –, in present, she further differentiates between the couple's thoughts and feelings: "Her face is calm, generous and sweet" to Joe, while "It is the face of a sneak" (*J* 12) to Violet. In the discrepancy of both descriptions of one and the same picture, Mahboobeh Khaleghi sees the misunderstandings possible in interpretation at its roots (3). In any case, the alleged verisimilitude of the narrator's account – which, initially, was set in past tense to further lend credence to the speaker and her story – is now undermined. The apparent lack of distance between the events and the narrating tentatively reveals the narrator's limited perspective: Her claims to omniscience are exposed as her subjective view of the events and of the people; they are her very own, potentially incorrect, opinion.¹¹⁷

The speaker's overly optimistic outlook on the future further pronounces this effect, as she boldly claims, "in 1926 [...] all the wars are over and there will never be another one. [...] At last, at last, everything's ahead. [...] History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last" (*J* 7). Firmly believing in the promises of the times and of urban industrial metropolises such as New York City, she cheers the opportunities for work as well as for fair wages, and takes pride in racial progress. In fact, however, the pull factors of the Great Migration – employment, money, and better living conditions in the North (*J* 33) – remained largely

¹¹⁷ Below, I will discuss the discrepancy between past and present tense in greater detail with reference to the narrator's transgression of narrative levels.

unfulfilled promises for African Americans: The many race riots of the interwar period, alluded to by the novel numerous times (*J* 53-55; 57; 61/62; 128/129), testify to that. Furthermore, not all the wars are over in 1926 as history has shown. This lack of historical knowledge creates a chasm between the narrator and the narratee – assuming that the latter, being the former’s friend, neighbor, or casual acquaintance, is her contemporary –, and between the implied reader as well. It clearly shows that any discussion about the receiving end of *Jazz* needs to differentiate between the narrator’s and the implied author’s audience. Hence, not only is the reliability of the narrator critically examined but also the interplay between teller(s) and the audience(s), which surfaces in the considerable differences between the narratee’s and the implied reader’s knowledge: Despite the intimacy between narrator and narratee, the subtle distinctions between the use of past and present tense, and the factually incorrect assumptions about the course of history appear to caution the observing reader against the speaker’s unreliability. With the benefit of their knowledge, the implied reader as well as the flesh-and-blood reader can and should not identify with the fictional narratee – *Jazz*’ audience, it is hinted at, should not fall for its narrator.

Lastly, the speaker’s numerous references to her insightful methods of uncovering the characters’ secrets cast doubts on her allegedly omniscient knowledge, which is explicitly illustrated throughout the opening pages. The narrator, for instance, states:

I haven’t got any muscles, so I can’t really be expected to defend myself. But I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it’s making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do. (*J* 8)

First, this cloaks the narrator in a mysterious aura that further contributes to her indeterminable identity mentioned above. Her self-image can also be seen as a potential reference to Cartesian dualism: All mind and no body, the speaker appears to be a metaphysical voice in the spirit of Enlightenment logic. The narrator’s attempt ‘to figure out everything and everyone,’ finally, ties in with her cheerful tone as it suggests self-confidence based on knowledge. Read against the grain, however, parallels emerge to other highly unreliable first-person narrators in fiction that overemphasize their credibility only to win over their audiences. In Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), for instance, the speaker insists on his sanity, sharpness of senses, and cunning, but turns out to be a maniac who killed an old man that he was actually committed to take care of. In *Jazz*, consequently, the narrator’s assumptions, judgments, and observations have to be taken *cum grano salis*.

In order to critically reflect on the narrator of *Jazz*, the readers have to keep their ears open – listening attentively to (i.e., reading) the narrative is paramount to uncovering the novel’s underlying agenda. A case in point here is the speaker’s disregard of the total absence of crucial factors in social change as well as her apparent indifference to the striking imbalance between future orientation and reliance on the past in her urban setting. Having sung her jubilant ode to the City, the narrator introduces the remainder of chapter one, which focuses on Joe and Violet Trace after Dorcas’ murder, and the girl’s infamous funeral, with another apparently joyful description of urban life: She describes the unlimited possibilities available in the microcosm of Harlem and its fast-paced society run by energetic young urban professionals. There is, however, a sharp contrast between the narrator’s unconditional love for the City and the numerous opportunities ahead for African Americans in New York on the one hand and the downsides of these times on the other: With every commodity imaginable right at hand, people forget about the absence of education and money in Harlem – although these, eventually, represent the true motors of social change; and with the alleged promises of the future, the past is neglected, family ties are disrupted, and a breach between the generations is to be observed.

The narrator is therefore distracted by the apparent miracles of city life – for example, public transportation, numerous shopping facilities, and leisure time activities, all accessible to African Americans – and almost neglects that two of the most important things are missing in Harlem: Only in parentheses, that is, only as seemingly unimportant side notes, which usually tend to be ignored by the audience, she states, “everything you want is right where you are: [...] (but no high schools), [...] (but no banks)” (*J* 10). Read against the grain, however, the attentive reader is able to translate the narrator’s silence surrounding the lack of education and money in Harlem into a strident criticism of structural weaknesses. Likewise, the storyteller talks about the outsider’s role of the old and about intergenerational relationships in Harlem:

The young are not so young here, and there is no such thing as midlife. Sixty years, forty, even, is as much as anybody feels like being bothered with. If they reach that, or get very old, they sit around looking at goings-on as though it were a five-cent triple feature on Saturday. Otherwise they find themselves butting in the business of people whose names they can’t even remember and whose business is none of theirs. (*J* 11)

The apparent gap between the generations, between the old and the young, effectively uproots urbanites: While almost all of Morrison’s novels have a benevolent ancestor figure at their centers (e.g., M’Dear in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva in *Sula*, Marie Thérèse Foucault in *Tar Baby*,

Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, and Miss Ethel Fordham in *Home*), *Jazz*' main protagonists lack this person's presence, since both Joe and Violet are orphans and have long cut the ties to their relatives and friends in Virginia.¹¹⁸ What is even more striking is that the narrator, distracted by the city's pleasures and with her mind firmly set on the future, does not object to Joe's and Violet's escapism; quite to the contrary, the point of view that she represents greatly contributes to the *Geschichtsflucht* that appears to be so characteristic for the Jazz Age and the interwar period.¹¹⁹ Hence, the attentive listener/reader discovers that – despite her firm belief in her (cartographic) knowledge – the narrator is deceived by the City and remains largely unaware of its underlying restrictions and structural imbalances. Moreover, she seems to accept the “deception” (*J* 34) of the City as an integral, even desirable, part of urban life.

Similarly, the seemingly all-knowing narrator, who, with almost graspable poise, pretends to know everything and everybody, deceives the (incautious, gullible) reader: Just as the narrator follows blindly the misleading design of the City, so – by being lured by the speaker's know-it-all mentality – is the audience prone to misinterpret the novel. I therefore read the deconstruction of the allegedly omniscient narrator as a metaphor for the canonical approach to literature and Western epistemology ever since Enlightenment in general: Because *Jazz*' narrator is not an authority, her omniscience nothing but mere pretense, and her unshakable truths and convictions anything but stable, the novel appears to suggest that any Western readers' understanding of knowledge and its production, their interpretive tools, and their apparent need to find and formulate final, conclusive truths need to be challenged. And this presupposes a fundamental reconsideration both in the narrator as well as in the reader – a developmental process, ultimately, that, in probing the boundaries between the fictional and the extrafictional, is initiated by the former and that makes a significant impact on the latter.

The Golden Gray episode (*J* 137-162) marks the turning point in the narrator's and the reader's journey toward deeper (self-) understanding. As an embedded story, this passage plays with narrative levels in *Jazz*: Following Genette, who coined the term, we can differentiate between an extradiegetic level (i.e., the level of the telling), an intradiegetic level

¹¹⁸ It can be argued that Henry LesTroy/Lestory, the skilled black hunter, and True Belle, Violet's grandmother, assume the role of ancestors. Since the Traces have left Virginia behind and there is no communication between them and their relatives – for all the reader knows, Henry and True Belle may long be dead –, they do not really meet the requirements of an ancestor, a person who is the community's center and its spiritual guide.

¹¹⁹ The detrimental results of a severance of family ties are to be observed in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, in which Macon Dead, Jr. breaks with his sister Pilate. This does not only lead to a cold, impersonal relationship of the members of his family, but also to a crisis of identity of his son, the novel's main protagonist. Interestingly, the beginning of *Song of Solomon* is set in Depression America and thus portrays the not so bright side of the interwar years; additionally, Macon Dead, Jr. and his sister Pilate have also experienced migration from the rural South to the urban North – there are, therefore, certain temporal and thematic parallels to be observed between *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*.

(i.e., the level of the told), and a metadiegetic level (i.e., a story within a story) (1983: 227-234). Narratologically speaking, then, the Golden Gray episode is at the metadiegetic level of *Jazz* and should be distinguished from the stories of the novel's characters (intradiegetic) as well as from the narrator's gossipy chat with her narratee (extradiegetic). The distinct narrative levels, however, do not operate in a vacuum; instead, they are closely related to and influenced by each other. Assuming that embedded stories are always subordinate to primary stories, Genette lists three basic functions of metadiegetic narratives. First, they have an "explanatory function" and may provide answers to the question: "What events have led to the present situation?" (1983: 232, his emphasis). Next, there exists a "purely thematic relationship" (1983: 233, his emphasis) between the intra- and the metadiegetic level: The subject matter of the embedded story provides either a mirror for or a contrast to the embedding story. When "the act of narrating itself [...] fulfills a function in the diegesis" (ibid.), lastly, embedded stories assume a narrative role. In *Thousand and One Nights*, for instance, Scheherazade tells numerous metadiegetic stories in order to prevent imminent death on an intradiegetic level.

When Genette's typology is applied to *Jazz*, especially the first two of these functions are of importance: Firstly, the Golden Gray episode offers the reader background information on Golden Gray, Hunter's Hunter, and Wild – characters that have had a considerable impact on Joe and Violet and thus contributed to their present situation (explanatory function). Foregrounding the constructedness and inventedness of the narration, secondly, this embedded story casts light on *Jazz* as well as on its narrator and parallels the novel's agenda of deconstructing Western epistemology (thematic function). Strikingly, however, there is no shift in voice during the Golden Gray episode, which is usually a defining factor whenever a change in narrative level occurs (e.g., a character at the intradiegetic level becomes the narrator at the metadiegetic level). Other than, for example, in the *Odyssey*, where books IX to XII are not told by the narrator but by Odysseus, *Jazz'* unusual speaker appears as narrator at the extra-, intra-, and metadiegetic level. This almost overpowering presence of the narrator, the very fact that her voice appears to be so deafeningly loud, lays pronounced emphasis on *Jazz'* aim: Through the narrator's deconstruction, narrative space for the readers is created and they become the actual focus of *Jazz*. Parallel to the attack on Enlightenment certainties, then, the latter's knowledge is challenged and their reading/listening faculties are further sharpened during the course of the novel.

Halfway through Morrison's *Jazz*, I interpret this embedded story as a *mise en abyme* and/or metalepsis that exposes the work as artifice; that raises crucial questions about the distinction between the fictional and the extrafictional; and that challenges notions such as truth and knowledge. Even though structurally and functionally related to each other, narratologists nevertheless discriminate between the concepts of *mise en abyme* and metalepsis. On the one hand, both can be seen as metafictional devices that reveal fictional representations *as* fictional representations and both are used to describe the relation between different narrative levels. *Mises en abyme*, on the other hand, reproduce certain characteristics of the framing story (e.g., thematically or structurally), while metalepses violate narrative levels.

In most basic terms, a *mise en abyme* is a story within a story (or a film within a film, a picture within a picture, etc.) that imitates certain characteristics of the embedding story: Lucien Dällenbach explains, “a ‘*mise en abyme*’ is any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated or ‘specious’ (or paradoxical) duplication” (36, his emphasis). In reduplicating the structure of the primary narrative, the *mise en abyme* casts light on the framing story – an analysis of a narrative of the second degree will therefore have significant repercussions on the diegetic situation, that is, on the intra- as well as extradiegetic level of narration. As a literary device in postmodern fiction and literary criticism, the recursive, and potentially even infinite, mirroring of images (e.g., a story within a story within a story etc.) highlights, for instance, the intertextuality and instability of language: *Mises en abyme* underline that meaning does not solely reside in the text, but is created by the reader. Theorizing the function of the *mise en abyme*, Dällenbach claims that they reflect on the utterance, emphasizing “the *result* of an act of production” (75, his emphasis); the enunciation, bringing “into focus the agent and the process of production itself” (ibid.); and/or the entire code of the narrative, where this stylistic device makes “the *way the narrative functions* intelligible” (98, his emphasis).¹²⁰ Especially the last function – according to Justin Weir “the best reason for turning one’s interpretive attention to *mises en abyme*” (xxii) – is of importance: Here, Weir claims, “the text seems to say ‘read me this way’” (ibid.) and foregrounds the communicative situation between sender, message, and receiver. As key to the code of the text, the *mise en abyme* reflects the production and reception of fiction. Applied to Morrison's *Jazz*, I argue that the (implied) reader is to recognize the constructedness of the novel by perceiving the parallels between the obviously fabricated

¹²⁰ Dällenbach, however, points out that it is impossible to come up with a clear-cut distinction between the three functions of the *mise en abyme* (107).

Golden Gray episode and the equally fictional, but supposedly factual, primary story told by the omniscient narrator.¹²¹

Taking this metafictional function one step further, metalepses transgress the borderlines between narrative levels. By, for example, a doubling of temporality, so that story and narration appear to be contemporaneous, they cause a contamination on the level of the telling and the level of the told, which then has certain repercussions on the process of reading: “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into the metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse [...],” Genette maintains, “produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [...] or fantastic” (1983: 234/235). In blurring the boundaries between narrator/narratee on the one hand and author/reader on the other hand, metalepses problematize the traditional distinction between the fictional and the extrafictional: The conflation and transgression of narrative levels leads to a destabilization of the reading process and Genette thus explains, “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative” (1983: 236). In *Jazz*, then, the narrator violates narrative levels at several points in the novel – her intrusions can, however, be felt best in the Golden Gray episode. Here, the metalepsis brings an end to the speaker’s claims to authenticity, to omniscience, and to factuality. By extrapolation, Lilienfeld argues that Morrison’s novel “illuminat[es] and reflect[s] contemporary debates concerning the postmodern dissolution of Enlightenment sureties about such issues as the human subject, truth claims, and scientific objectivity” (58, note 6). Below, I discuss the Golden Gray episode as a metalepsis that contains a *mise en abyme*, or, conversely, as a *mise en abyme* that shows certain metaleptic characteristics.

Right at the outset of the narrator’s and the reader’s turning point in their parallel developmental processes, the former frames a direct reply to Joe’s claim to know about the hardships and sorrows of an older generation of African Americans in the South, uttered at the end of the preceding chapter (*J* 135): “Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me – curious, inventive and well-informed” (*J* 137). Chiding Joe for his ignorance and arrogance, she stresses the differences between herself and Joe, and appears to firmly believe in her alleged knowledge as well as in her almost

¹²¹ Even though the Golden Gray episode is, strictly speaking, not a *mise en abyme* in the truest sense of the term, since there is no easily discernible change in narrative level and since it is not a novel within a novel (Dällenbach 35), its function as a mirror for the frame tale provides quite enough justification to apply this term here.

investigative methods. Despite the fact that she is highly critical of Joe's claiming to be able to read other people's minds, the narrator freely creates the story of Golden Gray out of the bits and pieces the main protagonists have provided and thus enters the metadiegetic level: "So [Joe] didn't know. Neither do I, although it's not hard to imagine what it must have been like" (ibid.). The introduction into the Golden Gray episode points explicitly to the fictionality of the entire passage: Regardless of her own ignorance, the narrator continues to believe in her omniscience – up to the point where fantasizing is indistinguishable from telling the truth. As a result, this embedded story addresses some of the novels most pressing questions: What is true, what is false? What is fact, what is fiction? What can we know? How do we produce knowledge?

The Golden Gray episode exposes the narrator's know-it-all mentality and it violates the novel's narrative levels. First, it is permeated with explicit references to the narrator's limited point of view. Having claimed to be able 'to imagine what it must have been like,' *Jazz*' unusual speaker's explanation of True Belle's feelings and her interpretation of Golden Gray's motivation to help Wild are anything but accurate, factual accounts. Uncertain about the former's feelings upon leaving her family behind (*J* 141/142), the narrator's assumptions are revealed to be mere speculations: "Her state of mind," says she, "must have been a study" (*J* 137). The epistemic modal 'must' indicates an estimation of the likelihood that the statement is true. Even though this modal verb ranks high on the scale of probability (as opposed to, for example, 'might,' which would indicate serious doubts about the truth value of the phrase), the use of this modal construction alone questions the speaker's commitment to the truth of the utterance's proposition. To say the least, there is a considerable distance between the narrator's speculative statement about True Belle and more neutral ones (e.g., 'Her state of mind *has* been a study.'): Implicitly, then, the narrator's confidence in her own knowledge is critically reflected and her alleged omniscience strongly questioned.

Likewise, the unusual speaker is unsure about Golden Gray's picture of Wild and his reasons for helping her:

When he stopped the buggy [...], perhaps it was because the awful-looking thing lying in wet weeds was everything he was not as well as a proper protection against and anodyne to what he believed his father, and therefore (if it could just be contained, identified) – himself. Or was the figure, the vision as he thought of it, a thing that touched him before its fall? The thing he saw in the averted glance of the servants at his boarding school; the bootblack who tap-danced for a penny. A vision that, at the moment when his scare was sharpest, looked also like home comfortable enough to wallow in? That could be it. But who could live in that leafy hair? that unfathomable skin? But he already had lived in and with it [...]. And if he shuddered at the

possibility of her leaning on him, [...] it is also true that he overcame the shudder. Swallowed, maybe, and clicked the horse. (*J* 149/150)

For one thing, the numerous questions in this passage can be seen as rhetorical questions. Used often in persuasive and suggestive speech, this type of question is a stylistic device that imitates dialogue and can also be taken as a reference to the call and response technique at the heart of jazz. For another thing, however, the fact that the narrator provides answers to these questions herself, the various modal expressions in this excerpt, and the conditional clause all indicate a certain insecurity on the part of the speaker and highlight her need to reassure herself of her omniscience. Realized both grammatically as modal verb ('could') as well as non-grammatically/lexically as adverbials ('perhaps' and 'maybe'), the linguistic modality of the quotation, again, calls into question the narrator's commitment to truth. At the same time, the conditional clause casts further doubt on the speaker: Apparently, this phrase is a zero conditional that implies factual and general truth of the statement. Since the hypothesis in the protasis challenges the narrator's very own account of Golden Gray's horror about Wild sitting in his carriage, it is diametrically opposed to the reassuring consequence in the apodosis. This obvious discrepancy, then, shows that the speaker is rather undecided about Golden Gray – if she really knew him, that is, if her story were true, she would not have to be so vague and to be critical of her own account. The narrator's insecurities about True Belle and Golden Gray thus undermine her claims to knowledge and reveal her stories as fictitious.

Secondly, the Golden Gray episode contains many direct intrusions by the narrator into the embedded story that explicate her subjective view, for example, "I see him" (*J* 143), "I like to think of him that way" (*J* 150), and "He's avoiding her, I know" (*J* 152). Most often, these intrusions happen in the form of indictments of Golden Gray and the speaker is very outspoken in her criticism of this character. Calling him a "hincty pinch-nose [worried] about his coat and the ivory buttons on his waistcoat" (*J* 143), the narrator is disgusted with his alleged snobbery and with his lacking concern for the injured Wild. However, the speaker is apparently also of two minds about Golden Gray: Torn between adoration and repulsion, between Golden Gray's apparently beautiful outside and his deficient inside, she states, "It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore" (*J* 151). By judging Golden Gray, the narrator conflates the level of the telling and the level of the told. I read the collapse of the boundary between intra- and metadiegesis as a metafictional comment on the deconstruction of sureties that came under attack in postmodern fiction and theory: By destabilizing the reading process, the audience's attention is directed toward the fictionality of the episode and

the reader has to revise her picture of the narrator; by extrapolation, then, the audience has to reflect on her preexisting knowledge too.

The Golden Gray episode can therefore be analyzed as a recapitulation of *Jazz* in miniature: The two different accounts of the eponymous character's story, the narrator's comments on Golden Gray's modeling of his narrative, and the change in tense between the several parts of this chapter certainly prove that point.

First, there are two versions of the story of Golden Gray saving Wild in the woods that show slight differences (*J* 143-149 and 150-155, respectively): In the first account, the narrator sees Golden Gray "in a two seat Phaeton" (*J* 143); Wild has "large and terrible" (*J* 144) eyes; there is only "a tickle of blood down her jaw" (*J* 146); "[Golden Gray] takes his horse into one [stall] and wipes her down carefully" (*ibid.*) before tending to the unconscious woman; he finds a "heap of ash" (*J* 147) in the fireplace at Hunter's Hunter's cabin; and covers Wild with a "strange-smelling dress" (*ibid.*). The account casts a negative light on Golden Gray, who is portrayed as a snobbish, rather immature adolescent on a meaningless quest for revenge. Throughout this passage, then, the narrator emphasizes Golden Gray's concern for his (material) possessions, his abhorrence of the injured African American woman, and his disgust at his father's apparently sparse belongings and his spartan living conditions.

The second version, however, reflects well on Golden Gray: Instead of the expensive Phaeton, he drives just a random "carriage" (*J* 150), which will, in a subsequent retelling of parts of this episode through Hunter's Hunter's eyes, even become a "buggy" (*J* 168); he only waters his horse in the stall (*J* 150) before immediately taking care of Wild; he finds a clean fireplace and "a woman's green frock" (*J* 152), which conveys a more favorable view on his father's cabin and presents a link to his mother; Wild has now "deer eyes" (*ibid.*), that imply a certain closeness and affection on Golden Gray's part (through the homonymy of 'deer' and 'dear'); and her eyes are, moreover, completely covered in dried blood caused by a severe wound on her forehead (*J* 153/154), which turns her rescue into a more heroic act and recalls the chivalric theme of the damsel in distress. The fact that the narrator provides more details at crucial points (while being sparse with them at other moments) and draws a more nuanced portrayal of Golden Gray testifies to her undecidedness about that character and shows that she does indeed freely alter her accounts. The slightly different versions of Golden Gray's story thus uncover the fictionality of this episode, reveal the narrator's stories as artifice, and call her know-it-all mentality into question.

This point is further pronounced by the unusual speaker's harsh judgments. Imagining a conversation between Golden Gray and his father, the narrator insults him for shaping a story – although she shapes and alters the narrative all the time: “I know he is a hypocrite; that he is shaping a story for himself to tell somebody, to tell his father, naturally. [...] He is lying, the hypocrite” (*J* 154). Utterly unable (or unwilling) to perceive the similarities between herself and Golden Gray – after all, the narrator is telling her story to a listening narratee –, the speaker is torn between disgust at and pity for this character. Yet, blaming his ignorance on Golden Gray's youth, she still believes in her deep insight and superiority: “He's young. So young. He thinks his story is wonderful, and that if spoken right will impress his father with his willingness, his honor. But I know better” (*ibid.*). The narrator even sets out to deconstruct Golden Gray's story: “Why doesn't he wipe her face, I wonder. She is more savage perhaps this way. More graphically rescued” (*J* 155). Highlighting the constructedness of Golden Gray's narrative for dramatic purposes, she (unknowingly) foreshadows the work that the reader will have to do when dealing with *Jazz*: Just like the unusual speaker deconstructs Golden Gray's words to his father, so the audience will have to read the narrator's accounts against the grain. It is hardly surprising, then, that she forgives Golden Gray “his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures” and concludes that she does not “hate him at all” (*ibid.*). Implicitly, the narrator acknowledges the parallels between herself and Golden Gray: In the end, they are both unreliable speaker's whose claims to truth and authenticity are null and void.

The narrator's judgments on Golden Gray point also to the next issue, namely, the metaleptic transgression through a shift in tense that signals a change in narrative level: While the introduction into the episode (*J* 137-143), the interlude between the two versions (*J* 149/150), and the largest part of the chapter's ending (*J* 155-162) are narrated in past tense, the two versions of Golden Gray's encounter with his father and Wild are told in present tense.¹²² As I have already stated above, past is the traditional tense of narration in English. For that reason it can be argued that the parts of the Golden Gray episode in past tense are positioned at the intradiegetic level of the novel: Here, the narrator simply reports the events. Strikingly, however, throughout the novel – and especially in the Golden Gray episode – the past tense narration is interrupted by present tense; and whenever this happens, the level of the telling contaminates the level of the told. The parts told in the present are at the extradiegetic level of *Jazz* – the narratological level at which the narrator is conversing with

¹²² There are other parts in the Golden Gray episode that are also narrated in present tense: the imagined conversation of the eponymous character with his father (*J* 154) and Golden Gray's interior monologue/stream of consciousness narration (*J* 158/159). I will focus on them momentarily.

his narratee. As a result, there is a direct reference to the narratee (and potentially to the reader) in the Golden Gray episode: “Can *you* see the fields beyond, crackling and drying in the wind,” asks the speaker, and further: “The blade of blackbirds rising out of nowhere, brandishing and than gone?” (*J* 153, emphasis added). The use of the second person pronoun and the stylistic device of the rhetorical question imply a certain dialogical dimension. Further, this shows that the Golden Gray episode is explicitly designed for the narrator’s audience: It is fabricated to cater to their needs and to bring about a certain response in the hearer/reader.¹²³

While the analysis of the Golden Gray episode has, so far, revealed the narrator’s omniscience as mere pretense and exposed the fictionality of the story, I will now argue that this passage marks indeed the turning point in the speaker’s and the reader’s parallel development toward a deeper understanding: For the first time, the narrator admits to herself that she only has a limited scope shortly after two embedded stories within the embedded story of Golden Gray. Adding yet another layer to the already complex narrative situation, the imagined conversation with Golden Gray’s father (*J* 154) and his interior monologue (*J* 158/159) make a considerable impact on the unusual speaker as well as on the reading of *Jazz* in general. Circumstantial evidence suggests that both emanate from the narrator’s imagination. Formally speaking, they appear to imitate direct speech: Both are marked off with colons and the second is ushered in with the introductory phrase “he thought” (*J* 158). The missing quotation marks and the rather fluent passage from the narrator’s to Golden Gray’s words – from one sentence to the next, within one and the same paragraph –, however, do not indicate a shift in voice. From a narratological perspective, then, both passages seem to be at the extradiegetic level: Told in present tense, the imagined dialogue and the interior monologue are, parallel to other parts in the Golden Gray episode, at the level at which the narrator addresses her narratee directly. Therefore, these embedded stories indeed illuminate decisive aspects of the framing story as well as of the novel at large, and, through the metaleptic violation of narrative levels, transport the reader of *Jazz* more firmly into the novel: “Like listeners drawn into the music,” explains Rody, “our position as story-receivers is transformed by a teller who urges us to enter with her into the work of creation” (627).

¹²³ Since the Golden Gray episode is partly reiterated in past tense in chapter seven (*J* 168-173), adding a third version with a focus on Joe’s birth, this further underlines the (implied) author’s deliberate use of metalepsis, her conscious play with the transgression of narrative levels, which is to highlight the fictionality of the entire novel as well as to cast doubt on notions such as truth and knowledge. Again, the shift in tense implies a shift in narrative level and this passage is at the intradiegetic level. Moreover, there is also a shift in perspective: While chapter six is largely told through Golden’s eyes (or through the eyes that the narrator imagines), the main focalizer is Hunter’s Hunter in the chapter that follows.

Regardless of whether they are the sole product of the narrator's vivid imagination or not, both passages enable the speaker to undergo a change of perspective. This development becomes apparent regarding the contrastive effects that the imagined dialogue on the one hand and the interior monologue on the other have on the speaker: Whereas the narrator rejects the truth value of Golden Gray's words to his father and deconstructs his dialogue, the second passage makes her realize her failures. Through the metaphor of the severed arm, which signifies Golden Gray's fractured identity caused by the absence of his father, the narrator understands that it is not vengeance that Golden Gray seeks and that it is not hatred of his mixed racial status that drives him. Thus, she harshly criticizes herself: "What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? [...] I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am" (*J* 160). Provided with a deeper insight into his feelings and thoughts by means of the interior monologue – a depth the speaker did not grant Golden Gray before –, the narrator admits to her limited perspective. In stark contrast to the map metaphor, which gave the narrator a sense of security through alleged knowledge, she now comes to realize her ignorance through another metaphoric expression of the experiencing of (narrative) space: "Even his horse had understood and borne Golden Gray along with just a touch or two of the whip," she states, "It did not know where it was going and it knew nothing of the way, but it did know the nature of its work. Get there, said its hooves. If we can just get there" (*J* 160). Claiming to know the way exactly, the narrator neglected 'the nature of her work' – she ranked science and allegedly objective knowledge higher than (her) natural instincts. Similarly, the reader – in following blindly the speaker's lead and thereby thoroughly believing in the tools of literary studies – is also prone to develop a know-it-all mentality that effectively blocks them from understanding: Only through carefully listening to, that is, through reading closely, as *Jazz* suggests, will the audience be able to continually excavate meaning(s) from the text.

The unusual speaker's change is a potential meta-comment on the reading of Morrison's novel. The nesting-doll principle at the heart of *Jazz*' narrative construction creates permeability from inside to outside, from the meta- to the extradiegetic level; the transgression of narrative levels through the narrator's intrusions, moreover, extends this and blurs the boundaries between the fictional and the extrafictional realm. When the narrator states, "Now I have to think this through, careful, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down" (*J* 161), this, likewise, functions as a reminder for the reader to regard meaning as non-essentialist, fluctuating, and potentially contradictory in nature. It can also be regarded as a challenge to certain alleged sureties of

Western thinking: By deconstructing truth, knowledge, and the production thereof, *Jazz* contributed to an ongoing discussion in academia and the public in the 1980s/1990s (specifically the canon wars, as was discussed in depth above) and continues to exert influence over reading practices. Hence, Khaleghi maintains, “*Jazz* humanizes and therefore problematizes the all-knowing omniscient narrator” (2). The destabilization of omniscience leads to an appreciation of contradiction, change, and slippage in meaning: Just like the “narrator-goddess” (Rodrigues 751) will have to face her human fallibility and is confronted with her limitations, so the readers will have to reconsider their preexisting knowledge and (academic) training.

Consequently, there is a decisive shift throughout *Jazz* from the overpowering presence of the narrator’s voice, which allegedly claims to report the truth about everything and everyone, to a clear focus on the narratee/reader at the end of the novel. And this shift – from the sending to the receiving end of the fictional message – strongly questions the producer, the production, as well as the product of meaning. Narrated in present tense or from an ex-post perspective located in the present, chapter ten is situated at the level of the telling, at which the narrator is in conversation with her narratee. By extrapolation, however, I argue that the text is in direct conversation with its flesh-and-blood reader at the end of the novel. First, the last chapter contributes to the novel’s problematization of omniscience. Here, explains Rody, the unusual speaker “Expos[es] its ‘know-it-all’ omniscience as a sham [and] reveals itself as vulnerable, limited, personal” (625). “I thought I knew them” (*J* 220), the speaker states about the assumptions that she no longer holds about her knowledge of the characters in Morrison’s novel. Shocked by the Golden Gray episode and by the fact that her initial prediction about history repeating itself is contradicted, the narrator comes to realize “how poorly, how shabbily [her] know-it-all self covered helplessness” and that she “was the predictable one, confused in [her] solitude into arrogance, thinking [her] space, [her] view was the only one that was or that mattered” (ibid.). I take this deconstruction of the narrator as a comment on the reading of Morrison’s novel: The isolation of the speaker mirrors the usual isolation of readers of novels. In discarding their mindset and revising their beliefs, the audience and the narrator also have to admit to their ignorance. Parallel to her formerly arrogant claims to omniscience, the narrator therefore puns on her own effort to figure out things and people, and states, “Something is missing there. Something rogue. Something else you have to figure in before you can figure out” (*J* 228). Likewise, the readers of *Jazz* have to ‘figure in’ change and polysemy in meaning as possibilities that may alter their interpretation of that novel. Hence, Rody detects a “postmodern play with the convention of the omniscient speaker” –

primarily employed by female writers of fiction from the margins of American society – “that works to reconfigure the relationship among narrative knowledge and power, identity and desire” (621).

The shift from the sending to the receiving end of the communicative system, secondly, links narrator and narratee (or text and audience) in a reciprocal, mutual process of telling and listening (or writing and reading) that can be compared to a romantic relationship:

Talking to you and hearing you answer – that’s the kick.

But I can’t say that aloud; I can’t tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (*J* 229, her emphasis)

Morrison’s novel has created narrative space for the receiving end of the story and the reader will have to assume responsibility for the meaning of *Jazz* as well as for the construction of world knowledge in general. The audience has to realize that meaning is never cast in stone, but remains always open to modification and contradiction. Hence, *Jazz* challenges the notions of truth and authenticity, and mirrors the academic spirit of the time of its conception and publication – a time in which universal values came under attack and in which the humanities changed considerably into what we know today.

The use of the second person singular pronoun ‘you,’ lastly, can be interpreted as a final transgression of the distinction between the fictional and the extrafictional, which is to further underline the parallels between the narrator and the reader. Through the oral quality of the novel, which suggests a colloquial, gossipy intimacy between narrator and narratee, and through numerous invocations of the reader throughout the novel (most notably, of course, in the Golden Gray episode and at the end of the book), the close proximity and intimacy between sender and receiver has abundantly made clear (Page “Traces of Derrida” 63/64). *Jazz*’ inherent orality and aural quality heavily relies on certain African American cultural practices such as call and response, witnessing and testifying, and the communal effort of storytelling. These rhetorical devices are not dominated by a powerful speaker/author and cannot be divided along the binary of active/passive. Instead, they blur the boundaries between teller and listener and, in the case of storytelling, introduce the latter to the ‘circle’ of knowing people so that she is, in fact, able to become a future storyteller herself.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ These rhetorical and stylistic aspects can also be linked to jazz: Lars Eckstein, for instance, has analyzed the musical quality of Morrison’s novels and forwarded the notion of “jazzthetic” (272) to describe her reliance on improvisation, slippage, and audience participation.

Toward the novel's ending, then, the invocation of the reader leads to a collapse of certain well-established narratological categories and problematizes the boundaries between fiction and reality. Matthew Treherne, for instance, maintains, "the 'you,' for the first time in the text, refers to the reader – or if one prefers, a narratee with no difference from the real reader" (199). The final words of *Jazz* testify to the performativity of the novel: Here, narration is conceived of as collaboration between teller and listener, writer and reader, text and audience: "By situating the narratee as a co-creator of the text," Lilienfeld writes, "the implied authors incorporate the reader in a community that does not erase difference, but demonstrates through narrative strategies of reading postures the possibility of shared knowledge" (57). In this setting, sender and receiver share responsibility, and the latter becomes central for the construction of meaning. Instead of closure, instead of the metaphorical death of the novel following its academic interpretation, the ending of *Jazz* calls for a continuous cooperation of reader and writer that allows for slippage, change, and contradiction in meaning and thereby challenges Western thought patterns and its know-it-all mentality: "Now you are free to close the book, to reopen it wherever you choose, to move backward or forward," concludes Lesoinne. "And every new reading of this book or part of it will be a remaking. For each time you do that, you will be the same and different at once – it is still you, but you have had new experiences in between" (163). Hence, *Jazz* ends on a pronounced note of attention toward the reader, as Morrison "invite[s] us to write the novel with her as we are reading it, to (re-) create the novel, and by the same token to (re-) shape ourselves. In that sense, she offers the reader the opportunity to become the protagonist of his/her version of *Jazz*" (Lesoinne 151). In stark contrast to the opening words of Morrison's novel – "Sth, I know" (*J* 3) – the three blank pages following the last line appear to encourage the audience to continue the narrative and to produce knowledge over and over again. Whereas the beginning implied closure and certainty, the end remains open as the blank pages indicate.

Other than with most of Morrison's previous novels, where (story-) telling was paramount to the parallel development of readerly figure and reader, *Jazz*' main concern is with these actors' listening capacities: The narrator has to reflect on her telling just as the readers have to reflect on their reading. The analysis of the narrative situation in Morrison's sixth novel has shown that this work undertakes a careful and fundamental deconstruction of omniscience. In that, *Jazz* parallels the canon debates' drive to redefine academia. The interpretation of this novel, then, – this I should like to point out explicitly – makes most sense regarding the historical background and context of the novel's conception in the 1980s and its publication in the early 1990s, a time in which the boundaries of the humanities were attacked from so-

called minorities.¹²⁵ Through an active construction of the allegedly omniscient narrator right at the beginning of *Jazz* and an ensuing deconstruction of this unusual speaker throughout the rest of this novel, teller and reader simultaneously realize the former's limits; thereby, they also reach the limits of traditional explanatory models of literary studies and Enlightenment thought in general.

In this respect, *Jazz* initially provides psychological reinforcement of the reader's preexisting knowledge and beliefs by establishing an omniscient narrator and by employing a highly oral/aural language that implies intimacy between the teller and her audience. The following deconstruction of the narrator, at first perceived by both speaker and listener/reader alike as painful and distressing punishment, finally leads to a deeper understanding. The discrepancy between past and present tense narration, as well as the historically incorrect statements by the narrator create a distance between (implied and flesh-and-blood) reader and narratee, where, by contrast, the colloquial style was to create intimacy. The deception of the City, which makes the speaker miss that the truly important things, however, cannot be had in Harlem, runs counter to her reliance on cartographic knowledge. The Golden Gray episode, lastly, functions as the turning point for the narrator and the reader, in which both enter a sort of feedback loop that leads to self-reflection: As a *mise en abyme*, it is an example for the audience that shows how they should treat literature; as a metalepsis, it foregrounds the fictionality of the text and troubles the reader's understanding of truth. "Like jazz," Rodrigues maintains, "*Jazz* hits us below the Cartesian belt and offers us a powerful experience that does not insist on definite meanings" (750). Though different from Claudia MacTeer, Denver Suggs, and Patricia Best, *Jazz'* narrator may still stand in a row together with these forerunners and functions as role model for Morrison's audience:¹²⁶ As the novel's philanthropic gift to its readers, the development of the unusual speaker enables and facilitates a process on the receiving end of the communicative system of the novel and (ideally) ensures the effect of *Jazz'* central aim.

¹²⁵ While far from being perfect – if ever perfection were a goal worth striving for –, I do believe that the humanities – and, for that matter, especially cultural studies – have come a long way since the canon wars in the 1980s/1990s. Today, researchers in our field of study find an exciting arena, in which approaches to, for instance, fiction are interdisciplinary as well as multi-perspective, and the academic community, by and large, appears to be not only adaptable to but quite open for change and new directions.

¹²⁶ Interestingly enough, Rody (626) and Khaleghi (2) have stressed the parallels between *Jazz'* narrator and Morrison, a link that further connects the unusual speaker to Claudia, Denver, and Pat: All of these 'characters' have actually been compared to the author.

4.2.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted a reader-response reading of Morrison's works that was intended to unearth her novels' underlying philanthropic qualities – philanthropy is therefore not only a pervasive motif in her oeuvre, but also a force that shapes her writing. Through her works, as I have argued, her audience is awarded the gift of knowledge and deep insights; knowledge about hitherto neglected aspects of American history and insights into the African American experience therein. Yet, her fiction refuses to provide ready-made answers and Morrison should equally not be perceived as moralist. Instead, her novels provoke thoughts, so that ever new knowledge can be gained from them. As a narrative means that ensures the transmission of knowledge from sender to receiver and that links the parties involved in the communicative system of her fiction, certain readerly figures have been at the center of my attention in this chapter. As guides, mentors, and role models, they accompany her audience on its winding way through her fiction. I have also maintained that both go through a parallel developmental process: Just like each of the readerly figures discussed above emerges as deeply changed at the story's end, so the story itself may have initiated a transformative development within the reader. Hence, Morrison's works can indeed be regarded as philanthropic acts, as gifts for her (flesh-and-blood) readership that are to have a palpable influence on their lives.

In her oeuvre, readerly figures can be found at different levels of the diegesis (character and/or narrator) and they assume with different roles in their respective novels (protagonist or minor character). In Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia MacTeer functions both as overt auto- as well as covert heterodiegetic narrator and she clearly belongs to the main cast of this work. As a literal prototype, she can be regarded as a readerly figure with growing pains. On the one hand, the most basic functions of readerly figures in Morrison's entire oeuvre can already be found in her character. Hence, she helps the reader in bringing light to the chaotic story of Pecola Breedlove and, despite the relative narrative density of this novel, she makes Morrison's work accessible. The dialogical narrative situation between Claudia as narrator and her narratee, between text and reader by extrapolation, underlines this point: The colloquial, oral language implies intimacy; the indirect reader address in the form of the first person plural pronoun 'we' draws her audience into the narrative; and the metaphor of language as a couple dance, finally, highlights the significance of the co-creative, communal process of storytelling. In this respect, Morrison unquestionably attempts to establish the reader "as part of the population of the text" ("Unspeakable" 220). This attempt, however,

remains largely incomplete: Instead of closing the distance between text and reader, Claudia's presence as covert heterodiegetic narrator in large parts of *The Bluest Eye* increases the distance and reduces the emotional response of the novel's audience to Pecola's fate. The effects of her autodiegetic narration gradually wear off and the readers are provided with the relative comfort of being able to pity Pecola instead of having to question their own responsibility for certain structural injustices at the root of the ongoing dilemmas in our society. These inadequacies, I argue, can be seen as potential reason for the reading public's disregard of *The Bluest Eye* upon its publication and academia's scarce interest in that particular novel until today.

I have analyzed Denver Suggs and Patricia Best, in turn, as more mature versions of the readerly figure that function as role models for the audience of *Beloved* and *Paradise*, respectively. Developing the groundwork laid out by Claudia, Denver clearly establishes links to *Beloved's* reader: Both share feelings of isolation and alienation in the beginning, and both realize the centrality of the co-creative process of storytelling in creating meaning in which active and passive, telling and hearing, writing and reading merge. Hence, I claim that Beloved (the character) catalyzes this change in Denver, while *Beloved* initiates the parallel development of the reader. Pat Best's genealogical archeology mirrors the reader's attempt of disentangling Ruby's history. Yet, as opposed to Denver who belongs to the main cast of *Beloved*, Pat is only one of many focalizers in *Paradise* and, in her role as a chronicler, a merely passive bystander rather than an active participant. She presents only one half of *Paradise's* story and remains largely silent about the women at the Convent. Most important, however, is that she burns her books: In rejecting her newly acquired knowledge about Ruby, she protects the town's secrets and thereby indirectly joins ranks with its conservative male elite. If *Paradise* is read as allegory on U.S. history, Pat hardly qualifies as a positive role model for the novel's audience.

Jazz's unusual narrator, finally, is also an equally unusual readerly figure that, however, may have the most pronounced influence on Morrison's audience. At first sight, telling and hearing, writing and reading, seem to be oppositional processes. Narrator and audience would normally not be expected to share very many experiences and to develop parallel to each other. And indeed, the narrative situation of *Jazz's* opening seems to support this traditional take on the communicative system of fiction: The beginning of that novel establishes an omniscient narrator which I have taken as a meta-comment on Western epistemology and thereby as an apparent affirmation of certain well-established reading practices. The

remainder of *Jazz*, however, functions as a deconstruction of this very narrator and of her audience's resulting beliefs: The discrepancy between past and present tense narration, the narrator's historically incorrect statements, and the fact that she is deceived by the City considerably question her reliability. The Golden Gray episode, lastly, is the pivotal moment in the teller's and the audience's parallel development: Here, the former comes to finally realize her unreliability and her false know-it-all-mentality, while the latter will have to rethink their understandings of literary interpretations.

5. Conclusion

In a recent article by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Toni Morrison states, “the acquisition of knowledge” (n. pag.) is the ultimate sign of quality of good stories, of narratives that do something to their audience and make a lasting impact on the world. In her novels, she attempts to meet this criterion: Revising the American grand narrative, Morrison provides her readers with a “counterhistory” (Byerman 2005: 24) of the United States; being an epitome of the African griot – the storyteller and historian –, she becomes somewhat of a teacher for her audience; a teacher who offers her readers a ‘counter-pedagogy.’ Contrary to Western thought – memorably depicted in the character of schoolteacher in *Beloved* –, Morrison gives her readership different textures of knowledge. Instead of positivist knowledge solely derived from empiricism and printed in textbooks, the characters in her stories pass knowledge on orally and her novels employ different carriers and containers of knowledge: Memory, the body, and (natural and/or artificial) objects are, for instance, infused with meaning that often runs counter to the official, written record. In her fiction, moreover, Morrison renegotiates the teacher-student interaction and envisions a reciprocal relationship between the parties involved. Teaching instead of lecturing, provoking thought rather than moralizing, providing open ended narratives as opposed to writing manuals on how to live one’s life – these are indeed some of the hallmarks of Morrisonian art. She reveals just as much as she has to in her novels, leaving the rest in the dark for the reader to uncover. Only through an active, participatory reading will her audience acquire knowledge – writer and reader therefore share responsibility in the construction of meaning.

Applied to Morrison’s oeuvre, the critical lens of philanthropy assists in gaining a deeper understanding of ‘the acquisition of knowledge’ in her novels. As a force that shapes her work’s meaning and structure, philanthropy is closely related to two of her fiction’s most pervasive concerns: love and the inseparability of good and evil. Describing diverse interpersonal relationships that are characterized by affection or the lack thereof, Morrison focuses on the social fabric of U.S. society with a particular interest in its African American population and their very place within the nation. In this context, the literal ‘love of humankind’ exerts an ambivalent power and she discusses American philanthropy as an ambiguous force: Allegedly good characters do bad, ostensibly bad ones do good. Additionally, her works can be seen as philanthropic acts: The strong teaching impulse in her oeuvre, the reader’s acquisition of knowledge as a self-issued main criterion for good narratives, and the considerable degree to which her novels rely on their audiences’

participation further support this assumption. Together, author and audience establish intimate relationships and engage in a collaborative process of meaning-making. Hence, *'What Good Is Good?'* *Philanthropy in Toni Morrison's Oeuvre* argues that philanthropy comes to surface as a motif in her novels, which offers her audience new insights into the American nation, and that philanthropy is as a guiding principle of Morrison's fiction, which, for instance, renegotiates the writer-reader interaction in her literature.

In tracing America's long philanthropic tradition, chapter two laid the discussion's theoretical framework and developed a different conception of philanthropy that deviates considerably from the more traditional, exclusive, and rather narrow definition. Closer to its Greek etymological root, I consider philanthropy a pervasive force in human history and a fundamental principle in our social fabric. Especially within an American context, this broad definition avoids certain dangers: Since this phenomenon has had (and arguably continues to have) a major impact on race relations in the United States, on definitions of American identity, and on understandings of the U.S. in general, a narrow focus would effectively gloss over American society's heterogeneity and deny a large proportion of Americans access to one crucial indicator of Americanness. As a culturally formative power, philanthropy and the nation's auto- as well as its heterostereotype are intimately and inextricably related to each other – a close relationship that appears to be unique to the United States (Gurin and Van Til 3). A deeper understanding of American philanthropy can therefore add in meaningful and productive ways to the discourse on the nation in literary and cultural studies.

Following Turner, I adopted a twofold approach to philanthropy in the analytical chapters on Morrison's novels (306-308). Discussing this issue as a motif in her works, I put emphasis on the house/home antagonism in chapter three and argued that a reconceptualization of the American house runs parallel to a rethinking of American philanthropy. In chapter four, by contrast, I interpreted Morrison's oeuvre as philanthropic act that transmits the gift of knowledge to her audience by means of a readerly figure placed as a negotiator between sender, text, and recipient of her fictional message.

As one of the most powerful metaphors for the American nation and society, the house is central in American fiction. Likewise, Morrison's novels are replete with striking and singular houses (Valerie Smith 131). Yet, the house exerts an ambivalent influence over her African American protagonists: Their broken homes are measured against the unattainable white ideal; as a highly visible sign of ownership, they signify her characters' individuation, but also set the individual apart from the larger community; and especially white-owned houses have

the dubious power to harm and imprison their inhabitants (both black and white).¹²⁷ Starting already in her debut novel, the author embarks on a journey from house to home and thereby attempts to reconceptualize this symbolic space. Dismantling the architecture of race, Morrison probes the American house and locates black America's place within this locale. In this process, the importance of the concept of home is increased. As an alternative, it breaks with certain conservative and traditional characteristics: In, for instance, formulating critique on strict social hierarchies (e.g., WASP authority), Morrison openly attacks the very foundations of the American house. Roynon thus claims that the reader clearly recognizes the novelist's "insistence that 'America' is not an immutable monument, a pillared, immovable temple to its own dominant ideology" (*Classical Tradition* 185) in her oeuvre.

This reconceptualization of the American house, I argued in chapter three, runs parallel to a rethinking of American philanthropy. The nation-as-house metaphor, for one thing, shares many characteristics with philanthropy: Traditionally, both are hierarchically structured, both are headed by men, and both are inherently white concepts to which minorities have only had very limited access. For another thing, philanthropy has also been employed as a means to conceal the cracks in the nation-house throughout all of U.S. history: Repeatedly, philanthropists could not persuasively dodge the blow of self-interest and even the most atrocious crimes (e.g., Indian Removal and slavery) have been justified for supposedly philanthropic reasons. Consequently, Morrison's oeuvre-wide 'house/home antagonism' – first described in her essay "Home" – finds its equivalent in her reinterpretation of philanthropy.

In her novels, Morrison develops an altered understanding of American philanthropy: Instead of the dominant, single, male patron, the female community acts as philanthropist; instead of only claiming to hold on to certain cultural values, her characters' behavior is deeply influenced and accentuated by philanthropic principles; instead of money or monetary equivalents, knowledge, communion, and personal assistance are presented as gifts. Her different take on philanthropy avoids an essentialization of this concept along the lines of race, class, or gender. Rather than the exclusive and elitist definition of American philanthropy that has been dominant ever since the turn of the twentieth century, this phenomenon is now seen as a democratic bottom-up process in which a large proportion of the American population – and especially African Americans as a minority historically denied

¹²⁷ Scruggs has highlighted the fact that black women writers, and Morrison in particular, have dealt differently with houses than white women novelists (99). For her, the house and the experience of space are thus deeply raced.

access to it – engage. Close to Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of America’s unique creed, Morrison’s novels characterize philanthropy as “the practice and the prerogative of the many” (McCarthy 3). Her understanding of home and philanthropy, however, are ideals – and by no means perfect replacements of inherently flawed concepts – that may bring about change in U.S. society.

From *The Bluest Eye* to *Home*, Morrison engages critically and creatively with the American home and American philanthropy. Her debut novel gives a diagnosis of the root problems of the United States. The destructive influences of the primer ideal – which is the very embodiment of oppressive white standards and a vivid reminder of white America’s cultural imperialism – on Lorain’s African American community are highlighted: In media, language, and concepts of beauty, ‘white’ translates to good and desirable, while ‘black’ becomes its very antithesis. The primer’s harmfulness, however, also implies that other frames of reference need to be invented. Hence, the MacTeer family and their home serve as alternatives: As a place that allows for truly philanthropic interactions which the white house only pretends to offer for African Americans, the MacTeers’ home becomes a place that has the power to fulfill the United State’s promises and to renovate the American house.

As a developmental step, *Tar Baby* further elaborates on these issues: Picking up certain concerns of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the American house and American philanthropy are considered in isolation in this novel. Its island setting allows for a close scrutiny of Valerian Street’s imperial mansion L’Arbe de la Croix and its disintegration can be taken as a critique on U.S. cultural imperialism. However, leaving the white house and Valerian, *the* symbols for traditional philanthropy, behind, Jadine and Son do not find a place that both can call home: Unable to attune to their different lifestyles, their love remains superficial and does not reach the level of true love for humankind.

In *Beloved*, Morrison contrasts white and black houses as well as inter- and intraracial philanthropy. As a white house, 124 Bluestone is owned and controlled by white males such as Edward Bodwin; as a black house, it is run by a succession of black women and is always somehow related to the larger African American community. This can be interpreted as a metaphoric reference to American philanthropy: In traditional terms, Bodwin is the very epitome of the stereotypical philanthropist, while the Suggs women are typical recipients of his generosity. Under Baby Suggs’ reign and again when Denver assumes responsibility, however, the lay of the land changes: Here, emphasis is shifted from male to female protagonists; from the strong individual to the community; from money to other, more direct

forms of help. Hence, next to interracial philanthropy – one of the most traditional outlets of philanthropic endeavors in the United States – Morrison places an intraracial variant that appears to be more closely connected to the term's Greek roots.

A thought-experiment in American history, *A Mercy* tells a revisionist founding narrative of America: Set in pre-national times, Morrison characterizes the early colonies as yet not fully raced or hierarchically structured societies, as places that are only just beginning to constitute themselves. With her focus on an 'unlikely assembly' of people at Jacob Vaark's farm, she describes the colonies as a literal paradise lost. The apparently mutually supportive, heterogeneous family – composed of people of different races, classes, genders, and sexual orientations – seems to have the potential to be a true home, and Vaark's farm may at one point have been a place characterized by a true love for humankind. Yet, *A Mercy* also clearly depicts that right from the beginning the seeds of the American house's later corruption have been spread: Despite the repeated claims to a genesis deeply rooted in religion, America has primarily been a project directed by economic interests and entrepreneurship. In this rigid setting, philanthropy can only be employed to conceal the cracks and fissures of the forever incomplete American house – embodied by Vaark's unfinished mansion-gone-tomb.

Home, finally, has a dual implication for Morrison's house/home antagonism and her concern with American philanthropy. First, Morrison comes full circle with this novel and concludes her oeuvre-wide journey from house to home (mirrored in Frank Money's epic quest). Second, the Money siblings' arrival at home underlines the fact that this concept is indeed conceived of as an ideal by Morrison: Even though Lotus is anything but perfect, it is still the only place in which Frank and Ycidra can make their home. On a meta-level, again, different forms of philanthropy are compared and *Home* can be read as a critique on traditional renditions of the American house and more conservative ideas about American philanthropy: With the dubious Scotts and their prison-like mansion, Morrison puts emphasis on the inherent flaws of philanthropy – a social interaction that has perpetuated certain imbalances within the American society. Lotus, in turn, functions as a counterpart: Focusing on the importance of the community for Frank and Cee's development, Morrison underlines the fact that a more basic, deeper understanding of philanthropy has to be developed.

The interpretation of the analogy between the American house and American philanthropy has been highly productive in Morrison's oeuvre and future research could continue in this vein. A closer look at, for instance, other significant houses – Eva Peace's 'unpeaceful' house and Nel Wright's allegedly 'right' one in *Sula*; Macon Dead, Jr.'s chillingly cold house in

Song of Solomon; Bill Cosey's famous but not so cozy resort and hotel in *Love*; and the enigmatic Convent in *Paradise* – may yield interesting results for the study of philanthropy in Morrison's novels. This approach could explain how the symbol of the house and philanthropy influence each other, how typical African American ideas about these issues alter Western ones, and vice versa, and how they change in close contact with each other. Additionally, future research on the motif of philanthropy may draw a comparison between white, allegedly strong men as the very emblems of the stereotypical philanthropist and their complete opposite, the black, mostly female community (the tribe or village, as Morrison would have it): In describing the contrast between, for instance, Valerian Street, Edward Bodwin, and Jacob Vaark with the respective novels' non-white, non-male population, different patterns of interpersonal contact and interaction as well as opposing worldviews could be analyzed. Hence, the traditional picture of philanthropy as the white, male elite's game may be changed.

By shifting emphasis to a discussion of readerly figures in Morrison's oeuvre, I conducted a reader-response reading of her novels in chapter four that treated her fiction as a philanthropic act. At the center of my investigation, I placed the interaction of text and reader. In this respect, I interpreted certain readerly figures as didactic tools, as narrative means that actually secure a stable communication between sender and receiver of Morrison's fictional message. Contrary to New Critical theory – famously encapsulated in Wimsatt and Beardsley's old dictums of the "Intentional Fallacy" and "Affective Fallacy" – I perceived these characters and/or narrators as negotiators between the producing and receiving ends of the rhetorical system of Morrison's narratives. Hence, this chapter argued that writer/teller and reader/listener make meaning *together*.

As characters and/or narrators placed at the level of story or discourse respectively, readerly figures act as mediators between sender and receiver of the fictional message. Accompanying the readership on their tour through Morrison's works, they undergo certain processes parallel to the reader: The former's maturation and acquisition of knowledge, for instance, triggers simultaneous developments in the latter. In some of Morrison's novels, then, readerly figures are employed to guide as well as to instruct the audience. As didactic tools, moreover, readerly figures allow for an interaction between the producing and receiving end of her fictional communication. Bridging the gaps that her novels leave for the audience, they provide a more immediate reading experience and facilitate the transmission of the gift of

knowledge. Hence, readerly figures have a considerable impact on Morrison's readers as well as the reading of her novels.

From Claudia MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye* to Patricia Best in *Paradise*, Morrison uses the readerly figure in order to ensure that her stories will not be passed on (in the sense of being neglected) and that her readers will eventually unpack the philanthropic gifts that her novels offer. Placed at the narrative level of story, the readerly figures Claudia MacTeer, Denver Suggs, and Patricia Best draw clear parallels to the reader of *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise*. Throughout these novels, they act as mentors for the audience and their examples guide the readers in their reading of Morrison's works. The narrator of *Jazz*, in turn, exerts a considerable influence on the reading of that novel: Located at the level of discourse, this readerly figure raises crucial questions about Western epistemology and literary criticism. Striking about the afore-mentioned readerly figures is that all are female.¹²⁸ This gender assignment establishes links to Morrison and to her novels' main concerns: For one thing, literary critics have discussed these readerly figures as embodiments of the author herself; for another thing, especially *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise* focus on women and have female protagonists. Most important, however, is that the implementation of readerly figures has to be seen as a means to ensure the interaction between text and audience: Since her novels are meant to unsettle their readers, they might also potentially alienate them. The readerly figure counters this tendency and mediates between the parties involved.¹²⁹ Its primary function is thus to transmit the gift of Morrison's novels; that is, mostly the gift of knowledge about the United States as a whole, about the African American experience during the course of the nation's history, and about the individual's responsibilities.

Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* tentatively envisions the very prototype of the readerly figure – as a first timid version, Claudia MacTeer can be interpreted as a readerly figure with growing pains. Surfacing as narrator of both the primer as well as the seasonal parts of that novel, she makes this complex work accessible to the reader: Especially during the autodiegetic sections, Claudia and her narratee – text and reader by extrapolation – are intimately connected to each other. Here, both begin to seek explanations for Pecola's bleak story and start to question their roles in her downfall. Thus, the audience is really drawn into

¹²⁸ While Claudia, Denver, and Patricia are obviously women, most critics agree that *Jazz*' narrator is also female. Morrison, however, states that she wanted this narrator to be indeterminable – race and gender cannot clearly be identified (“I Come from People Who Sang All the Time” 127).

¹²⁹ Morrisonian novels with a pronounced focus on men – *Song of Solomon* and *Home*, for instance – employ different strategies to guide their readers: The first shows a linear plot development and both are patterned on typical Western genres, the *Bildungsroman* and the Odyssean journey, respectively. With their reliance on more traditional frames of reference and literary techniques, they are less susceptible to alienating their readers.

the novel. In the heterodiegetic parts, however, the distance between narrator and narratee, text and reader, increases dramatically: With the emotional response reduced, the audience is finally able to only feel pity for Pecola – instead of grasping the deeper, underlying reasons behind her fate. Morrison is not wholly successful in achieving her goal of provoking her readers into rethinking their attitudes; she fails to make her audience assume responsibility for Pecola's downfall. Hence, the philanthropic gift of *The Bluest Eye*, self-knowledge and the need to assume responsibility as the first steps to achieve large-scale change, is not transmitted to the readership.

In comparison to Claudia, Denver Suggs and Patricia Best can be perceived as matured versions of the readerly figure that function as role models for Morrison's audience. In *Beloved*, then, there are striking parallels between Denver and the reader: At the beginning of the novel, both are utterly confused, both are confronted with narratives that trouble their knowledge, and both are left to their own, largely useless devices. Throughout the course of Morrison's novel, however, both mature parallel to each other: Just like *Beloved* catalyzes Denver's change, so does *Beloved* initiate a developmental process in the reader. Hence, Denver is a very effective readerly figure who ensures that *Beloved's* gift is indeed unpacked by the reader – in the end, both emerge changed and both may pass their newly acquired knowledge about family and national history on, respectively. Likewise, Pat Best's work as Ruby's lay historian mirrors *Paradise's* readers' attempts to bring order into this highly complex novel. Unable to integrate her knowledge – namely the dark secrets at the heart of her hometown and its male leaders –, Pat, however, rejects her insights, thereby standing in stark contrast to Denver –, and provides a negative example for the audience: Ultimately, *Paradise's* readers will have to draw their own conclusions from the narrative and cannot take Pat as their convenient, ideal role model.

The highly unusual narrator of *Jazz*, lastly, is also an equally unusual readerly figure: In her claims to omniscience, she appears to have not very many things in common with her narratee. The largest part of that novel, however, is concerned with the deconstruction of the narrator. The nesting-doll principle at the heart of *Jazz* violates the novel's narrative levels and foregrounds its fictionality. Moreover, the narrator's alleged wisdom is revealed to be mere pretense. *Jazz's* narrative situation and the narrator's deconstruction can be interpreted as meta-comments on Western epistemology and reading practices: Just as the narrator realizes her limitations, so are the readers' beliefs in said teller destroyed – they, ultimately, will have to rethink their expectations of and experiences with literature. The close intimacy between

novel and audience at the end of *Jazz* borders on a romantic relationship of both – I therefore argue that this novel offers the greatest gift of all: understanding love.

Continuing the discussion of Morrison's oeuvre as a philanthropic act, other narrative devices may come into focus, which facilitate a communication between text and reader, and thereby ensure that the gift of knowledge is transmitted. As the ending of *Jazz* opens up the fictional to the non-fictional world and points into the direction of a stronger emphasis on the novel's audience, the readerly figure may be seen as a harbinger of a larger trend in Morrison's most recent works: In *Love, A Mercy, Home*, and *God Help the Child*, then, the reader is provided with more narrative space and gains even greater responsibility in the meaning-making process, while the narrator tends to gradually disappear. Commenting on this trend, Morrison states,

To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken – to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book – is what's important. ("Rootedness" 59, her emphasis)

This more recent technique changes the way her audience participates in the communicative acts of her fiction and has influence on the text-audience and writer-reader interaction. "What I really want," Morrison explains, "is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along" ("The Site of Memory" 78). With a narrator almost entirely absent from the scene, the reader automatically has to fill in this blank: If the sending instance takes up less space, there is consequently more narrative room for the receiver of the message. And this tendency is pushed to the extreme in her latest novel: Dedicated "For You" (*God* n. pag.), large parts of *God Help the Child* indeed totally dispense with the mediating entity of the narrator, so that the characters appear to be in direct dialogue with their narratees. Future research may thus take an even closer look at certain narrative devices in Morrison's fiction and should conduct more detailed reader-response readings of her novels.

A potential starting point could then be Jon Thiem's notion of 'textualization of the reader.' "In a textualization," he explains, "the reader is literally 'absorbed by' or 'lost in' a fiction" (238). He states that this effect is achieved through a more intimate immediacy of story world and real world:

In textualization this balance [between the reader's detachment from and involvement with the fictional world] is upset. The world of the text loses its literal impenetrability. The reader loses that minimal detachment that keeps him or her out of the world of the

text. The reader, in short, ceases to be the reader, ceases to be invulnerable, comfortable in his or her armchair, and safely detached, and becomes instead an actor, an agent in the fictional world. (239)

Fictions that use textualizations, Thiem argues, have “a pronounced metafictional dimension” since they “tend to make the readers more conscious of the act of reading itself” (240). By accentuating the reciprocity between text and audience, reader and writer, the study of textualization reflects the on-going academic discourse in, for instance, reader-response criticism and explores the constitution of the text by the reader and vice versa. To Thiem, then, the immersion of the reader into the text is one key element of postmodern and magical realist fiction: He describes the postmodern condition as a condition of belatedness, meaning that postmodern authors use and abuse their precursors’ works and play with literary conventions. In this respect, they seem to assume a passive role constantly following the great masters of bygone days. Similarly, “In the temporal sequence of author-text-reader,” states Thiem, “the reader comes last. The reader is thus positioned in relation to the author and text as the postmodern writer is to his or her precursors and their texts” (242). Hence, the postmodern author sympathizes and identifies with her audience: “In the reader,” Thiem explains, “the postmodern writer has found an ideal figure through which to explore the splendors and miseries of belatedness” (ibid.). This, however, may simultaneously be a chance as well as a threat for the audience: While textualizations can indeed lead to a more intense reading experience, the sole reason for the scarce attention this line of thought has received in academic discussions, Thiem argues, is that the clash and fusion of textual and extratextual worlds “in a textualization violates our usual sense of what is possible” (244).

‘What Good Is Good?’ Philanthropy in Toni Morrison’s Oeuvre has thus made possible new readings of Morrison’s novels and the examination of philanthropy’s role in her novels may even continue to yield more interesting, creative and productive results in the future. If, by her own admission, her “books usually end on a note of epiphany in which somebody learns something about his or her situation as a result of having had the book, which is what novels do” (“Interview with Toni Morrison” 116), I hope that the results of *‘What Good Is Good?’* may also illicit meaningful reactions from my readers, and that they may perceive Morrison’s novels differently after having read my book.

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Ehrenwörtliche Erklärung

Mit dieser ehrenwörtlichen Erklärung gemäß §7, Abs. 3 der Promotionsordnung versichere ich,

- dass mir die geltende Promotionsordnung der Philosophischen Fakultät der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena vom 6. November 2009 bekannt ist,
- dass ich die vorliegende Dissertation selbst angefertigt, keine Textabschnitte eines anderen Autors oder eigener Prüfungsarbeiten ohne Kennzeichnung übernommen und alle von mir benutzten Hilfsmittel und Quellen in meiner Arbeit angegeben habe,
- dass mich bei der Auswahl und Auswertung des Materials sowie bei der Herstellung des Manuskripts keine weiteren Personen unterstützt haben,
- dass ich die Hilfe eines Promotionsberaters nicht in Anspruch genommen habe und dass Dritte weder unmittelbar noch mittelbar geldwerte Leistungen von mir für Arbeiten erhalten haben, die im Zusammenhang mit dem Inhalt der vorgelegten Dissertation stehen,
- dass ich die Dissertation noch nicht als Prüfungsarbeit für eine wissenschaftliche Prüfung eingereicht habe und
- dass ich die gleiche, eine in wesentlichen Teilen ähnliche oder eine andere Abhandlung bei einer anderen Hochschule als Dissertation nicht eingereicht habe.

Dresden, den 19.08.2016

Rico Hollmach

Lebenslauf

Persönliche Angaben

Name	Hollmach
Vorname	Rico
Geburtsdatum	12.08.1986
Geburtsort	Weimar
Staatsangehörigkeit	deutsch
Familienstand, Kinder	ledig, ein Kind: Noah Hollmach (geb. 17.02.2016)

Kontaktdaten

Anschrift	Robert-Koch-Straße 2, 01219 Dresden
Telefon	0151/14067778
E-Mail	rhollmach@gmail.com

Referendariat

01.02.2016 – 31.01.2017	Studienreferendar an der Sächsischen Bildungsagentur Dresden Ausbildungsschule Gymnasium „Dreikönigschule“ Dresden
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Promotion

vsl. Ende 2016	Verleihung des Grades Dr. phil. nach Veröffentlichung der Dissertation
01/2013 – 12/2015	Landesgraduierstipendium, Friedrich-Schiller- Universität Jena
01/2013 – 12/2015	regelmäßige Doktorandenkolloquien an den Universitäten Jena, Dresden und Leipzig
10/2012 – 12/2015	Promotion am Lehrstuhl für Amerikanistik an der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena mit einer Arbeit zur Darstellung der Philanthropie in den Werken Toni Morrison

Lehrtätigkeit

10/2014 – 04/2015	Lehrbeauftragter am Lehrstuhl für Amerikanistik an der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
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Weiterbildung

02.04. – 04.04.2014

hochschuldidaktische Weiterbildung, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena

10/2014 – 02/2015

Zertifikatsprogramm „Führung in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft,“ Graduiertenakademie, Jena

Universitäre Ausbildung

10/2007 – 09/2012

Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena

Lehramt Englisch und Geschichte

1. Staatsexamen für das Lehramt an Gymnasien

Berufliche Tätigkeiten

09/2007

Vorbereitung auf das Studium

04/2007 – 08/2007

geringfügige Beschäftigung, Großschwabhausen
Tätigkeiten im Umweltschutz

Wehr- und Zivildienst

07/2006 – 03/2007

Zivildienst, Großschwabhausen

Tätigkeiten im Umweltschutz

Schulische Ausbildung

06/2006

Vorbereitung auf den Zivildienst

08/1997 – 05/2006

Lyonel-Feininger-Gymnasium, Mellingen

Abitur

08/2003 – 05/2004

Wilcox-Hildreth Public Schools, Wilcox/USA

Auslandsaufenthalt an einer Highschool